THE MAGAZINE OF FOOD AND FITNESS

Cooking Light

July/August 1998

blueberry pound cake

Blueberry Pound Cake, page 134
Lemon-Ginger Ice Cream, page 118

cool desserts from hot cooks • plum crazy

the herbs of summer • at-home retreats

california STORY

Curried Santa Barbara Shrimp Salad

MAYBE IT WAS the day I spent soaring in a hot-air balloon over the silver-gray artichoke fields of Castroville. Maybe it was a meal in a Napa restaurant, with mesclun salad picked that morning from a nearby field and a glass of Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon that tasted unmistakably of the valley's iron-rich volcanic soil. Or maybe it's just been a lifetime of savoring all the bounty of my native state, but somewhere along the way I've come to believe that California, like Tuscany and Provence before it, is well on its way to cultivating one of the world's finest regional cuisines.

For more than 25 years now, California cuisine has been evolving and gaining a reputation, so much so that the term itself has sometimes invited parody. In the Steve Martin film *L.A. Story*, the diners at a trendy outdoor café are asked what they're having for lunch. They reply in unison: "California cuisine." But beneath the parody—and related notions that California cuisine is pink tofu in a sushi roll—lies the reality of what has become one of the most influential food movements in the country this century. Then what exactly is it?

Short answer: an emphasis on fresh, locally grown produce with a decided preference for vegetables, fruits, and grains over meat and fat, and a passion for co-opting multicultural influences. But there's also an expanded definition that's as rich, complex, and evocative as the state itself. Primarily stemming from a Mediterranean sensibility, California cuisine is a healthy obsession with the quality of

Continued on page 102

Text by Nancy Spiller / Recipes by Jeanne Jones

Alice Waters (left), her acclaimed Chez Panisse in Berkeley (center), and L.A. celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck (right, with wife, Barbara Lazaroff) are the current stars of a centuries-old culinary evolution.

Continued from page 99

what you eat on a daily basis. It's refusing to accept wilted iceberg lettuce or tasteless tomatoes. It's planning menus around what looks best that day and season, in the market or the garden, and keeping an eye peeled for spring asparagus and fava beans, summer strawberries and corn, fall persimmons, and winter beets.

"It says this is what something tastes like when it's fresh. It raises the standards for everyone; it influences the national palate," contends Bill Bradley, chef de cuisine at the Culinary Institute of America's Wine Spectator Greystone Restaurant in Napa. "It's using what's raised here. It's cooking out your back door. It's creating lively flavors without relying on cream and butter." At the Greystone restaurant, Bradley's philosophy is to develop flavors on the plate combining, for example, "the perfect tomato with the perfect herbs." And those herbs are grown steps from the kitchen, in such profusion that restaurant chefs can choose, to name but one range of options, from more than 18 kinds of mint, including Egyptian, English, chocolate, and pineapple.

"It's absolutely been enormously influential," says *New York Times* restaurant critic Ruth Reichl, who, as a former restaurant critic for *The Los Angeles Times*, has seen California's culinary evolution from both coasts. According to Reichl, the state's chefs have been especially responsible for one of America's most healthful trends—freshness. "People like Alice Waters and Wolfgang Puck believed that the first thing that mattered was great ingredients, seasonal and regional, before you can have great food," says Reichl. "There's been this remarkable greenmarket movement across the country, and that's straight out of California."

