

DREAMS OF WARM PLACES

BY CLAUD MANN

In the early 1990s, Perla and I were living in San Francisco on Vallejo Street in an old pre-earthquake five-story brown shingle owned by our friend Leona Wolff. Although Dr. Wolff was well into her 80s she still delighted in making hospital rounds, took the occasional bone-numbing Alcatraz swim with her buddies in the Dolphin Club (of which she was a founding member), and happily kept a younger boyfriend on the side: a



75-year-old anarchist and retired architect named Charles, who sported an array of gingham ascots and had an out-of-control, Leonard Bernstein-inspired white shock of a hairdo. Leona had only recently begun spending time with Charles, confiding to us that after spending half of a life alone following the death of her husband, she considered Charles to be her “dessert.”

Each night Charles was in charge of preparing the salad, which was almost always composed of stacked sheets of butter lettuce mounded with microscopic cubes of radishes, raw vegetables and anything else that came between his gentleman's penknife and Leona's ancient cutting board. After dinner, they carried their thimble-sized wine glasses to the back yard and, if the fog belt hadn't already tightened, identified constellations. If the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters, were visible, Charles would inevitably refer to the star cluster as the “Please-ladies” and Leona would never fail to giggle.

We lived in an attached garden apartment but had the run of a house filled with a lifetime of relics: framed letters from Leona's correspondence with Albert Einstein, assorted Maynard Dixon landscapes, black-and-white originals of long grown children by family friend and photographic legend Dorothea Lange, and my favorite, a wall-length socialist style mural painted by the apprentices of José Moya del Piño, who were guests at the house while assisting the Spanish master during his Coit Tower installation for the WPA in 1933.

Life was sweet. I worked at a Northern Italian place out on the avenues, and Perla sang nights at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. We slept late, drank espresso at Trieste, cappuccino at Tosca and martinis at Bix; we threw dinner parties and gave concerts and mostly thrived on living in what we were sure was an enchanted city. A city with a million secrets ready to be shared with those able to feel the poetry of her pulse.

We knew we should have been absolutely content. Unfortunately that wasn't the case; you see, we were really, really cold.

While fun-busting accuracy fanatics feel compelled to spoil a perfectly good quote by noting that Mr. Twain never actually said “The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco,” what they probably don't know is that, according my sources, Twain did almost succumb to

hypothermia twice while summering in our fair city.

To be perfectly fair to the City it should be said that the year in question had been colder than any other I could recall from what was left of my memory after a misspent youth in the Bay Area. However, I naively assumed warmth was always around the corner. Perla, on the other hand, is a Southern California hybrid from Mexican-Argentine rootstock. Like a vanilla orchid, her DNA requires a minimum of heat and humidity to flourish. Walking down Van Ness one frigid morning she said offhandedly, “If I don't leave this cold I'll die.” It was then that I told her about the dreams.

For over a month I had been having a fractured series of dreams with a shared theme: In each I would find myself blissfully cooking over a wood grill in an outdoor kitchen on a cliff or bluff over the sea. Sometimes I'd wake up with the scents of wood smoke and salt air still swirling in my head. It was a far cry from my current gig at the Il Piano. Piano was a modest Victorian on Clement Street that had endured a desultory conversion to restaurant use sometime in the 70s. The owner, Al, looked like an Italian Snidely Whiplash without the top hat (although I'm certain he kept one handy). Each evening before service Al had me brown a fistful of garlic in olive oil and then set the pan on a café table near the front door to attract customers in the same way a hunter might use deer bait. Then Al would wait stealthily with menus in hand and ambush pedestrians, picking off those too slow or too weak to escape.

At barely 20 square feet, our windowless kitchen was so small that three cooks were out of the question although two could squeeze in if their combined waist size didn't exceed 60 inches. Luckily, I still had my youthful figure and Mario, our prep cook, had lost a lot of weight during his last stint at County lockup, where he had also found religion. When I

burned my hand on the line it was always comforting to have him re-explain to me that a red-hot char broiler was nothing compared to the fires of hell. No wonder I was dreaming about the beach.

Needless to say, when the call came I was almost waiting for it, which was fortunate because events moved so quickly. Melissa Nicola, wife and business partner of master restaurateur Larry Nicola, saw an article somewhere bemoaning the decline of food service at Cabo San Lucas's historic Palmilla Hotel. On a whim, Mellie fired off a proposal to the current owner, an Orange County real estate tycoon, who shocked everyone by having the good sense to accept the offer. Because Larry's presence was crucial to his own busy Silver Lake restaurant, the arrangement was to have the new executive chef (me) and the new dining room manager reside in San Jose del Cabo, with Larry flying back and forth each weekend to oversee the revamping of all food service operations.

