



Jean-Pierre Moullé & Denise Lurton Moullé

FRENCH ROOTS

Two cooks, two countries &
the beautiful food along the way



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FOREWORD BY PATRICIA UNTERMAN



Photography by Jan Baldwin



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We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.

—ANAÏS NIN

to Maud & Elga

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Jan Baldwin came from London and visited us for a week to capture our home and lives in Bordeaux. Jan's photographs represent perfectly the blend of country rustic and sophistication we strive to maintain, in our food, and in our everyday life. She always shot with curiosity, good spirit, and impeccable taste. Stylist Alice Hart, along with our daughter Elsa were very helpful that we got as many pictures needed to be taken in so little time. We are also grateful to Don Hicks for contributing some of the beautiful pictures he has taken of the ranch and garden in Healdsburg.

It was a pleasure working with Jenny Wapner at Ten Speed Press. She subtly found the way to keep us on the right path while letting us explore our diverse ideas. Toni Tajima made it all come together with her creative designs, finding just the right way to combine earthiness with elegance.

We are thankful to our parents, who instilled in us a deep sense of earth's preciousness. They taught us how to respect and receive the land's bounties, and how grateful we should be of it. We took these lessons for granted, but after having put them down in a book, it is very clear they are responsible for our "bon sens" which is to be down to earth and unpretentious.

Friends shared their recipes with us: Evan Shively, Natasha Landau, and Sybille de Brosse.

My sister, Christine Bazin de Caix, as well as Helen Calen and Bernadette Donascimento are to thank for the beautifully decorated tables at Chateau Bonnet.

Our dear daughters were fantastic helpers. Maud took care of our ranch and its abundant vegetable garden during our months away in France. Elsa helped us tremendously with recipes and much of the cooking while in Bordeaux. Alban, Elsa's husband, as a gourmet, was the perfect critic for his wife's testing recipes. Maud and Elsa are both excellent cooks and an inspiration.

We thank all of you who entice us to put these words down. We hope it will bring more conviviality to all of our lives, as well as respect for the beautiful planet earth we all share.

We can be contacted at: www.twobordelais.com



FOREWORD

by Patricia Unterman

“*Alors*, we are having our picnic now,” announced Denise.

She unfurled a tablecloth over some wet logs in the middle of a meadow in the foothills of the French Pyrenees. Jean-Pierre pulled bread, charcuterie, cheese and fruit from a wicker basket. The Americans, kids and adults in sweatshirts and jackets, actually thought it was raining. The French, in shirt sleeves and shorts, sipped wine from tumblers and admired the scenery. We picque-nique for exactly forty-five minutes and damply piled back on the tour van, which headed straight up the mountain to an encampment of Basque shepherds in their late spring stage of transhumance, the annual migration of pastoral animals with their human and canine caretakers.

The mountain pastures dotted with tiny yellow wild flowers looked like psychedelic green velvet. Misty bare peaks and forested slopes enveloped us. Our French-American contingent set up tents amidst outcrops of rock. We shared the meadow with woolly white sheep on impossibly skinny legs and monolithic reclining dun cows in leather necklaces strung with tin bells. The ruddy shepherds in serge jackets and black berets lived in a crumbling stone building with a tiny stove. There Jean-Pierre heated up his *garbure*—a thick soup of ham, cabbage and vegetables enriched with stale bread and mountain cheese—our dinner.

I had never been anyplace as profoundly beautiful as this, and I have never spent a more miserable night. At dawn we watched the sheepdogs corral ewes for milking, guiding them one by one into the hull of a gutted car, its open doors creating a stall. The cheesemaker, in white coat and hat, heated an aluminum pot of sheep’s milk over a burner on the stone floor of the house, added a few drops of rennet, and gently stirred it with his hands until he was able to pull out a soft, pool-sized basketball of curd—the birth of a wheel of tome de pyrenees. Draining the whey, he gave us the warm solids, sheep’s milk fromage frais, to eat with wild berry preserves, and cooled the rest in a pail anchored in the icy stream that meandered through the pasture. I have never tasted anything more delicious, or more intimate with nature. Jean-Pierre and Denise had taken us Americans by the hand and dragged us to experience the wonder of the traditional food they grew up eating. We would never be the same.

