Now is the time for fresh beans

By Russ Parsons, Los Angeles Times

Beans can seem complicated. They come in different colors – green, yellow and purple are the most common. And in different shapes – round and flat – and different sizes – yard-long and fingernail thin. They grow on different types of plants – pole beans climb to the sky while bush beans stay close to the ground.

But in the end, they all taste pretty much the same.

Thank goodness. Because beans, whatever the type, make terrific summer food.

Read the whole story

Peaches: Smaller, sweeter, quicker harvest

By Russ Parsons, Los Angeles Times

Peaches and nectarines are two of the most glorious prizes of summer, but this year you'd better grab them while you can. Blink and you might miss your favorites.

Because of the warm winter we experienced – the winter that wasn't – harvests are much smaller than usual and are coming much earlier. Some farmers I've talked to say they'll be winding up their picking within the next two weeks – that's

mid-July for a season that for some varieties normally can last until October.

As if that wasn't bad enough, this year's peach and nectarine crop is running much smaller than normal. As compensation, the fruit is exceptionally sweet.

Read the whole story

Drought changes kitchen habits

By Kim Severson, New York Times

SANTA CRUZ – Andrea Nguyen, who writes cookbooks for a living, knows that making pho in a pressure cooker is not the solution to California's drought. Still, developing a reasonable version of the Vietnamese noodle soup that can be made in less than an hour, with half the water, matters to her these days.

"We're all trying to do what we can," she said. "It's all about consciousness."

Across California, home cooks and restaurant chefs are adjusting to a new reality in kitchens where water once flowed freely over sinks full of vegetables, and no one thought twice about firing up a big pot of water for pasta.

The state is in the fourth year of a severe drought, but the reality of living with less water began hitting hard in the spring. For the first time, state officials ordered residents of every city and town to conserve water or face consequences.

Some residents had already taken the punishment into their own

hands with drought shaming, using social media to call out people with well-watered lawns or other outward signs of excessive water consumption.

A culinary equivalent has yet to pop up, probably because running a kitchen is not as water-intensive as maintaining a yard or using the bathroom, where a bucket to collect water as the shower heats up has become an accepted part of home décor.

Yet the drought's impact is being keenly felt in culinary matters, from how Californians cook and clean, to how they shop and even what foods they can find at the market.

Read the whole story

Study: Heightened imagination for smell may drive food cravings

By Los Angeles Times

Close your eyes and imagine the smell of baking bread, of a pungent curry dish, of popcorn at the movies or a bouquet of freshly cut tea roses.

If these prompts send you into swoons of olfactory delight, there's a good chance that upon opening your eyes, an obese person could be staring back at you in the mirror.

Research has found that compared with people of normal weight, obese people conjure up more vivid images of aromas. The ability to experience sensory fantasies so richly, said researchers at Yale School of Medicine, may make some people

more vulnerable than others to following food cues, even when they’re not hungry.

Read the whole story

For a better steak, cook directly on charcoal

By Matt Lee and Ted Lee, New York Times

We’ve never been the kind of guys to worship outdoor grilling gear and technology. When we were growing up, Dad set the tone, making do with a rusty hardware store hibachi and a metal chimney. We’ve written about the ascetic thrill of using government-issue grills in state parks.

But recently we picked up a trick from a Dallas chef that has rocked our minimalist approach to its foundation: We cook meats directly on the coals.

No, the precious porterhouses do not incinerate, even though the heat is consistently 800 to 1,000 degrees. The char is robust and earthy, but never too ashy or excessive, even when we use thinner cuts like hanger and skirt.

In fact, the method promises to reduce anxiety at our outdoor parties this summer by making the grilling speedier and more consistent, with far less sooty flare-up than when we raise our steaks a few inches onto a grate above the coals. (That air space between the meat and the heat provides oxygen for combustion.)

Read the whole story

Science behind keeping tomatoes out of the fridge

By Julie R. Thomson, Huffington Post

By now you've probably been told a million times that you should never put tomatoes in the refrigerator. But aside from knowing they'll get soggy and taste a little worse for the wear, do you really know why? We're about to get to the bottom of why you should really store tomatoes on the counter.