I relocated within the month. Perla bought a 20-year-old, turquoise Ford F-250 pickup and prepared to make the 1,000-mile drive down with our stuff. We dug up an ancient AAA roadmap of the Baja peninsula that had a sidebar featuring a list of dos and don'ts for women traveling alone in Mexico, explicitly discouraging the petting of stray dogs or the wearing of bright lipstick. Naturally, Perla arrived in Los Cabos a week later with a camera full of self-portraits in dazzling shades of lipstick, usually petting at least one dog.

Once at the hotel and walking through the grounds to our first departmental staff meeting, Larry mentioned I

should probably know that he had told the general manager that the new chef spoke fluent Spanish. That day I tried my best to look quietly attentive and did a lot of shrugging and thoughtful squinting. I also found that when understanding less than half of a conversation, a good tactic is to repeat the last three words someone says and then nod knowingly and then mention how hot it is.

The existing menu at the Palmilla was an awe-inspiring illustration of the continental, cruise ship approach to dining bafflingly popular in upscale hotels and resorts for half a century. It was almost as if, like a kidnapper, someone had deliberately sought to confuse their hostage-guests as to their location. There was New Zealand lamb, French squab and Atlantic salmon croquettes but no mention of Baja chocolate clams or sea urchin, found by the thousands on the rocks surrounding the hotel; or of verdolaga, a slightly sour, watercress-like native green that grew wild on Baja's beaches in enormous quantities; or damiana (also known as *Turnera aphrodisiaca*), the native herb with a slightly sweet chamomile-like flavor used to flavor Baja's locally made Damiana liquor. (The Latin name hints at its other common use as a folk remedy to combat a malady loosely translated as "sexual sluggishness"—a borderline oxymoron, depending on how you look at it.)

Which of course brings me to the existing menu's conspicuous absence of Mexican corn smut, a naturally occurring maize fungus that many world-class chefs regard as Mexico's answer to the Italian truffle. In 1989 the James Beard Foundation even sponsored a "Mexican truffle dinner" (which probably has a better ring to it than "raven excrement dinner," one translation of the fungus's Aztec name, *huitlacoche* or *cuitlacoche*).

Cooking is a portable profession and the excitement of working with the fruit of a new or exotic locale is something most every cook shares. With the bounty of the Sea of Cortez mere steps from the kitchen, we were already making big plans for innovative ways to use local fish and produce in our scaled-down menu when we learned the awful truth: In order to protect fishing-related tourism, any species considered to be "game fish" were forbidden by law for use in restaurants. To put it another way, practically the only commercially available local finfish we could legitimately cook was limited to the exotic sounding *huachinango* and *cabrilla* ... known more commonly as red snapper and sea bass. Deflated, we jettisoned plans for developing recipes using yellowfin tuna, skipjack, dorado (aka mahi mahi), wahoo or the hundreds of pounds of swordfish and marlin frequently abandoned in our walk-in by



wealthy sport fisherman. (A few times I just couldn't help myself and lemonwood-smoked a big batch of some forbidden catch to be served as a complimentary bar snack under some not-very-clever anagrammed alias (or *nom de yum*) like *lanmir*, *hoowa* or *hami hami*.)

On a more positive note, using only a suitcase full of smuggled seeds, a sizeable chunk of the produce budget and our slowly improving but still limited language skills, Larry and I enlisted the services of a dashing handsome Miraflores farmer named Manuel Verdugo to cultivate organic fresh herbs and assorted salad greens to be dropped off each morning by one of his many sons who also worked at the Palmilla. (I've learned recently that Manuel's herb business is still going strong today after 15 years.) Larry also made friends with the owner of the glass factory in Cabo and began designing hotel glassware to be made to our own specifications.

Eventually a number of native ingredients snuck their way into the new, scaled down menu including the aforementioned *almejas* *chocolates*, sea urchin, *huitlacoche* and *verdolaga*. We also stopped shipping in lamb and beef from San Diego and instead began ordering young goat from the father of one of our bakers. If you've never experienced really good goat (or as I like to call it, the other, other, other white meat) give it a shot next time you see a menu with *barbacoa de cabrito* or *birria de chivo*. And because, like Argentina's legendary Pampas-pastured beef, many Mexican cattle shockingly have the opportunity to roam around and eat grass, the cuts are often more flavorful and contain a greater proportion of Omega 3's (the anti-inflammatory good stuff) to Omega 6's (the pro-inflammatory not-so-good stuff) than USDA corn-fed Frankenbeef, which is often the only choice available for a majority of U.S. consumers. (On the down side, switching to pasture-fed beef means one can't always count on getting their minimum daily requirement of sub therapeutic antibiotics, synthetic non steroidal estrogens and that zippy flavor enhancer, acid-resistant E-coli O157:H7.)