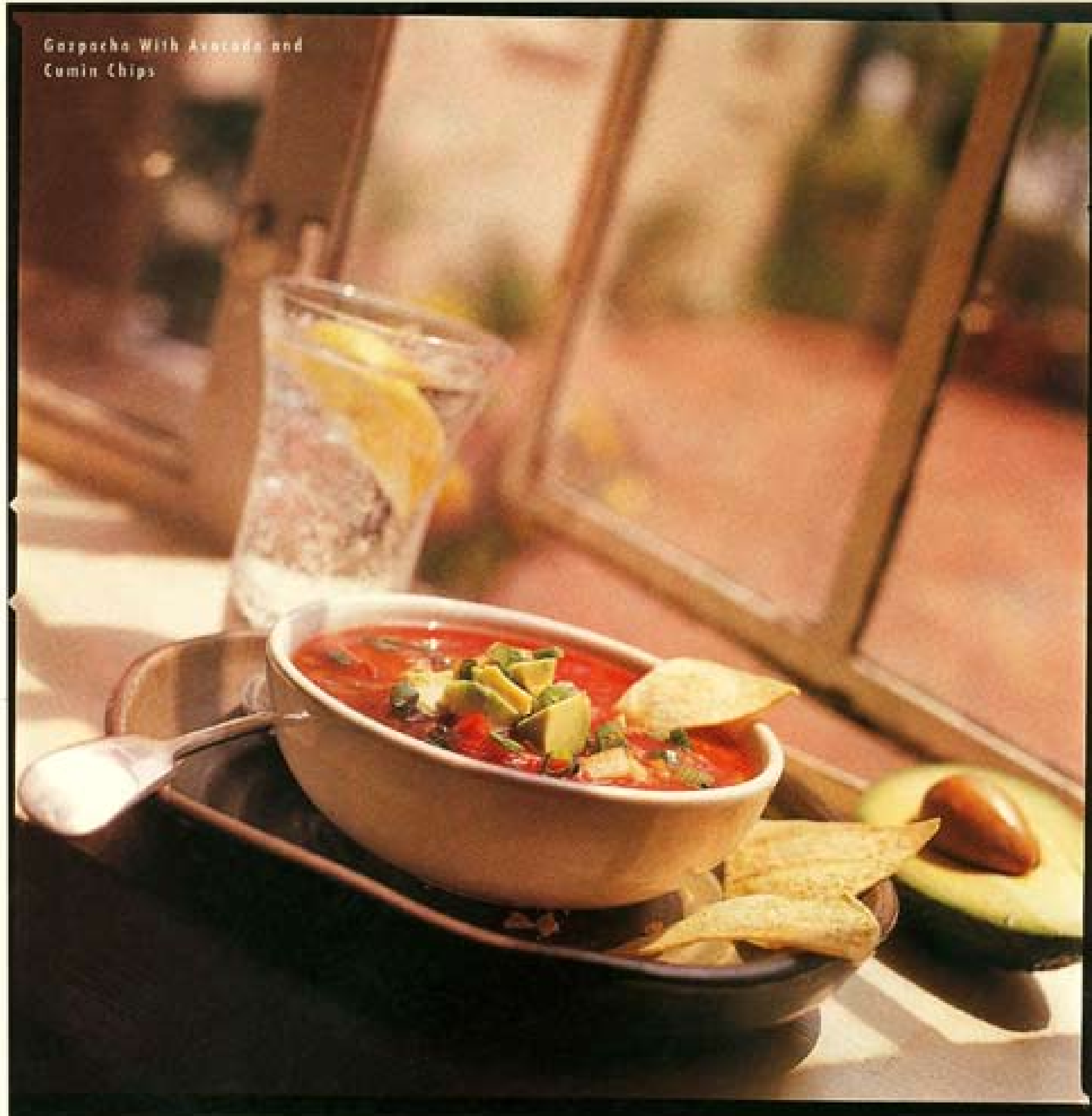
Boston-based chef Lydia Shire, who uses California produce at her acclaimed Biba Restaurant, describes California as a "daring, fertile place. There's such a sense when you go out there that the people are so passionate about what they do. This new awareness of what's good in America definitely had its roots in California."

California cuisine, like its more than 32 million highly diverse people, seems to constantly re-invent itself. Previously obscure ingredients such as crisp Chinese snow peas or shiitake mushrooms redolent of the Japanese forest are today commonly found in mainstream supermarkets. So are Italian zucchini blossoms and French haricots verts, countless varieties of Latin American chiles, and such locally grown Middle Eastern staples as pomegranates, dates, and pistachios.

Favorable climate means California cooks get to work with more fresh materials than can be found in any other state. More than 75 major commercial food crops provide more than half the entire country's larder. California is the nation's primary supplier of, among other things, almonds, artichokes, avocados, grapes, kiwi, olives, prunes, raisins, and walnuts. In addition, the state has ample cattle ranches, lamb, poultry—and 840 miles of coastline producing Santa Barbara shrimp, lobster, oysters, abalone, and other seafood. The only two major crops it doesn't grow are hazelnuts and cranberries. And that may only be a matter of time. After all, the otherwise-arid Central Valley is now filled with rice paddies.

Despite its relatively recent prominence, the roots of California cuisine run deep—all the way back, if you like, to the Native American tribes who found an Eden here of hunting and gathering. My own connection starts with my paternal grandmother, born in the 19th century in Monterey of fishermen from southern Italy. My mother was born and raised on the San Francisco Peninsula, where her father of French descent grew most everything her family ate—including chickens—in their backyard. A typical baby boomer in the suburbs of the San Francisco Bay area circa 1950 to 1960, I demanded Campbell's soup, Kool-Aid, and Jell-O, but still doted on our yard filled with walnut, apricot, Santa Rosa plum, McIntosh apple, and Bartlett pear trees, and a perennial border of artichoke plants that blossomed into summer's gorgeous purple thistles.

The political turmoil and cultural revolution of the '60s and early '70s were in many ways centered in the San Francisco area. Food was no exception. Alice Waters, a University of California-Berkeley student who'd studied in France, opened Chez Panisse in 1971. Her five-course prix fixe dinners based on the freshest local ingredients available that day heralded a new era in eating and became what



Gazpacho With Avocado and Cumin Chips

"It says this is what something **tastes** like when it's **fresh**. It's using what's **raised here**."

major studios, he terminated an era. Spago's bold, open kitchen provided the live equivalent of a giant-screen television for the dining room, and no one doubted who was star of the show. The celebrity chef was born.

In Berkeley, meanwhile, Alice Waters remains happily involved daily in Chez Panisse, her only spin-off, the tiny nearby Café Fanny, named after her daughter. The only product for sale beyond her doors is granola.

In recent years, her menu has shifted from French to Italian country cooking, but she's still enchanted by the most important, most irreducible element of the cuisine for which her state is famed: "Every year this time, the radicchios start coming in from the farms, and there are pale-yellow ones, mauve and red, striped and spotted. They're irresistible; they're like petals of parrot tulips," she says. "Fresh food that's alive gives off an energy, and I get an energy from it."

California cuisine is clearly a state of mind as well as mouth. Let Bill Gates ask where you want to go today; Californians will continue to ask the more vital and immediate question: What do you want to eat today?

Decades in the making, the Golden State's bold and bountiful cuisine has become one of the world's finest, and changed the way all of us eat–for much the better.