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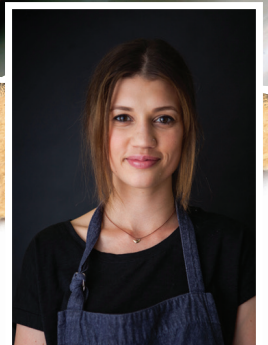


HAUTE CUISINE

INCORPORATING BEAUTY IN EVERY BITE — MINUS THE PRICE TAG

By Katie McCall, local food columnist

Photo by Victoria C Photos



Many years ago, I had the unique opportunity to dine at Thomas Keller's three-star Michelin restaurant The French Laundry in Yountville, California. While I can't recall everything I ate from the nine-course, prix fixe tasting menu (except for the glorious box of handmade chocolates presented at the end of the meal), the warm ambiance, immaculate service and stunning presentation of each dish will forever be ingrained in my mind.

After the three-hour meal, I wandered across the street to the restaurant's culinary garden; it was just

before sunset and golden rays filtered through rows upon rows of lettuces, herbs, heirloom tomatoes, radishes, beans and the like. I watched the gardeners carefully pick the produce and then walk across the street, delivering them to the kitchen staff. Within hours, these gems would appear on the dinner plates.

In that moment, I felt utterly grateful. Grateful to have dined at this restaurant, but more so to have been raised in a home where good, wholesome food was valued and regularly celebrated. Memories of picking beans from our family's garden and running them up to the porch didn't seem too far off from the culinary gardeners at The French Laundry ... except our meal

at home didn't cost an arm and a leg!

That's when it hit me: What excited me most about food was its natural beauty — and a Michelin-starred dining experience wasn't needed to achieve that. Sure, my meal was filled with caviar, Champagne and warm hand towels, but in all honesty, I enjoyed the simplicity of homegrown green beans sauteed in butter and seasoned with salt and pepper all the same.

After my trip, I made a commitment to incorporate beautiful elements into my life — and onto my plate — because beauty is intrinsically tied to quality. And



RICOTTA & JAM TOAST

Though hardly a "recipe," this delicious spin on morning toast is a perfect example of taking something average and elevating it to something beautiful. I love this toast with a hot cup of coffee or tea in the morning or as a late afternoon snack. Kids love it, too!

SERVES 1-2
INGREDIENTS:

- 1/2 cup ricotta cheese
 - 1/4 cup strawberry jam
 - 1 teaspoon orange or lemon zest
 - 2 slices of favorite bread, toasted
 - 4 fresh strawberries, sliced
 - Cinnamon
 - Sprig of fresh thyme
- In a small bowl, gently stir together the ricotta cheese, jam and zest. Set aside.
 - Toast your favorite bread and then spread the ricotta mixture on evenly.
 - Place the sliced strawberries on top and garnish with a sprinkle of cinnamon and a few fresh thyme leaves.
 - Enjoy!

when we genuinely appreciate the quality of something, big or small, we can connect with it on a more visceral level.

For me, the most obvious way to achieve this was growing my own little culinary garden. It started out small with a few herbs and tomato plants from my mom, but over the years, I experimented and expanded my humble plot to include a variety of squash, beans, peas, lettuces, peppers and eggplant.

I believe knowing exactly where something comes from, how it's grown or who made it automatically gives an object more value, making it less disposable and forgettable. With these fundamentals in mind, we're essentially forcing ourselves to be present with what's before us, and the act of preparing and eating food becomes therapeutic.

As a culinary professional and lover of food, I will always look forward to a "fancy" dinner out, but these days, I relish in being home and elevating the day's most basic dishes (see this month's recipe) with the addition of a freshly picked herb, unexpected ingredient or locally sourced product. My kitchen might not have a Michelin star, but bringing a little bit of beauty to my table every day is good enough for me.

■ Katie McCall, former owner of Two Wild Seeds Baking Co., is a bona fide Midwestern girl. Raised on four acres of rural property in Yorkville, she was always taught to respect nature and all of its bounty. From foraging morel mushrooms in the woods to picking wild black raspberries for homemade jam, Katie feels most at home when in nature and preparing food for others. When she's not creating new dishes in the kitchen (and writing about them) she can be found nose-deep in cookbooks, exploring the outdoors with her family — and eating ... always eating.

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