This happened twenty years ago. As I read *French Roots*, more memories flooded back—being with Jean-Pierre and Denise in Peyraud and Arcachon, and in Berkeley and Healdsburg. The two of them taught me, and a whole generation of northern Californians, how to eat and drink and cook and live.

Now, reading this evocative joint autobiography, I discover what great storytellers they are. They describe the evolution of their unique, multi-cultural sensibility in a moving coming-of-age story with benefits: it includes an inside look at the Chez Panisse kitchen, a wonderfully personable collection of recipes (some so simple and homey I started cooking them for dinner; others I’m aspiring to take on) and a lifestyle primer. Most of all, they’ve written a love story—their own—rooted in provincial France and nurtured by the social freedom of America.

I didn’t want this book to end.



INTRODUCTION

Denise

Nearly every day of our more than thirty-three years of married life, Jean-Pierre and I have sat down together to eat lunch. It's not a heavy meal: We have a large green salad from Jean-Pierre's garden, a French cheese, bread, and a glass of wine. In winter, we might make soup, a frittata, or an omelet for a heartier meal. On occasion we take a light dessert—fresh fruit with crème fraîche or, in winter, a slender slice of cake with an espresso.

Whatever happens to be ready to pick in the garden usually determines our lunch—perhaps in December and the leeks are all that survive. Instead of the usual green salad, we'll have blanched leeks with anchovies, egg, and vinaigrette. In spring we might have cauliflower, cabbage, or another winter vegetable that has survived the heavy frosts. In summer we'll dress the just-picked green beans in vinaigrette, a plate of brandade, and a small green salad.

The ritual of sitting down to eat a meal, whether it's just the two of us for lunch or twelve friends and family for dinner, reveals something about the pace and focus of our lives. The table, and what occurs at it, is central to the vitality of our lives; it's there that our relationships and our work coalesce around food, wine, and conversation. The food we cook and the wine we offer and consume at those meals grounds us, linking us to its diverse sources. Through those sources we engage our culture and community as well as to the natural world we share.

What we hope *French Roots* offers is a sense of the connection between the Old World food and practices of rural France and the way we, as quasi-Americans, eat, drink, and live today. With recipes for simple preparations for vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish set alongside classic French dishes, we hope to link what many people think of as California cuisine and what we know is, more often than not, the simple—even elemental—cooking of rural France. We hope these connections show through the stories and adventures that accompany our recipes. We hope to offer some insight on how the many differences between French and American culture shape not just the way we approach cooking, eating, and drinking, but also the small and large ways that we love, marry, raise children, entertain, and generally engage with the world. We see ourselves as a bridge between what can be the vastly divergent cultures and practices of France and the United States.

It is no accident, of course, that I met Jean-Pierre in Berkeley, a city simmering with creativity and a lively spirit of rebellion. In our own ways, Jean-Pierre and I have long been restless rule breakers. We escaped the traditions, limitations, and safety of France for the alluring social and professional freedom California offered. We ended up in that particular paradise because we rejected tradition-loving France; yet in no small part, it's an Old-World approach that informs the food and wine included here.

This book is our attempt to capture the most meaningful old traditions cross-pollinated by the freedom to improve and improvise that California has allowed. We are truly hybrid, and this book represents that mixed heritage. That so many of the values that the food revolution brought to California were founded on rural French values and practices is no great surprise. One of the qualities that I hope makes our book worthwhile is the way these two elements are integrated in the food and ingredients we choose.

Flexibility and creativity in the kitchen are just a couple of the qualities that make Jean-Pierre the chef he is. His innovations and the breadth of his creativity yield the results they do because of his insistence on the integrity of his ingredients. For Jean-Pierre, this often means hours spent in the garden and orchard, tilling, planting, weeding, pruning, watering, composting, harvesting—all the hard outdoor labor of producing your own food. Whether it's the green garlic he keeps growing year round outside the door or the vinegar he ferments using our leftover wine, his attention to detail as well as his upbringing are what make his food as clean, pure, and truly remarkable as it is.