Unsurprisingly, our first visitors from San Francisco were Leona and Charles, who happened to arrive during the first week of the hotel's high season and were already diving through the breakers before unpacking their bags. For the hotel buffet that night we roasted a pig on the beach pibil-style with chiles, citrus, tequila, vinegar, various spices and achiote paste. (Achiote, made from annatto seed, is also the natural color traditionally added by English cheese makers to give winter cheeses the same golden color as spring cheeses, when cows graze on beta carotene-rich spring grasses.)

As our hotel guests passed through the buffet, one little boy asked me why a roasted pig's head was nestled on the platter of cochinita pibil. When I explained that, like his breakfast bacon, pork meat came from a real pig he began weeping inconsolably. His mother later complained to hotel management that I had callously despoiled her boy's innocence. I tried to explain that this might be seen as a first step in knowing where one's food comes from and that

someday the boy might even thank me—or at least take a moment to thank the pig next time he eats a ham sandwich. Nobody bought it for a minute.

To be honest, I had arrived in Mexico a little full of myself. Having barely mastered a handful of quasi-French cooking techniques myself, I had arrogantly imagined whipping a lackluster kitchen staff into shape. Of course, I had it backwards. As the months passed I was the one absorbing an arsenal of kitchen techniques. Smart stuff like throwing crushed papaya seeds in a marinade to tenderize tough cuts of meat (the papaya enzyme papain is the active ingredient in meat tenderizer—and in a pinch can also be used as a poultice for insect bites or jellyfish stings). Or how our sous chef, Jesus Morron, could peel a 25-pound case of small-cloved Mexican garlic in 3 minutes instead of 3 hours by first dumping the entire case into a 30-quart Hobart mixer fitted with a paddle, mixing at high speed a minute or so and then filling the bowl with cold water. Smashed off by the paddle, the skins float to the top and are skimmed off and discarded. The peeled cloves are then strained from the water and chopped, the garlic-scented water to be used later for chicken stock—now that's just good clean work.

The year passed quickly. Our hotshot dining room manager, recruited from a high-end hotel chain, made a predicted transition from expatriate to expatriate-lush. After a series of "mishaps" including disappearing for days on end and totaling Larry's new Jeep, I had finally had it with him. So when, after surfing in a prohibited area, he showed up at the back door of the kitchen impaled by sea urchin spines and asking for medical help, I surprised myself by agreeing to surgically remove the crumbly slivers with a boning knife. If it helps, I'm happily aware that the fact I enjoyed the procedure so much makes me a truly insensitive person. And while I'll never divulge the mysterious circumstances surrounding my sodden co-worker's sudden late night return to the U.S., suffice it to say that there was the transfer of a large sum of money and the involvement of at least one high-ranking government official.

The following year, I chose not to renew my contract and returned to Southern California to work again with Larry on new restaurant project in downtown Los Angeles. During that time we learned that Perla was pregnant and Leona Wolff was dying. Perla began making regular trips to San Francisco, visiting and helping with a myriad of doctors (some of whom Dr. Wolff had taught as medical students). Leona was in complete control throughout her illness, ultimately deciding when and where and with whom she would die.

I was asked to speak at



her service held at Fort Mason and told of how when first staying with Dr. Wolff while in college I found a thick, leather-bound guestbook in the library. Dating back to the 1920s, it held literally thousands of poems, drawings and salutations in dozens of languages entered by seven decades of visitors to the great house. It was a moving testament to Leona's early years in the peace movement, the founding of Physicians for Social Responsibility and her lifelong commitment to providing safe shelter to travelers and those in need (me included). There was also a page with only one entry, written by Leona on the day her husband, also a physician, passed away. It said simply, "Today I start a new chapter of my life without Ernst."

This was to be our new chapter without Leona. Not long after, our daughter, Eva-Leona, was born. She says she wants to be a doctor.

Claud Mann has cooked professionally for more than 25 years. His recipes and/or rambling essays have been featured in The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Daily News, USA Today and Cooking Light.



