

Wine Spectator

Revolution by the Bay: *A vanguard of women chefs reset the table*

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Alice Waters (left) and Sibella Kraus, shown here at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco, have worked tirelessly over many years to get more fresh ingredients onto more dinner plates. (Alanna Hale)

When Alice Waters and a few counterculture Berkeley friends opened Chez Panisse in 1971, they set in motion trends that would change the food landscape in the San Francisco Bay Area and across America. Waters and other women not only laid the foundation for what became known as California cuisine, they drove key developments that set the tone for the way we dine today.

Things we now take for granted originated with women in the City by the Bay, from chef's menus to farm-to-table cooking to kitchens organized as collaborations instead of traditional chef hierarchies.

An inspiration for Alice Waters was Cecilia Chiang. Now 99, Chiang established a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco in 1961 called the Mandarin and introduced authentic dishes from all over China, not just the narrow list of Americanized Cantonese specialties that then prevailed in

Chinese dining here. She moved into the then-new Ghirardelli Square development in 1968, with decor that avoided kitschy chinoiserie. Chiang championed high quality wine with her food, then unheard—of in Asian restaurants.

Beyond Chinese cuisine, she mentored prominent restaurateurs, starting with Waters, who took cooking classes from Chiang before opening Chez Pannisse.

"Alice came to the Mandarin with some friends," Chiang recalls, sipping tea in the living room of her Pacific Heights apartment. "She couldn't get over how every dish had different flavors, and she wanted to know the secret to the way we cooked vegetables so green, crisp and fresh."

Chiang's classes introduced a who's who of soon-to-be culinary luminaries to the hows and whys of Chinese dishes, with students including James Beard, Chuck Williams (founder of Williams-Sonoma) and Marion Cunningham (author of the revised Fannie Farmer Cookbook and mother hen to many women chefs).

Shortly after Chez Pannisse opened, Waters convinced Chiang to educate her cooks about vegetables. Chiang recalls that it was the start of a lifelong friendship: "We went to Europe together three times and to China twice. They say when you can travel together without getting on each other's nerves, you'll be friends. We still are."

Vegetables were treated with the utmost respect at Chez Pannisse, in menus that were, in themselves, revolutionary. Instead of a standard à la carte list, and unlike old-fashioned table d'hôte, or prix fixe, menus, Waters' menu offered a single item for each course. Essentially, it was a dinner party, just like the French-inspired menus she made at home for friends. "We were not professional cooks," she recalls. "We were intellectual cooks and Francophiles, but we thought we could do it." The restaurant had lines out the door from the very first night, Aug. 28, 1971, for a set menu of pâté en croute, canard aux olives, plum tart and coffee. It cost \$3.95.

There's a direct link to Thomas Keller's epic tasting menu at the French Laundry through that restaurant's original owner and chef, Sally Schmitt. Inspired by Chez Pannisse's format, Schmitt had raised the bar on a desultory 1960s Napa Valley dining scene with monthly dinner menus at the Chutney Kitchen, the gourmet shop in a sprawling Yountville shopping mall that she and her husband, Don, had moved to California in 1967 to manage.

In 1978, they bought an old building across Washington Street that locals knew as the French laundry. Her nightly five-course menu there quickly made it an insiders' favorite. After Keller bought the building in 1994, he expanded on the menu format and never turned back.

Nancy Oakes of Boulevard and Traci Des Jardins of Jardinière top a long list of female chefs whose restaurants gained distinction in the 1990s, and today they and many other women remain prominent among San Francisco's leading chefs, including Dominique Crenn with Atelier Crenn and Melissa Perello with Octavia.

Chiang, Waters and Schmitt might not have intended to cook up a revolution, but they had something in common. They were women, and they approached restaurants in a unique way that continues to be profoundly influential.

At Chez Panisse, Waters wanted to make food that tasted like what she had experienced in France. To do that, she found locally sourced ingredients from providers she and her chefs got to know personally. "We ended up at the doorsteps of organic farmers, because our values were part of their thinking. It fit with my counterculture world and trumped any desire to make money. We did, but we did not imagine that."