Our refusal to waste food is one of the most telling signals of our rural French sensibility, a sensibility that is tied up with frugality as much as it is tied to a deep respect for food as a valuable, nearly sacred, part of life. Whether it's a handful of slightly soft strawberries left over from making a tart or a half-bushel of overgrown green beans from the garden, we'll find a way to put it to use.

When Jean-Pierre creates a new dish, it is not infrequently the result of his desire to use the last, valuable bit of some ingredient that awaits his attention. From [Seafood Sauerkraut](#) to [Rabbit Rillettes](#), the real cooking of France is founded on a belief in using every last bit of what has been harvested or slaughtered. In the spirit of preserving, are the assorted preparations we call [Mince Recipes around the Duck](#). These recipes originate in a ritual of communal butchering that still takes place in the French countryside. Neighbors gather and for three days pluck and scald and gut and cut to preserve the meat for the year ahead. The practice arose in a time when refrigeration was nonexistent and survives today out of an attachment to the flavors and traditions of meat and food preserved this way. The products—duck confit, terrines, duck fat, smoked breast, duck prosciutto, and rillettes—are testaments to the purity of flavor and simplicity that have made French culinary traditions so influential.

What is included here is the food, culture, and influence of Berkeley through the lens of our rural French roots. It is French cuisine as practiced by a couple who have become, however incongruously, Californians. From this perspective, we hope to strengthen the food and culture of France and California.

After thirty-some years in the United States, I'm not American, nor am I entirely French. I have an American passport and driver's license, and Jean-Pierre and I raised our two daughters, Elise and Maud, in the United States. While I prefer living in the United States to living in France full time, I remain more French than American. Why is that? I have never shed my strong French accent despite my fluent English. Maybe it's my way of holding onto and signaling that my manners, values, and perspective remain rooted in the French countryside—in its food, wine, and culture and its affection for older, slower ways of being in the world.





Despite my accent and my enduring attachment to France, I revel in how direct and free the English language and American social practices enable me to be. I find English more linear than French; it gives itself to informality and ease in a way that the circuitous *politesse* of French does not. The freedom of the language matches the ease in America to do as you like, take risks, think for yourself, and make new friends outside your inherited social circle. This is a very un-French way of being in the world. Despite my seemingly intractable French sensibility in certain things, I find Americans and their laws, customs, and manners refreshingly uncomplicated.

I am the product of a wine family—whatever affected the vineyards and the wine determined the prosperity of the family. The cultivation of the grapes, the wine we produced from them, and whether that wine was good, great, or indifferent were all that mattered.

I've recreated much of what I most value from my rural childhood in the life I live with Jean-Pierre. We live country lives—our converted stone barn at Peyrault in Bordeaux is situated on ten acres amidst the vineyards, and our house in California sits nestled in the hills surrounded by a pristine land populated by wildlife—coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, ducks, geese, and cranes. Some of these animals live on the property, some stop by to refresh themselves in the pond. Whether we're at Peyrault or in Healdsburg, this life in the countryside is the life we envisioned for ourselves after many years amidst the urban bustle of Berkeley.

In Bordeaux and in Healdsburg, we work toward as much self-sufficiency as possible. Each

property has its limitations and strengths. We keep bees for honey and tend mature apple, pear, fig, and hazelnut trees in Bordeaux; in Healdsburg we enjoy an extended growing season for herbs and vegetables, our pond is stocked with fish year-round, and we cultivate olive trees.

Wherever we are, most of the wine we drink comes from friends or family. Jean-Pierre keeps a magnificent vegetable garden at both of our houses. In season, he supplies the bulk of the vegetables and all of the lettuce for our table. For the first time this year, Jean-Pierre cured green Tuscan-style olives and pressed his own olive oil. We gather cèpes (porcini), chanterelles, and morels from the woods, and Jean-Pierre hunts deer, boar, and game birds when given the opportunity.

