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Simply Fresh



Chef Jean Michel Diot's asparagus with morel mushrooms and fava beans special, using seasonal produce, at the Tapenade restaurant in La Jolla. Union-Tribune PHoto/John Gibbins

More and more San Diego chefs take inspiration from seasonal, local produce

By Maria C. Hunt
U-T FOOD WRITER

When Alice Waters started cooking her uncomplicated, seasonal food 30 years ago, the concept seemed so logical.

She'd find fresh, organically grown ingredients in season, because that's when they taste best, then treat them carefully in the kitchen so the natural flavors were enhanced.

Bringing flawless food from the farm to the table is a hallmark of Chez Panisse, the Berkeley restaurant that has become an American icon. While Waters' ideas have influenced chefs all over the country, few restaurants in this vein have existed in San Diego.

But recently, with the greater availability of good local produce, the Chez Panisse ideal has emerged in several restaurant concepts. Finally, it seems, market-fresh cuisine created from local produce is enough of a hook for a restaurant in San Diego.

"Hopefully, people are looking for a simplified approach: eating what's in season," said chef Michael Stebner of

RECIPES

Fresh Morel and Asparagus Fricasse

(shown in main photo)

4 servings

1/2 pound fava beans, shelled

1 bunch white or green asparagus, peeled and cut in 3-inch pieces (see note)

1/2 pound fresh morel mushrooms (see note)

1 sprig sage

1 sprig tarragon

1/2 bunch Italian parsley

4 spring onions

4 tablespoons butter (divided use)

4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil (divided use)

4 medium fingerling potatoes, washed and cut in 1/8-inch slices

Salt and pepper, to taste

4 shallots, finely chopped

1 cup homemade or low-sodium canned chicken stock

1/2 cup heavy cream

Blanch the fava beans in salted boiling water for 1 minute. Plunge them in ice water. Drain and

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Nine-Ten in La Jolla. "We let the market decide what's going on the plate."



Chef Jean Michel Diot of Tapenade in La Jolla uses fresh, seasonal, ingredients in his asparagus with morel mushrooms and fava beans special. Union-Tribune photo/John Gibbins

The trend picked up steam when Jean Michel Diot opened Tapenade in La Jolla four years ago and Trey Foshee took over the kitchen at George's at the Cove. They joined restaurants like Mille Fleurs, Laurel, The Belgian Lion and The WineSeller & Brasserie.

In the past year, three restaurants that cook with the season have opened: Arterra, Nine-Ten and A.R. Valentien at the Lodge at Torrey Pines.

"We're kind of on the front end of a movement that's occurring down here," said Carl Schroeder, chef de cuisine at Arterra in the San Diego Marriott Del Mar. "A lot more

people are educated to food down here now, and there's a lot of attention being paid to people doing it right."

In early spring, green garlic, morel mushrooms and peas were popping up on menus around town. Chef Jeff Jackson put a dish with salmon, peas, morels and green garlic on the dinner menu the first week A.R. Valentien opened.

"For me, there's no bigger excitement in the kitchen than when the first asparagus of the year or the first morels or chanterelles come in," Jackson said. "They're perfect, and they're wonderful, and you want to put them in everything while you have them in season."

In late spring, squash blossoms and squash started appearing, along with more peas, onions and strawberries.

Patrick Ponsaty of El Bizcocho in the Rancho Bernardo Inn is serving fresh Oregon morels stuffed with chicken and foie gras mousse, and a pre-dessert of carrots, zucchini and baby beets poached in vanilla syrup and served with diced mango and pineapple. The garnish is a zucchini blossom stuffed with lime-rosemary ice cream.

"Every season we change the menu, because in France, every restaurant does that," Ponsaty said. "We respect the season."

Natural bounty

San Diego, with its bounty of agricultural products and farms, seems like fertile ground for this style of cooking. Yet, for many years, there were only a handful of restaurants cooking this way. Places such as The Belgian Lion, Cindy Black's and Mille Fleurs seemed unique in their devotion to seeking out seasonal foods.

peel them, then set aside.

Cook the asparagus in salted water until tender. Plunge it in ice water, then set aside.