Before long, the French identity gave way to something new. For the executive chef role, she hired a young Jeremiah Tower, later known for Stars, the landmark San Francisco restaurant that was his prototype of the American brasserie. He expanded the Chez Panisse menus into celebrations of American ingredients without shoehorning them into a French frame, triggering what we now think of as California cuisine.

Neither Chez Panisse nor California cuisine would be the same without Sibella Kraus, who created the system that made it possible for the state's stunning array of produce to reach these restaurants at the peak of quality. A cook at Chez Panisse in the 1980s, Kraus found a way for farmers who might be growing eight kinds of eggplant to connect with chefs. This evolved into a career servicing restaurants that wanted the best stuff from the farmers growing it.

While working for a produce wholesaler in San Francisco, she convinced one farmer to grow lettuce at half the normal size and get twice the price for its natural sweetness and vibrancy. "I set up a whole department to deal just with specialty and organic vegetables and fruit from small-scale farms," she recalls. That became Greenleaf, now the leading purveyor in the field.

In the 1980s, Kraus created the Tasting of Summer Produce, an annual event at the Oakland Museum of California showcasing growers of unusual and rare fruits and vegetables. Noted Bay Area chefs and restaurateurs began to realize that they could get ripe heirloom tomatoes, Chioggia beets, purple potatoes and an array of unusual melons.

Kraus also spearheaded the founding of the Ferry Building Public Market and the huge outdoor Ferry Plaza Farmers Market that runs three days a week in its shadow. Today, she runs SAGE (Sustainable Agriculture Education), where a current project finds ways to establish farms and agricultural parks around the edges of cities.

"On the plate, those raw ingredients, be they peaches, or chiles, or oysters, or tomatoes, that's what makes the food great," says Kraus. "Getting those great ingredients has been the basis of every cuisine, whether it's Korean, California cuisine or Mexican." It's easy to detect the vibrancy, high-def clarity and sheer presence of such flavors in San Francisco's best dishes.

Women were responsible for creating much of that, and more. Their work drew hungry diners to parts of the city previously unexplored by the food-obsessed.

Patricia Unterman established Hayes Street Grill in 1979. Hayes Valley is now a dining mecca, but back then, the blocks behind the opera house and just-opened symphony hall were sketchy. "There was no place to eat before performances," she recalls.

A native of Evanston, Ill., who came to Northern California to attend Stanford University, Unterman had already created a popular gourmet shop and restaurant called the Beggar's Banquet in the shadow of Chez Panisse in Berkeley. For the new grill, Unterman decided she would play a riff on classic San Francisco seafood restaurants such as Tadich Grill and Sam's Grill.

"My notion was to make it fresher, cleaner. None of that frozen stuff," she says, inspired by "grilled fish scented with fresh herbs, served with fresh vegetables" that she ate during a vacation on the coast of Yugoslavia. "The food was clean. The wines were delicious. I realized we could do that in Northern California. We had the ingredients. Everything could be fresh. Fish cooks quickly over a grill, and it is light enough to be ideal before going to a concert or an opera."

Another chef who drew curious food lovers to remote neighborhoods is Nancy Oakes. Even before she made Boulevard (which opened in 1993) into the San Francisco waterfront icon it is today, there was L'Avenue, which opened in the Richmond District in 1988. She served elevated American food in casual surroundings.

Oakes proved adept at integrating the center of the plate seamlessly with the rest, contrasting grilled salmon draped with chive sauce against sautéed spinach, corn sticks, zucchini, pears and tomatoes. An Italian-inspired salsa on a grilled veal chop brightened new potatoes sprinkled with sage and Parmesan; French beans tossed with lemon, olive oil and roasted peppers completed the picture.

Oakes did not aspire to be a chef. She hosted and served, but did not cook, at such high-end San Francisco restaurants as the Carnelian Room and Alexis before she started making comfort food at Pat O'Shea's Mad Hatter, a sports bar. The owner, who was her boyfriend at the time, built L'Avenue down the block for her to expand her game in a real restaurant.

Growing up, Oakes had experienced classic French cuisine while touring Europe with her parents. She continued to travel there on her own, at a time "when you could be 25 years old and eat at every three-star in Europe," she says. "Now an evening costs a week's wages." But she admits she was "hugely" influenced by Waters' first cookbook (*Chez Panisse Menu Cookbook*, 1982). "So many beautiful things in it, like quail grilled over olive branches," Oakes remarks. "She really nailed what became California cuisine."