I don't want to pretend we don't go to the store—of course we do. I often buy bread and shop for fruit, fish, meat, and staples at the farmers' market or health food store. In Bordeaux, Jean-Pierre shops at the farmers' markets in Libourne and Branne, not far from our house. The point is not to go "back to the land" for the sake of a wild experiment in natural living—the point as we see it is to live and eat well by staying as connected as possible to where our food and wine come from and to those who grew it or caught it or slaughtered it before it arrives in our kitchen. This matters to us because that's the way we grew up—buying strange produce from halfway around the world and bringing it into the kitchen, and trying to make sense of it doesn't appeal to either of us. Certainly we buy cheese from France when we're in California, but in France we prefer to drive down the road to buy goat cheese and eggs from the neighbor who has been a friend of the family for two generations.

Jean-Pierre and I feel most at home when we're in sync with the seasons through eating what we grow, shoot, catch, and forage. It's not only to eat well that we do this—although we do, of course we eat well. For my part, I'm at my best and most grounded in the world when I regularly notice the color of the sky or the vivid green threads of fine grass sprouting by the pond after the rain. The staggered arrival of fruits and vegetables as they come into season again each year is my ultimate calendar, just as the mournful lowing of the cows at feeding time is the best sort of clock for me. Simple as these rhythms are, like a lucky glimpse of a red bobcat slipping through the grass, they are prescient reminders of nature and its power.

Denise and I were married only six months after our fateful sidewalk meeting on Shattuck Avenue in front of Chez Panisse. The depth and longevity of our marriage—thirty-three years and counting—might have something to do with the food we shared on our first date. The meal Denise prepared was pure seduction. She'd managed to smuggle into the country an amazing foie gras from her Tante Anne's geese, along with an exceptional duck confit the likes of which I hadn't tasted since I'd left France nearly two years earlier. For dessert Denise made the best cherry *clafoutis* I'd ever tasted—the whole cherries, stones intact, making it quintessentially French. We ate the meal slowly at the table in her tiny apartment, first savoring the buttery foie gras on crisp toast, before starting on the rich saltiness of preserved game in the shredded duck confit on a bright, peppery salad of barely dressed arugula. There was ample—extremely good—Champagne. It would have been difficult for me not to fall for Denise: The effortless ease of a native language in common paired with her beauty conspired to seal my fate.

Our shared sense of exile in Berkeley, the language, and the food she prepared with such exquisite taste and attention turned a date into a lifetime. She's been my ideal partner; our commitment to our rural French roots has always mingled effortlessly with our desire to take risks, explore, and shake some of the nonsense out of the dullest parts of our traditional French heritage. I guess that's how we've forged such a charmed life: by cobbling together our mixed desires into our own ideal version of new and old.

When I met Denise I had been working at Chez Panisse for just a few years. It was during the somewhat chaotic reign of the talented, rowdy chef, Jeremiah Tower, when all the excesses of Berkeley in the seventies made their way quite naturally into the kitchen. It was an exciting time to be a chef in California. What I discovered at Chez Panisse—along with the chaos—was a passionate group of chefs, cooks, and visionaries who welcomed a dose of the professional kitchen discipline I brought in the form of my formal French training.

Alice Waters never wavered much in her vision for Chez Panisse. Despite many changes over the years, she remained committed to certain principles. My loyalty followed; the integrity of the ingredients I had to work with and my freedom to do what I liked with them, paired with the general spirit of experimentation, kept me attached to the restaurant. I brought my formal culinary training to Chez Panisse but learned there, in turn, that I'm at my best as a chef when I am loose, open, and experimental. Creativity and risk-taking were ever-important elements amid the slight reckless impulses that launched Chez Panisse. What I did in the kitchen couldn't be solely defined by French or even European values, no matter how powerfully those traditions shaped the food and menus that have made the restaurant so famous. For the most part, although it was hard work, and any kitchen work is, I loved the joyful, creative cooking I had the freedom to put into practice at Chez Panisse for so many years, and a great deal of it is included here.

