

“Now, you think this is a simple process of finding beautiful fruit and putting it in a bowl, but it is really a way of expressing ripeness, of seasonality, of purity. It’s about everything that we believe in.”

SUBCHAPTERS

Taste and Taste Again

Repurpose Unworthy Fruit

Expressing Seasonality

Finding Ripeness in

Every Season

CHAPTER REVIEW

People felt that the fruit bowl was an audacious idea but Alice embraced that audaciousness and now the fruit bowl is on the Chez Panisse dessert menu every day. Each fruit bowl is a snapshot of that particular day of the season—capturing that moment is at the heart of Alice’s cooking philosophy. When writer Michael Pollan visited Chez Panisse, he was intrigued by the fruit bowl, which was listed on the dessert menu for nearly the same price as a sweet dessert. He found the experience of eating it to be unforgettable.

Alice makes a fruit bowl at home to bring that picture of seasonality into her kitchen. To make your own fruit bowl, start with seasonal, organic fruits at the peak of their season. Engage all of your senses as you select the fruit. Pick up the fruit, feel its weight and the texture of its skin or peel. Color, healthy skins, aroma, and the leaves and stems indicate ripeness and freshness. As you cut through the fruit to taste, pay attention to the texture of the flesh. Most importantly, taste every piece of fruit to make sure it’s perfectly in season.

ALICE’S GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING FRUIT FOR THE FRUIT BOWL:

- ♦ Aliveness! Look for fruit with a just-picked quality.
- ♦ Smell and taste for flavor and ripeness.
- ♦ Consider what combinations of fruits will taste good together.
- ♦ Choose how to present the fruit. (The fruit bowl at Chez Panisse often has a fig leaf lining the bowl.)
- ♦ Some fruits are left whole, such as mandarins and berries, or sliced, such as pears and plums.

When you taste a fruit and decide that it isn’t at the right stage of ripeness for your fruit bowl, put it to use in another dish. Grapes that don’t look lively enough for the fruit bowl may be ideal for a sherbet; slightly under-ripe Bosc pears can go well in a chicory salad.

The fruit bowl is about discovery. When you’re at your farmers’ market, try fruits you’ve never seen before, and ask farmers what fruits they’re looking forward to harvesting. Get to know what varieties are unique to your area.

For Alice, a menu is a representation of the moment of the season, and she plans menus to showcase food at its perfect ripeness. Alice created seasonal menus in this chapter with a home cook in mind.

WINTER

The variety and colors of winter vegetables at the farmers' market can be just as beautiful as they are in the summer season. Look for carrots and radishes of all colors, chicories, chard, kale, collards, cabbages, cauliflower, broccolis, beets, and winter squashes. Try stews and braises with Moroccan or Indian spices to add warmth to winter vegetable dishes. Winter fruits like apples and pears are available throughout the winter. There are abundant winter citrus varieties, including some of Alice's favorites—kumquats, blood oranges, mandarins, and grapefruit.

Leek and potato soup with pepper and chives
Roast pork loin with braised red cabbage
Pink Lady apple galette

Romaine salad with shaved winter radishes, beets, and carrots
Soft polenta with wild mushroom ragù
Chocolate bark, candied citrus peel, and dates

Spicy winter squash soup
Duck leg confit with wilted greens and farro
Meyer lemon curd tart



SPRING

Spring is the season for green vegetables so young and tender that they can be eaten raw or very lightly sautéed. Look for green garlic, nettles, young leeks, small turnips, baby artichokes, asparagus, fava beans, spinach, new potatoes, peas, and morel mushrooms. At Chez Panisse, everyone with a free hand is shucking young favas and peas during spring. Spring lamb and local wild salmon become available, and tender herbs like tarragon, chervil, mint, parsley, rocket, and chives begin to arrive.

Alice loves when the seasons overlap, like spring strawberries and the last of the winter kumquats coming together in a sweet-tart dessert. She looks forward to cherries and Blenheim apricots—a variety with a jam-like, concentrated flavor.

Warm asparagus salad with lemon vinaigrette

Fresh fettuccine with peas and morels

Blood orange upside down cake

Mesclun salad with shaved radishes

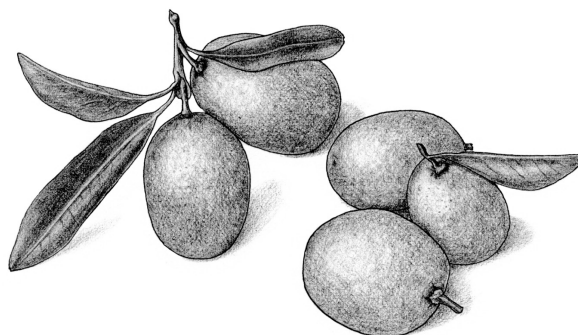
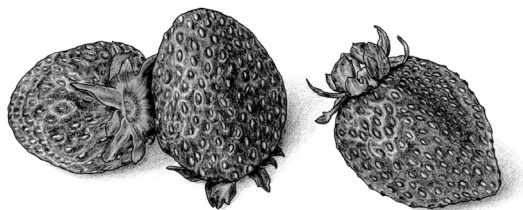
Poached wild salmon with carrots, turnips, and herb butter