Briefly soak the morels in cold water and drain on paper towels. Chop the sage, tarragon leaves and parsley and combine them; set aside. Halve the spring onions lengthwise and set aside.

In a heavy skillet, melt 1 tablespoon of butter and 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Add potatoes and spring onions and saute until potatoes and onions are soft (about 10 minutes.) Transfer to a plate and set aside.

In the same skillet, melt 1 tablespoon of butter with 2 tablespoons of olive oil over medium heat. Add morels and season with salt and pepper. Saute until morels are soft and their released juice has reduced so it just covers bottom of pan, about 8 to 10 minutes. Set aside.

Just before serving, melt the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter in a heavy skillet over medium heat. Add the spring onions, potatoes and asparagus and saute for 2 minutes. Add the shallots and the chicken stock and cook until the stock is reduced by half. Add the cream and cook for 8 to 10 minutes, until the sauce has thickened. Season with salt and pepper.

Just before serving, add the fava beans and finish with chopped herbs.

Note: Morel mushrooms and white asparagus are available at Jonathan's in La Jolla, Harvest Ranch Markets and Whole Foods La Jolla.

Part of the problem in San Diego stemmed from the fact that fine produce wasn't as readily available as it was in places like San Francisco or New York, which has the Union Square Green Market.

"We had to work a little harder to find things," said Don Coulon, who operated The Belgian Lion in Ocean Beach for 24 years. "We had to grow our own sorrel, and even fresh basil was hard to find."

Today, businesses such as Specialty Produce, which specializes in high-quality fruits and vegetables, make the work much easier.

Just as Waters did, chefs here have had to develop a network of farmers, bakers and other artisans to supply the quality food they want. This year, the San Diego Chefs Celebration, a series of dinners to raise funds for culinary scholarships, highlighted a different local farmer each night.



Chef Trey Foshee of Georges at the Cove, selects fresh produce at Chino Farms in Rancho Santa Fe. Union-Tribune photo/John Gibbins

This relationship between farmers and chefs is good for both parties, because chefs get fresh local produce and farmers get some financial security in a risky business.

"We get calls from all over saying, 'Can you send us vegetables?'" said Kay Chino of Chino Farm. "I say, 'No, support your own local people. They need support. If you don't, how can they grow?'"

Diot, who has been using fava beans, Swiss chard, asparagus and morels on his menu at Tapenade, works with Specialty Produce and Good Faith Organic Farm in Jamul.

"It's easier because you get the availability. The only thing you have to have in your hand is the technique to use the ingredients," he said. "We have to please them (the ingredients), not overcook or overseason them."

Some chefs, such as Martin Woesle of Mille Fleurs and Foshee of George's at the Cove, go shopping themselves every day.

On a recent Thursday morning, Foshee was at Chino Farm in Rancho Santa Fe, picking up purple sage blossoms, petits pois, fava beans, baby artichokes and shelling peas. The shelling peas and sage blossoms would wind up on the plate with a soft-shell crab in a hazelnut crust.

Exiting the freeway to pick up the order only adds a few minutes to Foshee's daily commute to George's in La Jolla.

(From Chef Jean Michel Diot of Tapenade in La Jolla.)

Strawberry-Rhubarb Crisp

Makes 8 tarts

4 cups (6 to 8 stalks) fresh rhubarb, sliced in 1/2-inch pieces

1 cup sugar

3 pints farmers market strawberries (like Chandler), washed and sliced in half

1 tablespoon cornstarch

1/2 cup unsalted butter

1/4 cup brown sugar

1/4 cup sugar

3/4 cup all-purpose flour

1/4 cup cornmeal

Sweet Almond Crust (see accompanying recipe)

Toss rhubarb and 1 cup sugar in a large bowl. Spread on a parchment-lined sheet pan and bake at 350 degrees for 10 minutes. Toss cooled rhubarb with strawberries and cornstarch. Set aside.

To make crumb topping, cream butter, 1/4 cup brown sugar and 1/4 cup granulated sugar until smooth. Add flour and cornmeal. Mix until large crumbles form.