Like most French men and women of my generation who were raised in the countryside, what was on the table each day was foraged, picked from the garden, or bought from a neighborhood farmer. Without a freezer or supermarket, it was impossible not to eat whatever was in season—not just vegetables and fruits, but meat, dairy, and seafood. In this sense, the recipes I developed over the course of my many years at Chez Panisse reflect the food of my childhood.

To organize the wide range of material here, Denise and I decided to present the chapters and recipes in a loose chronological order that makes explicit how our cooking has evolved over the course of more than sixty years. We begin with our respective mothers—both named Elizabeth and each a terrific cook in her own right—in a chapter on the traditional food they cooked for us. The recipes in this chapter, “French Family Life,” are mixed. Some are fairly refined and would have been reserved for the expansive, multicourse, multigenerational Sunday afternoon lunches that my mother worked for days to prepare, but most stick closer to the unassuming food of the French countryside. The second chapter, “Life in Berkeley in the Seventies,” takes its name from the decade that defined us personally and professionally as we made our way in a foreign country. These recipes are from those early days at Chez Panisse, as well as from our lives as we began there independently, in that bristling, bustling time and place. Chapter three, “Back to Bordeaux,” is focused on the food that we cook and eat in France and includes many of the recipes I have taught over more than twenty-five years during our tours through our company, Two Bords. Approachable but sophisticated, these recipes most closely represent the way we eat and cook today—a sort of hybrid California-French cuisine that changes each season—really, each month—when fruits ripen, vegetables mature, and animals are caught, hunted, or slaughtered. Chapter four, “Denise in the Kitchen,” are mostly Denise’s recipes for the simple, mostly French foods that she makes so often. During my years in the kitchen at Chez Panisse, Denise cooked when I arrived home late to finally relax with a glass of wine and a bite of whatever she had cooked earlier for the girls—usually an uncomplicated meal much like you might make from the recipes in this chapter. Chapter five, “In the Kitchen at Chez Panisse,” is a return to Chez Panisse, representing some of the recipes I like best from that era. The recipes in this chapter are the most modern and the most challenging—although by no means out of reach for any home cook willing to take them on. Chapter six, “Aperitifs and Toasts,” is focused on a crucial French ritual, the *aperitif*. The hors d’oeuvres and liqueurs here are deeply familiar to us after years of marking the end of the day with the ritual of a glass of rosé or white wine and a small bite as we talk and sit around together before sitting down to the table. Before this final chapter is a piece on how Denise approaches wine, her thoughts on pairing wine and food and some of the history of her rather famous father, the winemaker André Lurton.

As you’ll see as you read *French Roots*, I take great pleasure in working with my hands. I enjoy weeding almost as much I like harvesting a big bunch of radishes for our aperitif. Tinkering with equipment and taking on building projects—a duck pond, a garden shed, an irrigation system—any of these things get me outdoors. Physical labor is somewhat cathartic for me. Although I’m now retired and have less of a need to wind down from the pressures of the kitchen than I once did, I work as hard as I do because I can’t seem to accomplish enough to satisfy myself. My ambition is to make my own balsamic vinegar, start a barrel of hard cider made from apples grown on the property, cure the hams of the wild boar I shoot, expand my charcuterie repertoire, produce more of my own wine and olive oil, keep a cow for experiments in cheese making, and plant ever more fruit trees. My latest project: Pick all the wild plums on our ranch in Sonoma and make *eau-de-vie de prune*, plum alcohol, for all the aperitifs and cocktails I make. I’ll eventually get around to it. For now, I’m pleased to offer here a few of the recipes and techniques I’ve learned over the years. I hope you find the book useful and rewarding.





GETTING STARTED

Writing and Executing a Menu

Whether you're cooking two courses and a dessert for an intimate dinner party at home or putting out food for one hundred expectant diners at a restaurant, the significance of the process that goes into planning what to cook and how can't be overstated. A menu does not mean, of course, an array of choices as we know the term in common restaurant parlance; a menu in this context is the cook's own plan for the food he or she will prepare, including each dish's ingredients, style of preparation, and sequence within the meal as a whole. Setting a menu, even in your head, is the only way to prepare for a meal before it appears at the table.

