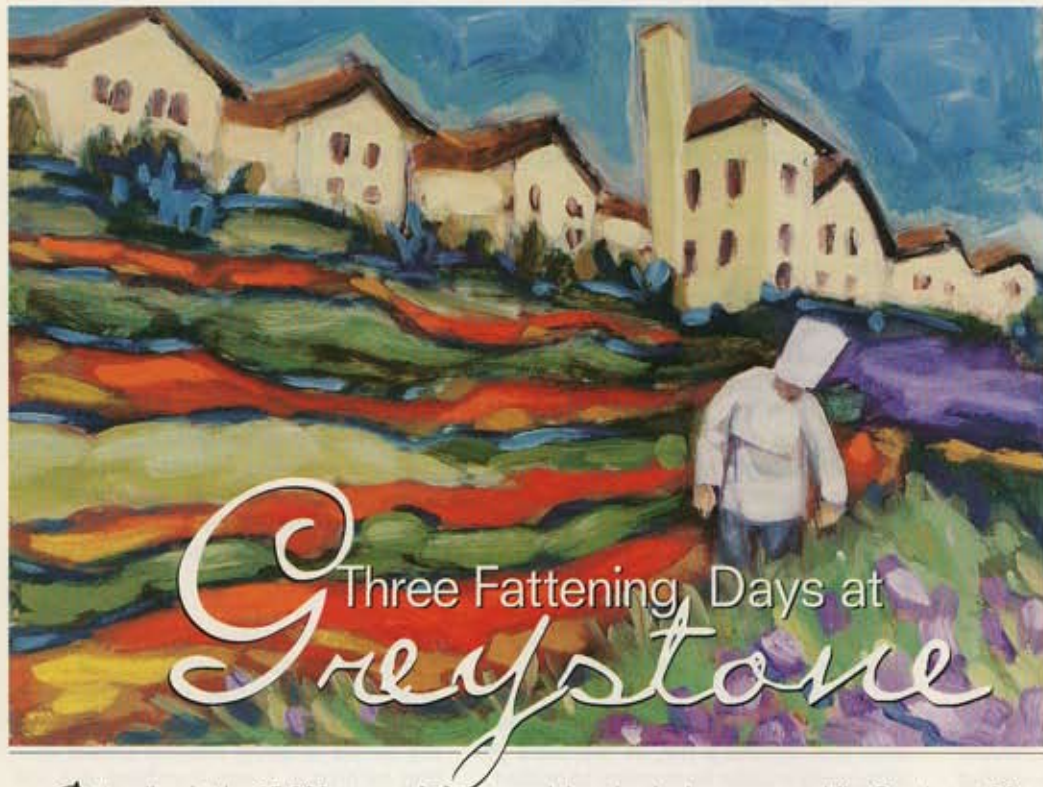


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Three Fattening Days at Greystone

Standing in the 15,000-square-foot teaching kitchens of the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in Napa, CA dressed in white toque and lab coat, I felt like a professional chef. Cookbook author and Italian food expert Nancy Harmon Jenkins was showing me how to moosh anchovies for *tagliatelle di San Giuseppe*, St. Joseph's Day pasta. At the prep island next to us, soft-spoken cooking instructor and Sicilian aristocrat Anna Tasca Lanza whisked up a simple, vibrant *salsa verde* to top the whole, salt-baked salmon her crew had just slipped in the oven. Farther down, Washington, D.C., bread impresario Mark Furstenberg held forth on the proper kneading techniques for artisan loaves, while the captain of Italy's National Culinary Team, Domenico Maggi, braised monkfish with garlic and artichokes.

It was the final exam, culminating experience and last supper of the CIA's "Flavors of the Mediterranean: The Garden, The Grove and the Sea" conference, a three-day, talk-and-tasting tour of the sun-drenched cradle of the world's most popular cuisines.

And we were only Italy. Spain, Tunisia, Greece and Provence were preparing their own specialties for the concluding luncheon buffet. Across the kitchen, chef Jean-Louis Palladin was making Provencal-style *gnocchi* with *tapenade*

and *jus de daube* sauce, while Greek chef Chris Veneris whipped up pasta with lobster tails.