Baked stuffed apricots

Halibut carpaccio with shallots and mustard flowers

Leg of lamb with potato and green garlic gratin

Rhubarb and strawberry sherbet



SUMMER

Summer starts with cherry tomatoes of all shapes and colors. Later the heirloom varieties arrive—such as Purple Cherokee, Chocolate Stripe, and Black Brandywine—and Chez Panisse begins to put tomato salads on the menu. Late-summer dry-farmed Early Girl tomatoes are great for preserving to fill out your pantry with the taste of summer. Alice buys them in bulk to preserve both at Chez Panisse and at home. The restaurant gets summer corn fresh daily. At the farmers' market, ask when it was picked. The sugars can turn to starch in only a few days and lose the corn's natural sweetness. Other summer vegetable market staples include basil, green beans, eggplant, shell beans, summer squash, peppers, and garlic. For summertime stone fruit varieties like peaches, plums, and nectarines test for ripeness by pushing gently near the stem. A little bit of give means it is ready to be eaten as-is or used in a simple dessert.

White corn soup with roasted sweet chile purée

Baked halibut and zucchini with salsa verde

Sliced peaches with raspberry sauce

Heirloom tomato salad with vinaigrette and basil

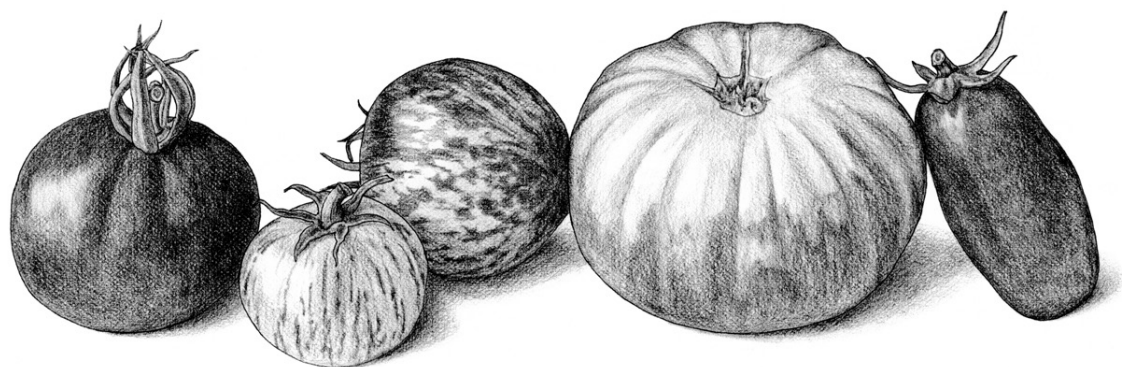
Grilled steak with roasted potatoes and aioli

Biscotti and blackberries

Green bean and roasted pepper salad with hazelnuts

Garlic and goat cheese pudding soufflé with wilted spinach

Plum sherbet with langues de chat



FALL

In Northern California, hot summer days come late and the crispness of fall sometimes begins as late as early November. By then the markets will have broccoli and Brussels sprouts, almonds and walnuts, the new crop of olive oil, and wild porcinis. Alice cooks thin sliced Brussels sprouts and sautés them with bacon, thyme, and lemon. Fall is a good time to roast vegetables, and make puréed soups and squash-filled raviolis. After preserving berries and stone fruit of summer, fall fruits such as apples, pears, grapes, quince, persimmons, and—especially—pomegranates are a welcome change.

Alice plans early for Thanksgiving. She sources an organic turkey from her friend Frank Reiss at Good Shepherd Poultry Ranch, who is dedicated to raising heritage breeds. Plenty of stuffing with wild mushrooms and walnuts is a must. Raw oysters and a salad with pomegranate seeds are usually on the menu. For dessert she makes pumpkin pie and Fanny always makes persimmon pudding.

Wild mushroom crostini with warm chicory salad
Braised chicken leg with saffron rice and glazed carrots
Pear tarte Tatin

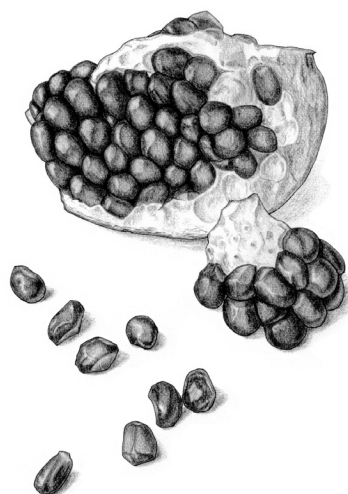
Curly endive salad with apples and walnuts
Squash ravioli with fried sage
Persimmon pudding

Antipasto with fresh ricotta, prosciutto, and shaved fennel salad
Fall minestrone with rocket pesto
Baked figs with honey cream