ANCHO CHILE SAUCE

Makes 2½ cups

- 6 to 8 dried Ancho chiles, stems and seeds removed, coarsely torn
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 2 Tbsp. white vinegar

Combine the chiles, 2 ½ cups water, salt, sugar and vinegar in a small nonreactive saucepan over high heat. Simmer for 5 minutes, remove from heat and soak 20 minutes. Cool slightly and then purée in small batches until smooth.

PALMILLA POSOLE

The classic Mexican pork and hominy soup—rather than making the traditional red stew, we like to serve the chile sauce on the side to give guests a choice.

For the soup:

- 3 pounds bone-in pork shoulder butt
- 3 pounds pig's feet, neck bones, or shanks, cut into 2-inch-thick pieces (have the butcher cut these for you)
- 2 large white onions, quartered
- 2 whole heads garlic, halved across the middle
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 Tbsp. sea salt
- 4 cups fully cooked Mexican hominy (see note)
- 1 recipe Ancho Chile Sauce

For garnish:

- Coarsely ground dried red chile
- Dried Mexican oregano
- Finely chopped white onion
- Halved lemons and limes
- Finely chopped red cabbage
- Thinly sliced radishes
- Diced avocado
- 1 recipe Ancho Chile Sauce

Rinse the meat and the bones. Place in a large stockpot and cover with 5 quarts cold water. Add the onions, garlic, bay leaf and salt. Bring to a full boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, uncovered, for 3–4 hours. Occasionally skim off any foam that rises to the surface. The meat is finished when it falls easily from the bones. Remove the pot from the heat and cool.

Remove the meat from the broth, shred into large chunks and set aside. Discard the bones, skin, fat and knuckles. Skim the fat from the broth and discard. Add the hominy to the broth and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to a low simmer and cook until the hominy softens and expands, about an hour. Return the meat to the broth. Taste and re-season if necessary. Cover and keep warm.

Arrange any or all of the garnishes in serving bowls. Ladle the soup with meat into large heated serving bowls. Pass the garnishes and Ancho Chile Sauce at the table. Transfer any leftover soup into smaller shallow containers so they cool quickly before refrigerating.

Serves 10 to 12.

Note: Mexican-style hominy is found in Latin American groceries. Try to purchase half-cooked hominy from a tortilla factory and finish cooking it at home. Alternatively, purchase pozole from a health food or gourmet store and cook according to the directions, 3 to 5 hours. Fully cooked canned or frozen hominy is available at most grocery stores.

CEVICHE DE CABRILLA

We like to make this ceviche when lemons and avocados ripen in the Ojai Valley. Feel free to substitute any firm, white-fleshed fish if sea bass or halibut aren't available.

- ¾ pound very fresh boneless, skinless sea bass or halibut, cut into ¼- to ½-inch dice
- 3 Tbsp. fresh lime juice
- 3 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice
- 2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp. dried oregano, preferably Mexican
- 2 Tbsp. juice from a jar of sliced pickled Jalapeños (sometimes labeled "Nacho Jalapeños"), plus ¼ cup pickled Jalapeños, minced
- ½ medium sweet white onion, finely chopped
- ¾ cup grape tomatoes or 1 medium firm-ripe tomato, cut into ¼-inch cubes
- ½ cucumber, peeled, seeded and cut into ¼-inch cubes
- 4 ounces pitted green olives (preferably not brined in vinegar; if they are, rinse with water before using), finely chopped
- ½ cup very finely crumbled cotija (firm Mexican cheese) or feta cheese (about 3 ounces)
- 1 Serrano chile, minced
- 2 Tbsp. fresh cilantro leaves, chopped
- 1 firm-ripe avocado
- Coarse kosher salt to taste
- Thick tortilla chips
- Mexican hot chile sauce, such as Cholula

In a medium bowl, combine fish and 2 tbsp. each of lime and lemon juice. Cover and refrigerate at least 3 hours and up to 6, stirring occasionally.

Meanwhile, mix olive oil, oregano (rubbed between your palms first if the flecks are large), and pickled Jalapeño juice in a large bowl.

Drain fish in a colander, discarding juices, and add to olive oil mixture. Toss to coat.

Add pickled Jalapeños, onion, tomatoes, cucumber, olives, cheese, Serrano, and cilantro. Peel avocado, cut into ½-inch cubes and toss gently with remaining 1 tbsp. lemon juice; add to bowl and toss ceviche gently and thoroughly. Season to taste with salt and remaining 1 tbsp. lime juice. Serve with tortilla chips and hot chile sauce.

Makes 8 to 10 appetizer servings.



erin ellwood

805 210 9148

323 496 1177

www.erinellwood.com