In a great restaurant or for an ambitious meal at home, the unfolding of an outstanding menu will surprise, challenge, and satisfy. In the best of cases, a truly outstanding menu is a shared experience, bringing everyone at the table together by evening's end—something like the way people might feel who, together, have glimpsed a remarkable but ultimately inexplicable sight that has faded from view. A menu can fail or succeed in the kitchen, but no matter how talented the chef, the food he or she cooks cannot surpass the limitations the menu sets.

There are no mysterious secrets or magic formulas for planning a menu—practice, imagination, and a little dedication to the work and effort required will take you most of the way. My advice is to tackle your menu with energy and enthusiasm—you'll never find the effort wasted. The work you do on paper at the planning stage will lead you into the natural flow of the meal as you get down to the physical work of shopping, prepping your ingredients, and cooking. Like most work worth doing, the more frequently you do it, the easier and more satisfying it becomes.

Contrast and balance are the central principles of a menu. Don't think of this simply in terms of ingredients—think about texture, temperature, richness, color, and strength. I'll explain all these in more detail, but for now remember that each plate has its own place in the whole and that each plate is sequential or in some way in conversation with the previous one. Good menus flow, progressing from one point to another the way a good story unfolds.

At Chez Panisse, I had a loose format. More often than not, the first course was a composed salad. In winter, the salad would often be warm or would contain both cooked and raw ingredients. Although there are virtually infinite variations when it comes to such salads, my standards often involved wild mushrooms, duck confit, and quickly seared fish or scallops over endive, watercress, or wilted chicory. In summer, the cold salads I liked best were arugula and mixed garden lettuce complemented by smoked fish, summer vegetables, or eggs.

The second course was almost always a soup, a vegetable ragout, or a pasta—if it wasn't fish (which it might well have been if there was no fish in the first course salad). I might have followed the first course of green asparagus salad with fresh pasta with smoked black cod and peas, but I followed warm dandelion salad with goose rillettes with chestnut soup, especially in winter. As you'll find when you read the recipes here, I believe there's no such thing as too much seafood. Most of the fish I served at the restaurant was baked and served with a sauce, such as local halibut roasted and served with black olive salsa or poached and served with a concentrated seafood stock.

or an unassuming Meyer lemon butter.

While putting the first two dishes together I'd have been thinking about trying to move from a lighter dish—a salad, say—to a heavier dish (but not too heavy because the main course was still to come). This was often where the fish came in because it's rich and versatile but not overly heavy. If the first-course salad was warm and on the heavy side, I would follow it with a much lighter fish dish while at the same time thinking about which textures I'd offered thus far. If I had a contrast of sour and bitter in my salad, I'd more likely follow it with a rich, sweet fish dish such as wild king salmon with herb butter.

My next task would be to fit the main course in with the first two courses so that it balanced the first two out and worked with them as a continuum, ideally moving the meal forward to another level as the menu took on momentum. At Chez Panisse, the main could be squab, quail, chicken, guinea hen, pork, veal, beef, or lamb, but it was almost always cooked in the fireplace, either grilled or spit-roasted.

A rich stock gives dimension to most savory dishes, even if you don't really know it's there, so I usually served meat and game with a reduction that suited the dish. If I served beef, I'd make a concentrated beef stock and then mount it with red wine and aromatics to finish the sauce. For venison, I'd start with something lighter, like veal stock, and add a stronger flavor to the reduction at the end—maybe juniper berries or green garlic. The main-course plates were usually finished with plenty of vegetables and a simple starch. If I served a fairly rich marrow risotto for my second course, I might serve fish for the main to keep the meal from feeling too heavy; but if I'd served a pasta dish for the second course, I would not serve a risotto as the starch on my main dish, or potatoes, yams, or other starchy vegetables either. If I'd served mussels with fingerling potatoes for the first course salad, you wouldn't find potatoes on the main-dish plate or, for that matter, potatoes in any form on the remainder of the menu. Whether it's fish, meat, or poultry for the main course, I'm a bit of a traditionalist; rather than a forlorn portion of meat, game, or poultry on the plate by itself, I prefer the classic balance of textures and flavors that a range of ingredients give a plate.