France also inspired Traci Des Jardins, whose first restaurant, Jardinière, opened in 1997 and pairs classic French culinary techniques with art nouveau decor designed by her original co-owner, Pat Kuleto, a restaurant designer who built dozens of high-end Bay Area restaurants. (In 2012, she bought out Kuleto's share.)

Born and raised in California's farm-focused Central Valley, Des Jardins enthusiastically embraced the farm-to-table movement. In 2004, she opened the taqueria Mijita Cocina Mexicana in the

Ferry Building. Her other restaurants include the upscale Mexican spot Arguello and the California-meets-Spanish restaurant the Commissary, both in the Presidio, part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Joyce Goldstein's thoroughly researched history, *Inside the California Food Revolution*, published in 2013, lent an insider's take to these stories and others. Goldstein had broken new ground herself in 1980, turning the upstairs dining room at Chez Panisse into a café with an open kitchen. The café's pizzas, salads, sandwiches and grilled food met the same high standards as the menu downstairs, only it was more casual. Goldstein's own restaurant, Square One, which opened in 1984, expanded the notion of Mediterranean cuisine beyond hummus, baba ganoush and pita to dishes originating from countries ranging from Morocco to Turkey, with stops in Spain, Lebanon and literally every region in Italy. Italian regional cuisines have since become a national trend too.

"Women ran the show in the Bay Area," Goldstein says today. "Many of us who worked together in various kitchens shared a sensibility about food based on how it nurtured our families, our community and the people we loved. We served more vegetables on the plate and didn't try to disguise the natural flavors of the food with too much technique."

Chefs of more recent vintage stand on the shoulders of these pioneers, among them Dominique Crenn, who last fall became the first woman chef in the U.S. to earn three stars from Michelin. Atelier Crenn, which opened in 2011, serves a single chef's menu. Her much more casual Petit Crenn (2015), a hearth-based neighborhood spot, celebrates her Brittany roots with an à la carte menu. The latest addition, Bar Crenn (2018), enhances cocktails and wine with snacks and light dishes from an annex of Atelier's kitchen. This year, she's opening a combination boutique, restaurant and patisserie in the new Salesforce Tower.

In international forums that have nothing to do with cuisine, including a memorable TED Talk, Crenn has been outspoken on women's experiences in the restaurant world. And, unusual among the other pace-setting chefs in this report, she embraces cutting-edge culinary techniques—science-based efforts to create unusual textures and visual presentations. But she does it in a poetic style.

An Atelier Crenn menu is written in allusions, not ingredients or names of dishes. "Where the broad ocean leans against the Spanish land" combines squid with Iberico ham and black truffles. "Walking deep in the woods" is a foraged mushroom dish.

"Poetry is raw, vulnerable," she says. "It's engagement, it's emotion; you have something to say and you're not afraid of saying it. [With poetry,] I found my own voice." That voice has the effect of softening the edges of her forward-looking cuisine, on the menu and on the plate, without losing the sense of adventure and abstract beauty. "I use technique and innovation to enhance my curiosity and my skill, and from that I can create a vision."

She arrived in San Francisco in 1986. At 21, with no restaurant experience, she landed a job as a cook at Stars. Crenn made her way around kitchens in California and did a one-year stint as chef of

the InterContinental Hotel's Jakarta restaurant. Her San Francisco Italian restaurant, Luce, made a splash before she hung out her own shingle at Atelier Crenn.

Childhood visits to her grandparents' farm in Brittany inspired her to plant a 4-acre biodynamic farm in Sonoma, which certainly puts her in San Francisco's farm-to-table conversation. She brightens animatedly as she lists the quinces, peaches, pears, persimmons, plums and herbs the farm produces for the restaurants. She smiles broadly when she mentions the pink Roscoff onions from Brittany that the garden grows.

Although she's a bona fide international star, Crenn talks a more internal game, aiming for the kind of collegial kitchen Goldstein described. "I want to know everybody's story and create a space for people to go on the journey with me," she says. "Creating for a community is important, in the city around me and in my kitchen."