To assemble tarts, fill the pre-baked tart shells (see accompanying recipe) with strawberry-rhubarb mixture. Cover with crumb topping and bake at 350 degrees for 12 to 15 minutes, or until topping is light brown.

(From Pastry Chef Jack Fisher of Nine-Ten in La Jolla.)

Sweet Almond Crust

Makes 8 tart shells

"It was one of the reasons why we moved to Encinitas," he said. "I live 11 minutes from here."



Jeff Jackson, executive chef of the A.R. Valentien at The Lodge at Torrey Pines, left, inspects produce that his forager Kevin Driscoll (right), bought at the farmers' market in Santa Monica. Union-Tribune photo/John Gibbins

Jackson of A.R. Valentien gets a variety of produce from Be-Wise Ranch in Rancho Bernardo and sea urchins from Catalina Offshore. He also works with a forager named Kevin Driscoll, a vegetarian and former produce vendor, who goes to the Santa Monica Farmers Market on Wednesdays and brings back items he knows Jackson

will like.

"The key is, you have to surround yourself with passionate people if you want to be successful with this kind of cooking," Jackson said.

Closer to home

Savvy to the demand, large produce purveyors are now offering so-called "heirloom" produce. But Schroeder of Arterra said he has found that the fruits and vegetables he buys from Chino Farm, Be-Wise Ranch, Valdivia Farms in Carlsbad, and Bernard Farms Citrus in Woodcrest have much more flavor. He was excited last week about fava beans and surprisingly early Brandywine tomatoes from Valdivia.

On a recent Sunday, Arterra served a Farmers' Market Vegetable plate with spring onion soup, heirloom Valdivia tomato and goat cheese tart, and braised baby artichokes.

Produce from small specialty farmers can be costly, so Schroeder has trained his kitchen staff to handle the precious items carefully.

"We get this stuff, and we treat it like children," he said.

The tomatoes are never refrigerated; instead, they're left in dry storage. Lettuces and other delicate vegetables are stored in large plastic containers, covered with damp cloths.

This style of cooking means that the chef and the diners need to be flexible. Often, market-driven restaurants will have short menus that change weekly or even daily. Stebner calls it the chalkboard-menu-on-paper approach.

"If we didn't get something, I change it," Stebner said. "The menu stays very liquid that way."

Some days, Stebner said, he and pastry chef Jack Fisher are creating dishes they've never tried out before.

"I usually don't worry about it, because I almost cannot think of a combination of vegetables that are in season together that won't work," he said.

So summer tomatoes might clash with spring peas, but they taste good with other summer produce, such as corn,

1/2 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature

1-3/4 cups powdered sugar, sifted

1-1/2 cups almond meal or ground almonds

3-1/2 cups all-purpose flour

1 egg white

Combine the butter, sugar, almond meal and flour in the bowl of an electric mixer with the paddle attachment. Mix on low or medium speed until combined. Add egg white and mix until just combined. Finish mixing by hand until dough is smooth enough to handle. Shape the dough into a 1-inch-thick rectangle and refrigerate for 2 hours or overnight.

Divide the dough into eight pieces. Roll the dough out to 1/4-inch thickness and line a 3-to 4-inch tart mold. Repeat with the remaining seven molds. Weigh down the dough with pie weights or beans. Bake at 350 degrees for 15 to 18 minutes. When the shells are done, remove them from the oven and set aside. They can be baked up to one day in advance and refrigerated.

(From Pastry Chef Jack Fisher of Nine-Ten in La Jolla.)

peppers, chiles, eggplant and even peaches.

It's not enough for chefs to cook good food; they have also learned that they must educate their diners about when certain foods are in season.

"I have customers asking me in January and February for tomato salad like we make in July and August," Woesle of Mille Fleurs said. "I just tell them, 'I'm sorry, it's not tomato season.' "

Jackson of A.R. Valentien noted that Alice Waters is so trusted by her clientele that she can prepare one menu each evening in the downstairs restaurant at Chez Panisse, and that's what everybody eats. San Diego isn't quite there yet.

"This kind of cooking requires time to turn it into the culture, the way things are done," he said.

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