Whether it's at the level of writing the menu, shopping, or getting everything done on time, the limitations on the chef are not only technical or conceptual, they're practical. If I have poached fish for the second course, my burners will be occupied. That means cooking my main course anywhere but on the grill is out of the question. If I have two chefs and an intern putting out starch and a vegetable on the burners for the main course, I need to keep both components fairly simple. If the starch is going on the grill with the meat—say potatoes that have been parboiled but must be finished on the grill—then I know I can push my cooks to do something more challenging with the vegetable.

It's about the space I have and the balance I'm trying to maintain. You and your kitchen will determine these factors—do you have four, six, or eight burners? A competent daughter, son, spouse, or friend to help you put out the meal? At home if I have meat on the grill, I'll plan a simple starch that I can make ahead—usually a gratin. That way the gratin is in the oven while I'm out on the grill. I know when I plan the menu that I can't be standing at the stove stirring mushroom risotto while the fat on my lamb chops flares the fire into great flames outdoors. When I throw a big party at home, I adjust the menu according to the help I have available. Sometimes I'm on my own, but sometimes I have my daughter Elsa, an excellent chef and the best possible sous-chef. When I have her I know I can do more and do it better no matter how many plates we're putting out. I also know she loves to bake and make dessert, so I plan for her to take on that part of the menu—a bread like the pastry chefs did at Chez Panisse.

Dessert, important as is it to the menu as a whole, must accommodate itself to the main menu. That doesn't mean it's an afterthought—far from it. It simply means that as the last statement of the meal, it must put an exclamation on the menu, giving it its final flourish, completing its last turn to the finish. It is, in the end, part of a whole and ultimately determined by what precedes it. I met with the pastry team on Thursdays, menus for the week in hand. In advance of the meeting I asked them to prepare a list of available ingredients that they were hoping to work with that week. Maybe the first cherries of the summer have ripened, and they want nothing more than to make a clafoutis to serve with brandy ice cream. Maybe quince are on their list, but I had my eye on them to use in a duck breast salad. We'd then juggle the days to make the use of the best ingredients in their turn.

Let's say it was September, and I had as a starter a tomato salad with mozzarella, black cod with wild fennel oil for a second, and a main of quail, caramelized apples, and an apple vinegar and demi-glace reduction for the sauce. At the pastry meeting, the chefs saw that there were apples in my main so they would not do an apple tart with Calvados ice cream; just as if I've done white shrimp with Meyer lemon salsa for the first course, they would not have a lemon sorbet for dessert. It's really fairly simple on this level: You don't want to repeat key elements; rather, you want to extend the motion and tenor of what has come before.

At Chez Panisse I tasted everything that left the kitchen twice, once from the first service and again for the second seating. I also walked the kitchen throughout the afternoon, observing, commenting, correcting, tasting. Judging when a dish has reached its right point is delicate. As with a painting, doing too much can impart a self-conscious affectation that is as unappealing as the dullness that results from doing too little. Sometimes the flavors of a dish are muddled because they're competing with one another: Some part needs to be omitted for the clarity of the ingredients to come through. At other times a dish is overly simple or just not very interesting; it needs another element of flavor or texture. Maybe it's as simple as a pinch of salt to bring the essential flavors of the dish to the fore, maybe it's a squeeze of lemon or a drop of vinegar to brighten a dish that is too subdued, maybe it's a drizzle of olive oil or butter to round out the feel of the food on the palate and to impart the unctuousness that so many of us crave.

One of the most common mistakes beginners make is settling on a menu in the abstract without thinking about ingredients. Once an item makes it on the menu—say a strawberry tart for dessert despite the January snows piling up on the windowsill and the sterile Chilean strawberries forlornly waiting in the produce section—nothing changes. Ignoring the realities of the hard, white-core strawberries they tote home, they proceed with that tart. It will not be particularly good. Flexibility is essential.

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