Although few women chefs in the Bay Area currently share Crenn's embrace of avant-garde techniques, one to keep an eye on is Kim Alter, chef-owner of Nightbird, which opened in 2016. She too softens the edges. "I like the techniques to draw out the flavors and get interesting textures," she says. "It's not about just using techniques like foams, gels and spherification."

Her menus, which run for two to three weeks at a time, each follow a theme. For New Year's, it was "Rare Indulgence," using luxury ingredients like caviar and truffles. Earlier in the fall, dinner celebrated diverse cultures with a "Sanctuary" menu (as in sanctuary cities) that included a Syrian-inspired dish of black cod with asparagus, green garbanzo beans and charred lemon.

One of the few chefs in this story to be mentored by a woman, Alter laid the foundation of her expertise in legendary Italian chef Suzette Gresham's kitchen at Acquerello in San Francisco. Alter has two other cooks working with her now in Nightbird's cramped 300-square-foot, all-female kitchen. "I think women today are drawn to working for women," she muses. "I think they feel more comfortable. It's safer."

If Alter is only beginning to get recognition, Melissa Perello has attracted attention as a formidable chef for 20 years, beginning at Charles Nob Hill, where she was executive chef, and for three years at the Fifth Floor when it was a Wine Spectator Grand Award winner. It was a rapid rise. Burned out, she took a year off in 2008 to travel the world. "Within that year, I knew I wanted to open my own restaurant," she says, "but not in fine dining."

Her first restaurant, the tiny, casual Frances, aimed to "elevate the food and refined service in a more familial, casual, comfortable way," she says. It opened in 2009 on a quiet block of San Francisco's Castro neighborhood, earning as much renown for its panisse frites (chickpea fritters) as for its beautifully balanced plates of stuffed quail with roasted sunchokes. Octavia followed six years later, a larger space where perfectly pink duck breast shines with delicata squash, persimmon, yogurt and a yellow curry vinaigrette.

Big Night, the snazziest restaurant group to emerge in San Francisco this past decade, has created an impressive range of restaurants at a high level, including Marlowe, the Cavalier, Park Tavern and three other popular spots.

Chef and business partner Jennifer Puccio cut her culinary teeth in Ana Sortun's kitchen at Oleana in Cambridge, Mass. Venturing to California in 2004, she worked with Daniel Patterson at Elisabeth Daniel in San Francisco and Jeremy Fox at Ubuntu in Napa. Emily Luchetti, who brought sweet delights to Stars in the 1980s, Farallon in the 1990s and Waterbar in the 2000s, is the group's chief pastry officer.

Puccio provided the spark that made Marlowe click. "Jenn is technically as good as any chef," says Anna Weinberg, the managing partner who recruited Puccio to rescue her failing first restaurant, "but we didn't want outré things like head cheese or tweezer food. We wanted food that was craveable and delicious. We wanted to make roast chicken for people in the neighborhood, like the neighborhood restaurants in New York were when I lived there."

"Anna had a great idea," Puccio says, recalling the moment she joined Weinberg in 2010. "It was up to me to come up with what the classics might be. It was food I like to eat on my day off ... big, bold, ripe flavors." Her time working with Sortun was invaluable. "She taught me that you have to understand the original dishes before you can riff on them and take liberties. That was super important for me."

Marlowe's "poulet vert," with candied baby turnips and bacon-mustard jus, is one example. Park Tavern's house salad, a menu fixture since the restaurant opened in 2011, contrasts sweet Little Gem lettuce with radish, avocado, Parmesan, torn croutons and the tangy flavors of a freshly made green goddess dressing.

Like Waters and Chiang, Pim Techamuanvivit was not a chef when she opened her groundbreaking Thai restaurant Kin Khao in 2014. Her restaurant experience before involved writing the foodie blog Chez Pim and a book, *The Foodie Handbook: The (Almost) Definitive Guide to Gastronomy* (2009).

At a time when most Thai restaurants seemed to serve the same dishes, Techamuanvivit brought her family recipes into the limelight at the 70-seat Kin Khao. She charmed adventurous diners with rabbit in green curry, the curry paste made from scratch in-house, and fruit salad in a white soy-lime vinaigrette, with toasted coconut, shallots and bird's eye chiles.