This was the perfect winter idyll for a food writer — inspirational lectures and demonstrations by some of the world's leading culinary experts, who also presented focused tastings, hot meals and hand-picked wines. I'd wanted to experience the CIA ever since the Hyde Park, NY, institution had opened its first satellite campus in Napa's historic Greystone Cellars building in 1995. The state-of-the-art culinary academy, demonstration restaurant and cook store are the perfect base camp for experiencing the pleasures of the region that has become America's Provence.

Not that there was much free time for exploring the surrounding territory. Mornings and afternoons of the conference were spent in the EcoLab Theater lecture hall, with meals served in the test kitchen and the rustically elegant barrel room. The more than 100 attendees included chefs, caterers, recipe developers and at least one "product quality scientist" from Pizza Hut. Passionate non-professionals included a housewife from Ottawa, IL, and a surgeon from Kalamazoo, MI.

The healthful aspects of the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid were a focus throughout. Its emphasis on grains, veg-

etables and fruits, its encouragement of drinking wine, and relegation of red meat consumption to only a few times a month seemed reasonable enough. But flying in the face of America's current low-fat craze is the diet's allowance for 45 percent of daily calories to be from fat, albeit "good fat," as in olive oil. Keynote speaker Jenkins assured us that as long as the total consumption of calories was not excessive then it was a healthy and sensible diet promoting long life, as demonstrated by the peasant populations surrounding the Mediterranean.

Of course, the slide shows illustrating their folksy food ways lacked many photos of these same peasant people. I suspect they may have been a little too lumpy and authentic for appearance-conscious Americans to want to emulate. No matter, I was willing to suspend disbelief for the duration and eagerly checked my Zone diet at the door.

Highlights of the welcoming reception featuring foods from the Greek island of Crete included a traditional Cretan dried fava bean puree with sea urchin, cuttlefish flavored with rosemary and honey, and my favorite, red mullet cooked with blood orange juice and basil. Winter is the citrus season in the Mediterranean grove and the guest chefs found countless traditional and inventive ways to use it.

Thursday night's Italian dinner, subtitled Mediterranean comfort food, included an "ahhh"-inducing assortment of housemade sausage, ham and *paté* from Paul Bertolli, chef/owner of Oakland's Oliveto restaurant and recent recipient of the James Beard Award for best chef in California. Lanza brought the accompanying wines from Regaleali, her family's Sicilian country estate. The pasta with mussels, clams and chile peppers represented to me the best of Italian cooking: simplicity that is both subtle and robust.

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On Friday night, Chef Palladin dazzled with the flavors of Provence with *pistou* soup, *loup de mer* with *bouillabaisse coulis*, rabbit with olives and rosemary, and a perfect lemon tart flavored with lavender honey and pine nuts. The well-matched wines were provided by the Chalone Wine Foundation.

Dinners were held in the stone-and-cask-lined barrel room and seating was open. Conversation came easily with food as the common language. On Thursday night, I found myself seated next to a Northern California caterer whose description of how to make caviar made me want to bag a spawning sturgeon on my way home.

Because skipping a meal was unthinkable, the challenge for me was finding the time and place to work off each day's parade of irresistible bites. I would get back to my posh but rarely visited room at the Meadowood Resort, a place popular with the too-thin and too-rich crowd, just long enough to change into my sneakers for a walk of the darkened grounds. I went for as far and long as I could without risking life or limb.

I did manage one daylight hike on the resort's private loop trail circling above Meadowood's golf course and tennis courts into the ferns, oak trees and lichen-covered rocks of Napa's native landscape. It was a reminder of how similar California is to Italy and southern France, and how fortunate the state is to have had the benefit of their immigrant influence on its cuisine and wine.

The most exotic country explored at the conference was Tunisia. The small, North African country wedged between Algeria and Libya has a lively and ancient cuisine based largely on fruits, vegetables and grains. And with their over 700 miles of coastline, there is more than a few fish to be found on their tables. Mediterranean expert and cookbook author Paula Wolfert explained how Tunisians nurture crops from their harsh, sun-lit climate by planting fruit trees beneath the shade of palms and vegetables beneath the shade of fruit trees. Tunisian chef Abderrazak Haouari proudly demonstrated the "cuisine of my mother. She never put her name on frozen food." He prepared a traditional fish stew baked in a *gargoulette*, a clay vase sealed in dough. When done, the neck of the vase is whacked off with a cleaver and a flour-

ish, and the stew decanted for a dramatic dish combining both sacrifice and sustenance.

