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Delfina Chef Craig Stoll Talks Food Trends and Cooking In Italy

Sep 29th 2009 9:38AM

By Tami Yu

Dining — *Interviews* —

Even before winning the prestigious James Beard Award for Best Chef last year, Delfina's Craig Stoll knew a thing or two about food. A New York native, Stoll was immersed in food from the very beginning. After a cooking stint in Italy, he returned to San Francisco to bring authentic Italian cuisine to the Bay Area. After almost eleven years in business, the nationally-acclaimed restaurant is still as popular as ever.

Stoll recently took some time out of his busy kitchen to chat about the latest food trends, cooking in Tuscany, and his favorite places to eat in San Francisco.

Are there any dining trends that you've noticed lately?

I'd say restaurateurs and diners want quality food in a casual, even downscaled, environment. Street carts, temporary restaurants, alleyways, loading docks, and defunct Chinese restaurants are springing up everywhere.

Upscale restaurants are relaunching as "taverns" or "bistros" with lower prices, comfort food and "fun" menus which defy the traditional appetizer-entree format. We've seen lots of pizzerias and fried chicken. Chefs have begun to understand the importance of specific (and heritage) breeds of animals and are naming them on the menu. It's hard to dine out these days without ingesting some Berkshire pork at some point during the meal. House-made salume is everywhere. Whole animal butchery is cool.

What's your favorite ingredient to use right now?

We continue to learn and grow in the produce department- Our favorite pepper this year (since it's pepper season) is the Jimmy Nardello, but we still love our padrones, gypsies and friarelli.

What are your favorite places to eat in SF?

I just had a great meal at Bar Tartine with new chef Chris Kronner. Also Little Skillet, Nopalito, and still always Slanted Door.

Can you tell us about your work experience in Italy? What was it that changed your view about food?

In 1992 I worked at a restaurant in a hilltop town outside of Florence that served traditional Tuscan food. I spent days off learning to make sheep milk ricotta, baking bread, visiting balsamic producers in Modena, and identifying wild greens in the fields.

One of the most important things I had to 'relearn' was technique. Simply using an Italian ingredient doesn't make your food taste Italian. When I say relearned, I mean much of the cooking was counterintuitive to what I had been doing before. I learned to use water instead of stock, how to keep flavors clean and distinct rather than overlaying them, learned the importance of soffrito, different ways to cut up animals than I had been used to, etc. I wanted to put my own twist on things but after a few months I surrendered to the cuisine. I became completely immersed.

I had lived in SF prior to leaving for Italy and realized how similar the climates and land were in both places. I was excited to see that we were working with many products similar to those we had used in S.F. – just treating them in different ways.

Right after returning to S.F., I noticed borago (a plant we used in Tuscany) growing through a crack in a sidewalk in Cole Valley. That moment made me realize that I could cook Italian food here without slavishly following tradition. I could cook "authentically" but naturally integrate our Bay Area sensibilities. My personal "twist" came naturally after I returned but it took years to develop and I still work on it every



Eric Wolfinger

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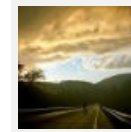
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What are some of your favorite cities to visit and why?

-New York: Well, because it's fucking New York! (My family's also there)

-Naples (Italy, not Florida): I keep going back there. I love the urban edge, the street food and pizza and its location as the gateway to the Amalfi coast.

-Rome: Uh...have you ever been there?

-Los Angeles: As an S.F. resident, we're supposed to have some sort of chip on our shoulder against L.A., but I love it there! (I have a sister there too).

- I saw a side of Seattle this summer that I had never seen before and gained a whole new appreciation for it.

After a long day in the kitchen, do you even cook after work hours? If you do, what do you make at home?

I usually make a four-course meal, starting with an amuse of the finest caviar, followed by a perfect salad of delicate greens that's sometimes topped with duck prosciutto that I've cured in our second refrigerator. Then we have a pasta course which I've handmade with our daughter earlier in the day and then a satisfying braise-maybe a cassoulet in the winter. Or simply grilled game birds with organic polenta and gible crostini. Then it's freshly-churned ice cream for dessert or maybe a seasonal fruit tart.

No, really: We try to have a proper family dinner once or twice a week. It's pretty hard given our schedules (my wife Annie runs the restaurants with me) and we have a 7 year-old daughter. But it's really important to get that quality time. We usually grab a chicken from the restaurant and roast it at home, or maybe some lamb chops and a salad or something - pretty simple stuff. We're just thrilled that we get to sit down together as a family. But I'm not actually answering the question I guess. After a long day at work, we often have dinner out of take out boxes filled with food from Delfina. Really.

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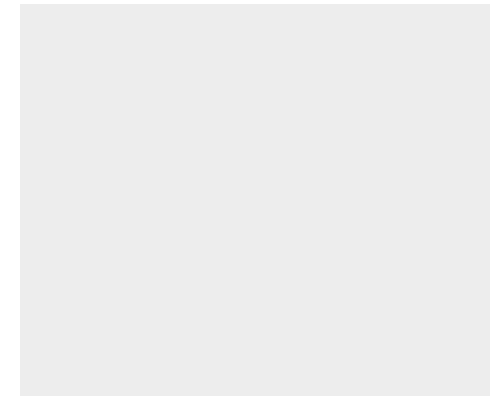
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