

Christmas Newsletter 2008

Let's deck the walls with holly, put on some woolly socks and hang up mistletoe to kiss under ... no. That's what they do in England. Actually I am just going to grab a mango, start eating it and let the juice dribble down my face. Now *that's* an Australian Christmas.

When I think of Christmas I think of giving and celebrating. This year I gave Olive and myself an amazing gift: the gift of travel to far distant shores. First we went to England, to the countryside, then to London and later on to Greece and a month lazing by the Aegean on the tiny island of Hydra. A month later I was on another plane to Times Square, New York — this time with Alex, not Olive — and then on to the other coast to spend time in a hacienda in the Napa Valley in California and finally on to Berkeley, the home of the biggest influence on my whole cooking career (after Elizabeth David), Alice Waters at Chez Panisse.

Visiting Chez Panisse in Berkeley is the biggest present I could ever give myself (that and a pair of Prada boots). Here we went for two lunches and one dinner, and there I was, eating the food I had first read about over thirty years ago in the beautiful Chez Panisse books. Sitting there reading the menu made it all very real and it was so hard to choose what I was going to have to eat — I had read about and dreamed about so many of these dishes. We simply had to try the:

Baked Andante Dairy goat's cheese with garden lettuces

This was perfectly done; the soft salad leaves were perfectly dressed and complemented the crispiness of the warmed, lightly bread-crumbed goat's cheese (all locally sourced).

Soul Food Farms chicken al mattone with sweet corn fritters, rocket salad and pickled zucchini

This was exactly what it sounds like: a piece of fried chicken (thigh) with the lightest of corn fritters on the side (think this was made with a kind of beer batter). The acid and sweetness of the zucchini cut through perfectly. An incredibly simple dish made very good by the combinations and the quality of the ingredients.

I have the restaurant's book *Pasta, Pizza and Calzone* and, as I looked up from our table and saw their wood-fired pizza oven, I knew that for one of our lunches I would have to sample their pizza. On the day we were there was:

Pizza with tomato sauce and brandade

Here the pizza came on a lovely large earthenware plate specially made by Heath ceramics for Chez Panisse. A thinnish pizza with a slightly charred edge, spread with a thin layer of tomatoes and dollops of fishy cod puree. It was lip-smackingly good.

Alex was contemplating her main course. She went for:

Grilled yellow jack with fried shoestring potatoes, garlicky greens and cherry tomato relish

A kind of mackerel-like fish that was rich and cut through with the tomato relish. From the other side of the table I looked longingly at her huge mound of shoestring potatoes (America does the chip so well).

At both our lunches we nibbled on:

A plate of olives, anchovies and Tuscan olive oil

These were served rather simply on little earthenware plates with small silver forks.

When it came to the puddings, Alex and I were faced with an even tougher call, for here were the sweet dishes we both had read about time and time again in Lindsey Shere's dessert book, starting many years ago. As I pushed my spoon into my first dessert it was like one of my favourite books had come to life and I was eating it.

Alex could not go past the tart we had seen on the way in, perched high up on the wooden counter in front of the open-plan kitchen.

Apple and huckleberry tart with calvados cream

And I on my two lunch visits chose:

Meyer lemon cream puffs with Middleton Garden raspberries and pistachio ice cream with Lucero Farms strawberries

Each was a triumph, with only a few ingredients each bursting with flavour and comfort for the tummy.

As I write this I am already wishing to go there again. I would like for Christmas this year to transform into Hayden Christensen in *Jumper* (a rather silly film but a great idea), then I could jump there any time I felt like it. I would get on the net and see what they have for dinner in the restaurant every night. (Once a week they post up the weekly set menu.) On 26 September Alex and I ate:

An aperitif

Lobster and tomato bruschetta

Corn and roasted pepper soup with ricotta gnocchi

Grilled loin of Becker Ranch pork with wild fennel, shell beans and chanterelle mushrooms

Plum ice-cream meringue with late-harvest peaches and berries

A little more formal than the café upstairs, the dishes were slightly more accomplished and there was space between tables — but all the food was presented in the same simple style that I like. In fact, Alice's latest book is called *The Art of Simple Food: Notes, lessons and recipes from a delicious revolution*. On the menus in both the café and the restaurant at the bottom there is a note:

Our produce, meat, poultry and fish come from farms, ranches and fisheries guided by the principles of sustainability.

It's good for me to remember that this restaurant started a revolution, and it's easy to see how it has influenced many cuisines all across the world. Chez Panisse café and restaurants are my favourite places to eat in the whole wide world and I am the luckiest person to have had that as a present.



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Recipe

Alice readily admits to serving a goat's cheese salad of some sort in her café every day. My first experience of warmed goat's cheese was in the south of France. The cheese was slightly warmed in the oven — all oozy in the middle — and popped over a lightly dressed salad. I am with Alice on this one. It is a perfect lunch meal.

Warm Goat's Cheese Salad with Fig Vino Cotto

INGREDIENTS

For the dressing:

1 tablespoon vino cotto with figs (or plain vino cotto)
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper
Pinch of sugar

Set oven to 180°C

In a bowl, whisk up the dressing ingredients. Taste and add salt and pepper to your liking. Cut the goat's cheese log into 8 slices, marinate in a little olive oil and the finely shredded basil leaves (this is best done on a flat plate as the goat's cheese is quite fragile). Carefully dip the cheese pieces in the breadcrumbs and lay on a baking sheet. Pop in the oven and bake for 8 minutes. Wash and dry the leaves and toss with a little of the dressing (you may not need it all). Divide leaves between four plates. Lay them in mounds and top them with the hot goat's cheese. Serve immediately. **Serves 4**

200 grams goat's cheese in a log (I used Udder Delights)
3 tablespoons rough breadcrumbs
A handful of basil leaves
2 tablespoons olive oil
4 big handfuls of mixed salad leaves like minuet, oak leaf, watercress, tiny gem lettuces (I think it's nice to use soft leaves, and I added a few witloaf leaves as well)

goat's cheese salad

Try making this delicious salad - it's the perfect lunch meal



Desserts *by Lindsey Shere at Chez Panisse*

If there was a big storm brewing and international news was saying World War Three was on the way, I would grab my Lindsey Shere book on desserts and go and cook some sublime pudding in the interim.

Desserts are at the end of the meal or, for some people, meals in themselves, and no one has done dessert better than Lindsey, the founding pastry chef at Chez Panisse. This book oozes the fourteen years she spent there and all the knowledge that she gained there. Read all about Meyer lemons. (Why are we not growing and selling them commercially in Australia?) These lemons are very low in acid and have the softest of skins with a gentle taste — they scream Californian cuisine to me. Learn how to make ice-creams (I did), cobblers and mousses. This is an expert's book written for the home cook.

An expert's book written for the home cook

Christmas Special

The delicious gluten-free orange cake we have decided to leave on for the month of December along with our Christmas range. There are two different-sized Christmas cakes sold in their own tins so you too can go on to bake your own. These tins are gifts in themselves — no need to wrap! Just sign your name on the pre-printed label. Also we have a box of candied orange macaroons, each one drizzled with chocolate. These are gluten free so make a great gift for those difficult-to-feed-and-spoil people.



perfect gifts

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