My eyes began to well when Haouari spoke of the women in his childhood village as artists of vegetable cultivation. I was ready to devote my life to raising vegetables in the difficult clay soil of my sun-baked Southern California yard. Then I realized I was having a hard enough time dealing with the rejection I now suffer from my ongoing insistence on eating bread. I would have to move to Tunisia if I were to become a vegetable artist. It gave me something to think about over the Spanish lunch of grouper *gazpacho* and a richly sensuous ice cream made with three different cheeses called *torta del casar*.

After lunch we learned to aspirate our olive oils. Served a tray of tiny cups of oil ranging in color from green to golden, we were told to sip each one while sucking in air to spray it over the palate. Premium olive oils are to be considered condiments, flavor elements in cooking, and we were tasting for their wide range of characteristics. We were warned by the expert panel that the first four oils were from last year, tired and lacking in fruit. Still, the unfiltered Greek oil was peppery; the Sicilian oil powerful, fruity and fragrant. The strong, acrid Spanish oil was described as "cat pissy," or, as another suggested, tasting of "grass in which overheated cats have been frolicking." It was considered perfect for *gazpacho* and tomato dishes. Panelist Bertolli declared the year-old Tunisian oil the most elegant and balanced of the group. The two California oils were less well regarded, with the DaVero brand's bitterness and heat described as "very forward," while Petaluma's McCavoy brand was dismissed as "punk-faced" and "spiky."

We next cleared our palates with exotic citrus varieties supplied by California Citrus Specialties, sampling the softly floral eustis limequat, the sweet and dreamy page mandarin, a hybrid of the clementine and minneola tangerine. I wouldn't argue with CCS's description of it as the "finest flavored citrus." We ended by sniffing Buddha's fingers. The once mutant, now hybridized, "Buddha's hand fingered citron" is a bizarrely beautiful tangle of tentacle-like rinds popular for floral displays and scenting rooms.

By the second day's Greek presentation,

my head was spinning like a tourist who'd spent too many days on the bus. Hadn't Palladin, his charm and talent overcoming an impossible French accent, just shown us how to make gnocchi? Hadn't it been at least 10 minutes since we last ate?

My focus returned with a tasting plate of artisanal cheeses from Crete. The most memorable was made from goat's milk, its sharp wine flavor from aging in the lees of wine barrels. Known as *ghilomeno* or *manoura*, cookbook author and Greek resident Diane Kochilas said it was the forerunner of today's feta cheese.

By Saturday morning, I felt ready for the challenge of cooking alongside the pros. That was until CIA instructor Ken Woytisek took the onion and knife from my hands to show me the proper cutting technique. I was humbled, but not hobbled. Between chores, I wandered the kitchen to see what the other countries were doing. I talked to Palladin about fat. He insisted eating it contributes to a long life. "Eet preserve everything inside you."

I sampled the Tunisian stew flavored with the dried greens called *moulakian* that Wolfert had enthused about. I decided the dark and dusky flavor was an acquired taste, like Hawaiian poi.

An eager crowd gathered for the salmon's release from its salt baked shroud. Instructor Woytisek took hammer to chisel and cracked the salt crust open in one neat piece, lifting it to reveal a perfect, steaming pink salmon. And of the seemingly thousands of dishes offered over the course of this incredible conference cum feast, all the variety, all the effort, all the exquisite ingredients, the simplest dishes were often the best, the embodiment of the Mediterranean's reputation as a "cuisine of the sun." For me, it was Lanza's salsa verde, made from nothing more than whisked lemon juice, good olive oil, parsley and salt, and served over the freshly baked, steaming salmon.

I drove south the next morning through Napa's damp, gray landscape. The fog-crested vineyards were ignited from below by the early blooms of wild mustard. Thoughts of winter in the Mediterranean and the warmth to be found from the traditional pleasures of the table helped guide me home. ■