AFTERWORD, 40 YEARS OF CHEZ PANISSE

BY MICHAEL POLLAN



I arrived at the party that is Chez Panisse fairly late in its history, sometime during its fourth decade. My first meal at the restaurant, upstairs in the Café, came during the late spring or early summer of 2001, and a decade later, I cannot tell you what I had for dinner. It might have been the salmon, which at the time were still running not far outside the Golden Gate. The only thing I really remember from that meal was not a dish exactly, at least nothing cooked, though it did appear on the menu. It was, very simply, a bowl of fruit—some peaches. The menu gave the name of the farmer and the variety, neither of which meant anything to me at the time. But figuring those peaches had to be something pretty special to earn a spot on that menu—and to command a price only a dollar or two shy of the profiteroles and galette—I ordered it for dessert, not quite sure whether a plain bowl of fruit on a restaurant menu was best interpreted as an expression of culinary modesty or culinary audacity.

What arrived at the table was a small, unpolished bowl of hammered copper set atop a round, hammered copper base, and in that bowl rested two perfect peaches wreathed in a scatter of equally perfect raspberries. But by “perfect” I don’t just mean perfect-looking, like a picture of fruit in a painting or magazine, though they were that, too: blushing, downy, plumped with juice. No, this was the higher perfection Ralph Waldo Emerson had in mind when he wrote, in reference to a very different fruit, “There are only ten minutes in the life of a pear when it is perfect to eat.” In the case of a peach, that window is probably closer to seven minutes, and in the case of raspberries, maybe five. The wonder of it was that the kitchen had somehow arranged for those peaches and raspberries to land on our table not a moment sooner or later than that narrow interlude of perfection.

At the risk of offending the restaurant’s many gifted chefs, that unadorned bowl of unimproved fruit strikes me as the essence of Chez Panisse, captures the restaurant’s philosophy in a copper bowl. Since it first appeared on the menu in 1991, the fruit bowl has been Alice Waters’s wordless way of saying that the true genius behind her food resides in the farmers who grew it and the breeders who bred it; the chef merely celebrates that genius by seizing on the moment of

moments and setting it off between the quotation marks of a dish. Which is why the menu goes to the trouble of informing us that that the peach is a Sun Crest, the pear a Warren, and the tiny tangerine a kishu. There are times, the kitchen is saying, when no amount of culinary artifice can improve on what nature has already perfected, and it would be folly—hubris!—to try.

Not that there isn't a kind of genius in selecting that perfect peach or pear or tangerine. Samantha Greenwood, who worked in pastry back when the fruit bowl made its first appearance, remembers the hours spent sorting through bushel baskets looking for the Elect—a few dozen peaches worthy of the copper bowl. On the days when she couldn't find enough, the fruit bowl simply fell off the menu.



The fruit bowl is also a kind of timepiece, a way of marking the seasonal calendar, which is a rite that has always been central to the restaurant's project. When Churchill's kishus show up it must be late December; Swanton's strawberries say May, and the mulberries—the most fleeting fruit of all—signal the start of summer: somewhere around the third week of June. These moments remind us exactly where we are in the round of the year, or rather, where nature is. But try not to miss the moment of the mulberries, a fruit so fragile and ephemeral it's fallen completely out of commerce, except here on Shattuck Avenue on the very day they arrive. The mulberries, which come from a single tree in Sonoma owned by a man named Hugh Byrne, perhaps best exemplify the restaurant's fierce devotion to the nick of time.

Okay, but is it cooking?

Some would say no; the rap in certain culinary circles is that what Chez Panisse does best more closely resembles inspired shopping than inspired cooking. But I doubt that particular critique carries much of a sting in this particular kitchen. For Alice Waters's genius has been to show us there can be no inspired cooking without inspired shopping and, behind that, inspired farming. It's become a cliché of restaurant menus to mention farms, but Chez Panisse was the first to share bylines—pride of authorship—with the men and women who grow the food, recognizing that many of them are as gifted as any who have passed through the fabled kitchen. So we learn that the kishu was grown by Jim Churchill and Lisa Brenneis in Ojai, the Warren pear by Farmer Al at Frog Hollow Farm in Brentwood, and the Sun Crest peach by Mas Masumoto down near Fresno. The modesty of the fruit bowl consists in these acknowledgments.

But make no mistake, there is a certain audacity in play here too. It is the audacity of a Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol, artists who understood that sometimes the best art is found, not made. To pluck something out of the welter of the world and put a frame around it, or in this case a copper bowl, is a way of making us stop and pay attention, so that we might see the familiar with fresh eyes, and in this case not just eyes, but with every sense. Rightly seen, rightly tasted, the fruit bowl reminds us, the commonplace becomes miraculous.

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LEARN MORE

- ♦ For concise information about varieties, seasonality, and cooking inspiration, read the introductory essays about individual fruits in *Chez Panisse Fruit*. There is also an extensive bibliography for further reading.
- ♦ Read “Fruit in the Garden” on pages 403–410 of *The Art of Simple Food II*.
- ♦ Preserving is a wonderful way to continue enjoying fruit after its season has passed. For more about preserving, see “Preserving Vegetables and Fruit” in *The Art of Simple Food II*, pages 325–355.

