

## Celebrating the produce pioneers

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For those of us who patronize Bay Area farmers' markets and revel in the produce bonanza, it's hard to remember life before Sweet 100 tomatoes. But Sunday at Greens restaurant in San Francisco, a group of Bay Area chefs, farmers and other food professionals gathered to reminisce about those dreary years before golden beets entered our kitchens and to commemorate an event 25 years ago that changed everything.

The brainchild of Sibella Kraus, at that time a Chez Panisse cook, the first Tasting of Summer Produce in 1983 was far more modest than last weekend's jubilant reunion. The original gathering capped a 5-month-long pilot project that attempted to link restaurants desiring high-quality produce with local farmers willing to grow it.

Chez Panisse, Greens, Bay Wolf, Hayes Street Grill, Mudd's in San Ramon (with then-chef Amaryll Schwertner) and the Union Hotel in Benicia (under Judy Rodgers) had signed on for Kraus' pioneering venture, and over that growing season 25 years ago, Kraus played matchmaker.

Working from the restaurants' wish lists, she persuaded farmers to plant French tarragon and haricots verts and to harvest their beets and zucchini young, the way chefs wanted them.

In August of that year, the chefs and farmers finally met.

"Farmers were saying to chefs, and chefs to farmers, 'I've been looking for you all my life,' " recalls Kraus of that first Tasting.

During the next six years, the annual meeting of local chefs and farmers grew exponentially, moving from Greens to Robert Mondavi Winery to the Oakland Museum, where the event became public. In 1987, nearly 100 growers from all over Northern California brought the best of their harvest to the terraced museum grounds, and more than 1,300 people showed up to ogle the *abbondanza* and participate in comparative tastings. The unparalleled produce trade show had ventured beyond pairing farmers and chefs to educating consumers about the superior flavor of dry-farmed tomatoes and tree-ripened peaches.

A subliminal message about the Bay Area's endangered farmland infiltrated every luscious fig from Brentwood's Knoll Organic Farms and wispy Marin County lettuces from Star Route Farms.

"It was a revelation to me," said Waters, remembering the earlier tastings. "I didn't know about these farms."



The Tasting of Summer Produce folded its tent after 1989, its tired organizers hoping they had spun an enduring web between Bay Area chefs, farmers and consumers. Kraus turned her attention to establishing a farmers' market on the waterfront in San Francisco - an effort that culminated in the Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market - and today directs SAGE, a Bay Area nonprofit involved in sustainable agriculture issues.

"Sibella bridged the gap between folks who were way too busy in the fields and folks who were way too busy in restaurants," says Paul Muller of Capay Valley's Full Belly Farm.

The 130 or so guests mingling at Greens at Sunday's reunion sampled Conseiller a La Couer pears and Cortland apples from Healdsburg's Foxwhelp Farm; Snow Princess white peaches and Emerald Beaut pluots from Twin Peaks Orchards in Placer County; and red-tipped endive from Rio Vista. The family-style dinner drew from more than 20 local purveyors.

Chronicle Food section contributor Georgeanne Brennan, with business partner Charlotte Glenn, ran a company in the early 1980s that provided seeds for the unusual European lettuces and vegetables so commonplace now, such as frisee and lacinato kale.

"There was a tremendous disconnect then," recalls Brennan, who attended the reunion. "I knew farmers who didn't taste a thing they grew. It was about production and yield, and that was the end of it."

Today, Bay Area farmers' markets teem with chefs buying directly from farmers, even plotting together what varieties to grow next. That dialogue, an outgrowth of the tasting, has provided Bay Area cooks with arguably the most enticing array of produce in the world.

"Now," says Annie Somerville, the longtime Greens chef, "It's, 'Do we want this farmer's broccoli di Cicco or that one's?' The tasting was the seed of what we have today."

### **Almond brown butter cake with plums**

#### **Makes one 8-inch cake -- Serves 8**

Adapted from "Everyday Greens," by Annie Somerville and Mayumi Oda (Scribner, 2003) of Greens restaurant. Serve with raspberries and whipped cream, or with vanilla ice cream.

- -- Melted butter for the pan
- 12 tablespoons (1 1/2 sticks) unsalted butter
- 11/3 cups sifted powdered sugar
- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup unskinned almonds, toasted and finely ground
- 4 large egg whites, at room temperature
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon pure almond extract
- 1/2 pound firm, ripe plums, each pitted and cut into 8 wedges
- 1/4 cup sliced almonds, lightly toasted
- -- Powdered sugar for garnish

**Instructions:** Preheat the oven to 350°. Set the oven rack to the middle position.

Brush an 8-inch round cake pan with melted butter, line with a round of parchment paper, and brush with a little more butter.

Put the 12 tablespoons butter in a small saucepan and cook over medium heat until the solids settle to the bottom and the butter turns a deep tawny brown and smells nutty, 8-10 minutes. Pour through a fine-mesh strainer lined with cheesecloth or a coffee filter. Let cool to room temperature.

Sift the sugar and flour together, then stir in the ground almonds.

In an electric stand mixer with the whisk attachment, or with hand-held beaters, whip the egg whites and salt until they form stiff peaks. Add the sugar mixture gradually, mixing until smooth. Add the brown butter and the almond extract and mix until just combined.

Pour the batter into the prepared pan. Arrange the plums in a circular pattern on top, and sprinkle with the sliced almonds. Bake until the top is golden brown and the sides of the cake have pulled away slightly from the pan, about 45 minutes.

Cool the cake in the pan. Sift a little powdered sugar over the top before serving.

**Variation:** To make 12 individual cakes, brush a muffin tin with melted butter and distribute the batter, fruit and almonds evenly. Bake until golden brown and cooked through, about 25 minutes.

**Per serving:** 341 calories, 5 g protein, 29 g carbohydrate, 24 g fat (11 g saturated), 47 mg cholesterol, 97 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.

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