Tomatoes originate from warm, desert-like climates, so they prefer to be hot. Tomatoes stored in the fridge aren't just unhappy, they undergo a chemical change that weakens their flavor and alters their texture.

The beloved tomato taste – that deep, grassy flavor – is the result of aroma volatile compounds. Refrigeration not onlystops the production of new aroma volatiles, but it also deteriorates already existing ones, a study from French National Institute for Agricultural Research proved.

Read the whole story

Foothill wineries win at State Fair competition

El Dorado and Amador county wineries scored well in the annual California State Fair Commercial Wine Competition.

This year’s wine competition consisted of 2,881 wine entries from 743 winery brands. Seventy-two judges on 18 panels awarded 57 double golds and 254 golds.

The first State Fair Wine Competition was in 1855. The competition is the oldest and one of the most prestigious wine events in the country. Top wines including Best of Region and Best of California winners will be featured at the State Fair, July 10-26.

Regional winners include:

Best of Show

Best of Show Red

- Double Gold 98, Lewis Grace, 2012 Tempranillo, El Dorado

Best of Show Pink

- Double Gold 98, Gold Hill Vineyard, 2014 Barbera Rosé, El Dorado

Best Microwinery Other

- Double Gold 98, Red Bucket Wine, 2012 Barbera Rosé, El Dorado County

Best of Region

Best of Sierra Foothills Red

- Double Gold 98, Lewis Grace, 2012 El Dorado, Tempranillo

Best of Sierra Foothills White

- Gold 95, Helwig Vineyards & Winery, 2014 Shenandoah Valley, Amador County, Sauvignon Blanc

Best of Other California Red

- Gold 94, Heringer Estates Family Winery, 2012

Clarksburg, Aglianico

Best of California Wines

Best Cabernet Sauvignon

- Double gold 98, Lewis Grace, 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon Estate, El Dorado

Best Italian Red Varietal Blend

- Gold 94, Nello Olivo, 2012 Toscanello , El Dorado County.

Best Red Generic

- Double gold 98, Zucca Mountain Vineyards, 2013 Sorprendere Sierra Foothills

Best Traditional Vintage Port

- Double gold 98, St. Amant Winery, 2013 Bootleg Port, Amador County.

Ritz-Carlton redefines dining at the counter



Mirrors provide a multi-dimensional view of the kitchen at Manzanita at the Ritz-Carlton Lake Tahoe. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – Knives go so fast it’s a wonder no one is injured. Flames shoot up. Pans are occupying nearly every burner, yet nothing is being neglected. A quick squeeze and flick of the wrist creates an artist-like design.

It’s controlled chaos in the kitchen at Manzanita.

A small army of sous chefs is assisting Chef Chris Watkins who is in charge of the restaurant on this particular Friday.

This is no ordinary counter we are dining at. The wood and rock make for a seamless transition from the outdoors. It’s more elegant than rustic. This is the Ritz, after all. But the splendor of Tahoe is not far away. To our right are windows that look out to the Martis Valley, while there is a more expansive view to our left of the hotel’s patio and Northstar’s ski slopes.



Chef Chris Watkins discusses the meal with Bob Keller. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

In front of us is the show. With mirrors on the ceiling we are able to better see some of the precision workmanship of the men and women dressed in classic chef apparel. Not only are they preparing our six-course meals, but the restaurant is full of regular diners.

Manzanita Chef's Tasting Counter is a bit of a misnomer. At least the word "tasting" is – assuming one was to define it as a sample or bite-size. While most of the portions of the six-course dinner were not over the top, they were ample and appropriate to the point that we might have turned down a

seventh course.

With that said, each morsel kept getting better. If we weren't full, we would not have wanted the experience to end.



The foie gras comes with foie mousse stuffed cherries and warm brioche. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Watkins has been at Manzanita for less than a year, having spent the last 10 years in San Francisco at restaurants like Campton Place and Aqua. He quickly had to show his versatility with what he was going to serve me because my personalized menu had fish on it – something I don't eat. He didn't seem fazed by the sudden change in plans.

Bob, Carolyn and I were presented with our own menus that outlined the six courses. For the most part theirs was the same except for the omission of soy for Carolyn. Mine was vegetarian.