"When you build curry paste from scratch, it's going to cost a lot more than curry paste that comes in a tub," she says. "It's home-style cooking with top ingredients" from the same high quality sources used by other A-list kitchens—items that are not cheap, but which produce sublime food. "On Yelp, there was a lot of 'It's great, but it's expensive for Thai food.' But we get our rabbit from the same farm that sells to other great restaurants."

Last year, she divided her time between Kin Khao and taking over the kitchen of Michelin-starred Nahm in Bangkok. And she continues to expand the perception of Thai cuisine with a second,

larger San Francisco restaurant, opening this year. Nari (the name is Sanskrit for "woman"), "a tribute to all [the] women in my life who taught me how to cook," happens to be on the site of Elka, a brilliant woman-run San Francisco restaurant of the 1990s helmed by the late Elka Gilmore, with Des Jardins as executive chef and Elizabeth Falkner cooking there as well.

Wine plays a central role for most of these chefs, not least Cindy Pawlcyn, whose Mustards, just outside Yountville, Calif., is a mainstay of excellent area dining. It opened 36 years ago, when high-level food in Napa Valley meant fancy restaurants such as Domaine Chandon, Auberge du Soleil or the French Laundry.

Pawlcyn had come to Napa Valley in 1979 to be the opening chef at Meadowood Resort—at the time "a 1950s country club," she recalls, hardly the luxury property it is today, with its much-admired restaurant and high-end spa. She then teamed with restaurateurs Bill Higgins and Bill Upson to open Mustards, a place where locals could drop in without dressing up and still find great food to enjoy with their wines.

Mustards had land around it to plant a garden, and Pawlcyn had a free hand to create a unique menu. "I knew I wanted a wood-burning oven and grill," she recalls, "but other than that, I just cooked what my partners and I liked. Cheeseburgers? Sure. Mongolian pork chops was something I made with a marinade I learned on a trip to China. Neighbors sold us bags of Meyer lemons from their backyard trees."

As long as she kept the flavors compatible with wine, everyone was happy. She was cooking for an educated audience. The backbone of the clientele, the valley's vintners, considered it a triumph to place their wines on Mustards' list, even for labels that were hard to get elsewhere.

The Real Restaurants group—Pawlcyn, Higgins and Upson—opened a string of memorable eateries in quick succession, including Tra Vigne in St. Helena, up Highway 29 from Mustards, and others that stretched from San Francisco to Carmel. By 2000, Pawlcyn had tired of driving all over Northern California to visit these far-flung kitchens. She left the partnership but kept Mustards and then opened two restaurants in St. Helena—Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen and Go Fish (both of which have since been sold).

Today, Pawlcyn's impact is easy to detect in wine country, where restaurants not only serve carefully sourced, simply prepared eclectic food in rustic surroundings but also offer wine lists celebrating the full range of what the vineyards around them produce.

Like Pawlcyn, Oakes encourages her chefs at Boulevard to keep wine in mind. "I don't want anything on the plate to compete with the wine," she says. "They're supposed to go together."

Early on at Chez Panisse, Waters cultivated contacts in the wine world. Chalone, Ridge and Mondavi were big supporters, as was the importer Kermit Lynch. They patronized the restaurant, filled the wine list and helped spread the word about what was happening in Berkeley.

A similar connection to the wine community was a driving force for Crenn when she opened Bar Crenn last year next-door to Atelier Crenn. "I wanted to create this space for people in the wine industry to come and do parties or just hang out," she says. "I'm fascinated with winemakers. The work and the knowledge—of the time, the place, the soil. The skill they have, it blows my mind. It's so meticulous to do [their] job.

"When you taste great food, there's layering, and when you meet with a winemaker, it teaches you about the layering that went into that product. I become a child again. I'm curious. I want to understand the story behind the bottle. We serve wines that inspire us."

Des Jardins fondly remembers working at Rubicon, where she was the chef and wine pro Larry Stone the sommelier and part-owner. "Larry taught me so much about the symbiotic relationship between food and wine," she recalls.

Des Jardins got her first taste of that sort of thing as executive chef of Patina in Los Angeles, where she and chef-owner Joachim Splichal devised extensive wine dinners for visiting high-profile wine-world figures and groups of collectors. The first was Henri Jayer, from Burgundy, and his U.S. importer, Martine Saunier. "Having that intense and deep dialogue with these great people gave me a reference point I never forgot," the chef says today.

Wine also played a key role in Techamuanvivit's restaurant, where she sold wine with Thai food simply by walking the bottles across the dining room. American guests started to ask about it, and now they listen when her staff suggests that Rioja might be a better choice with Thai flavors than Cabernet.

These chefs think outside traditional restaurant norms. They encourage collaborative kitchens. They often home in on flavors that remind them of what they ate in their youth, or while traveling. And they find inspiration in other women.

Reflecting on what might make women professionals' cooking different than men's, Puccio muses, "Women chefs tend to be a little less precious. They're more about delivering what people want and doing it consistently, and there's something about the way they nurture their staff and their guests that draws me. I always admired perfectionists like Nancy at Boulevard, Alice at Chez Panisse, Suzette at Acquerello, Judy [Rodgers] at Zuni."

Rodgers was the chef of Zuni Café from 1987 until her death from cancer in 2013. Her seminal Zuni Café Cookbook (2002) outlined a practical approach to restaurant cooking with innovations such as salting meat, poultry and fish as soon as they arrive, and has influenced and inspired two generations of chefs.

Barbara Tropp also died young. Her tiny China Moon Café (1986 to 1996) explored byways of Chinese cuisine in a tiny 1930s coffee shop. Her legacy lives on in a remarkable cookbook, *The Modern Art of Chinese Cooking* (1982), which includes a long essay on wine.

Women remain thoroughly ingrained in the fabric of Bay Area restaurants. Women owned or headed the kitchens of 37 in the list of 100 best restaurants of 2018 in the region's largest newspaper. Of 32 Michelin-starred restaurants in San Francisco, nine are owned or cheffed by women, and of Eater.com's list of 38 top restaurants, the count was 13. By way of comparison, women own or head the kitchens in fewer than a half dozen of New York's current 75 Michelin-starred restaurants and seven of the Eater 38 there.

Perhaps owing to its higher percentage of women-led restaurants, San Francisco has seen fewer high-profile revelations of restaurant-world sexual misconduct than have cities such as New York and Washington, D.C. And it's not crazy to think that in a city with women as mayor (London Breed) and members of Congress (Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris), life may be closer to equitable.

Still, the Bay Area has had its share of sexual harassment incidents, including two recent civil cases involving prominent male chefs. One chef Pawlcyn worked for before she moved to the Bay Area wanted her to sit on his lap. Puccio once had a chef stick his tongue in her ear. "That guy was a creep," Puccio says. "There was a potential to throw me off course, but that's not my makeup. I saw a role model of a strong female chef [working for Ana Sortun early on], and I thought, 'OK, that's it. Come in early, stay late and treat everyone the same.' "

Several highly regarded women chefs continue to make an impact in restaurants they co-own with spouses and life partners. Among them is Gayle Pirie at Foreign Cinema, who met her partner, John Clark, working in the kitchen of Patricia Unterman's fondly remembered pizzeria Vicolo. Sarah Rich and her husband, Evan, opened Rich Table in 2012. In the local fashion, they serve serious food absent of any formality. Nicole Krasinski and her husband, Stuart Brioza, own State Bird Provisions and the Progress. Annie Somerville has been the chef of Greens since 1985, when the original chef, Deborah Madison, decamped for New Mexico. Madison treated vegetarian cuisine with the meticulous attention she learned working at Chez Panisse.

And now at Chez Panisse, for the first time, all the key chefs are women. Amy Dencler, who joined the staff in 1996, was recently elevated to restaurant chef, and Jennifer Sherman has been general manager since 2008. Pastry chef since 2013, Mary Jo Thoresen started as an intern in 1981.

"It didn't happen out of my feminism," Waters says. "It came from their ability to both cook and collaborate in a way that makes the restaurant what it is."

Back when Chez Panisse opened, the restaurant world was highly male-dominated, and an all-women team of key chefs probably wasn't possible. But today, thanks to the energy and community that emerged from Chez Panisse, the pool of talented, experienced women chefs has greatly expanded.

Waters is not alone in noting the impact and importance of younger women chefs. "This next generation is happening," she enthuses. "We're not in competition. We're learning from each other and sharing ideas."