The smoked trout set the bar high for the remainder of the courses. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

A smoked trout rillettes with trout skin chicharone started the evening. Bob and Carolyn raved about the skin, adding that the flavors kept bursting in their mouths. I could say the same about the roasted beet salad with house made ricotta and honey rosemary vinaigrette.

Watkins explained that the foie gras is essentially deconstructed and put back together, which makes it taste less gamey. Bob, who is a big fan of foie gras, raved about this incarnation of the delicacy.

The seared scallops with summer succotash was Carolyn’s favorite course of the night. They were perfectly cooked and the flavor of the vegetables outstanding.



Wine steward Travis Masten introduces guests to an array of wines. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Bob had a harder time picking a favorite, saying each course brought something new and another culinary surprise.

Being a fan of mushrooms, the fifth course – herb gnocchi with fava beans peas, morels, mushroom consume and shaved pecorino – was hands down my favorite. My meat eating dinner mates had lamb in their dish. I know I was given more morels than they were. I was in heaven. The only disappointment was seeing the bottom of the bowl.

We had the option to buy a bottle of wine or pay for six

tastings. We chose the latter, which was fun because wine steward Travis Masten introduced us to varietals and wineries we were not familiar with – such as Pedro Ximenez's Mayu from Chile.



A different libation for each course. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

This is the first summer the Ritz-Carlton at Lake Tahoe has offered the Chef's Tasting Counter. The counter accommodates six people. The intimate interaction with the chef and wine steward made for an even more enjoyable experience compared to most foodie events that involve a room full of guests.

Catering to small parties is exactly what the Ritz was aiming to do when staff came up with the idea.



Chefs Chris Watkins, left, and Nick Leandro prepare one of the six courses. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

“We recognized an opportunity to enhance and further activate this existing counter space in the restaurant. With dining trends becoming more casual, not all diners are interested in a formal, sit-down pairing menu, but these same guests still want to enjoy a unique culinary experience and personal interaction with the culinarians,” Robin Penning with the Ritz told L*ake Tahoe News*.

Also making these dinners special is that the chef creates a meal for that evening for those at the counter that isn’t

being served elsewhere on property.

When it was all over, Carolyn said, “This is the best food I’ve had in a really long time.”



Dessert – rum baba – poached peaches, apricot yoghurt sauce, marcona almond cookie crumbs and plum sorbet. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

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Notes:

· For reservations, call 530.562.3121. They must be made 48 hours in advance.

· Tasting Counter dinners are Fridays and Saturdays.

· Dinners start at $95, with alcohol separate.

· Each dinner is six courses.

Newest miracle food may be avocado

By Ariana Eunjung Cha, Washington Post

First it was blueberries. Then the tart, deep red seeds of pomegranates. Now it’s avocado’s turn in the spotlight.

Long revered as a superfood with good vitamin and fat content, the fleshy green fruit is being used in the development of a drug that researchers hope will one day be able to fight blood cancer.

In a study published in the journal Cancer Research, Paul Spagnuolo, a professor at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, writes of a fat in avocados that combats acute myeloid leukemia (AML), a rare and deadly form of cancer, by targeting leukemia stem cells while leaving healthy cells unharmed.

Read the whole story

Is the leading nutrition

science group in big food’s pocket?

By Luke Whelan, Mother Jones

Figuring out whom to trust for nutritional advice can be a daunting task; new findings on everything from the dangers of sugar to the health benefits of leftover pasta seem to come out every day, and the “experts” behind them often have ulterior motives.

According to a report released this week, even venerable nutritional science organizations and the journals they publish can’t be trusted.

Public health lawyer Michele Simon explores how corporate interests influence the findings of one of these research organizations: the American Society for Nutrition. The nearly 90-year-old nonprofit, comprising 5,000 scientists and experts, publishes theAmerican Journal of Clinical Nutrition and claims to “bring together the world’s top researchers, clinical nutritionists and industry to advance our knowledge and application of nutrition for the sake of humans and animals.”

But according Simon, the group’s coziness with corporate sponsors calls its research into question.

Read the whole story