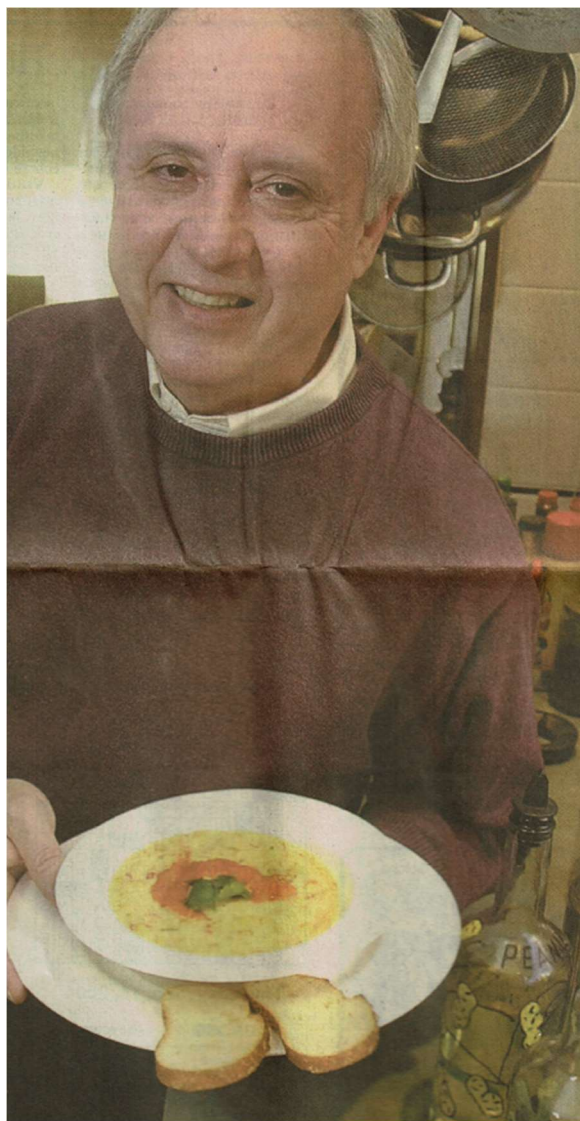


Cook Around the World

Traveler and cook Reid Melton's kitchen is a melting pot of flavors and experiences

By SARENE WALLACE , NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT, STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

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Nearly 40 years ago, Reid Melton began exploring the world and bringing small pieces of it back to his kitchen.

Amid the spotless Santa Barbara kitchen with its teal-green Formica counters, white cupboards and wood floors, these souvenirs await introduction. Mr. Melton obliged. One by one, he picked up a memento and told its story.

Mr. Melton began his travelogue with a fragrant small glass jar of panch phoron, an Indian spice mix

usually of fennel, cumin, fenugreek, mustard and nigella seeds. He mentioned an unrelated walnut tart recipe he discovered during a training session he conducted in Pakistan.

From a crowded handmade pottery vase, he pulled out orangewood hand-carved forks from a desert bazaar in Morocco and a spatula from London. He took down his mother's copper pot from a hanging rack. Near it is an Indian metal plate for heating chapatis.

He brought the plate (called a tava) from India, where he was a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid-1960s. Before he left on his two-year stay, his mother, Virginia, made sure he had the necessary survival skills: cooking with basic ingredients.

"She said, 'There are some things you've got to be able to cook all around the world. You can get butter, eggs and milk, probably, so you've got to be able to cook with those,'" recalled the 60-year-old who moved to Santa Barbara in 1999.

His father, Don, was a master with sandwiches, soups and meats. An adventurous cook, his mother was forever exploring other cuisines. But it was egg custard and spinach souffl^Z that she chose to ready him for the trip. In Central India, he taught the locals his mother's recipes. They, in turn, exposed him to the region's lightly spiced cuisine.

While later living in Washington, D.C., Mr. Melton supplemented his early kitchen time with six years of weekly classes by Carol Mason, "a boutique caterer, cooking instructor and friend." Ms. Mason's classes covered everything within "classic and casual cooking." Several white binders labeled "Carol's Classes" commemorate those years in cookbook-lined shelves -- 18-linear feet of books, to be exact.

In 1987, Mr. Melton spent 3 1/2 months studying full time at La Varenne, a cooking school then located in Paris. An immersion program conducted in French, it taught classic and modern versions of French dishes. The instructors repeatedly stressed the importance of paying close attention while cooking. Mr. Melton learned this lesson the hard way on his first day of class: He accidentally substituted powdered sugar for cornstarch in a gnocchi recipe.

These days, Mr. Melton primarily cooks Cal-Italian cuisine -- a fusion of California and Italian cooking that relies on simple, best-quality ingredients -- with a foundation of the French technique he learned at La Varenne.

When he cooks, Mr. Melton likes to "discover new things and new ways of doing things."

One of his favorite exploration topics is the master recipe, such as Red Pepper and Caramelized Onion Confit, which adapt to a variety of uses.

Creating menus is also something Mr. Melton enjoys. It's a process that you could describe as a balancing act.

"You've got to balance the sweet and the sour, and the hot and cold, and the crunch -- I sometimes call it the noise you hear in your ear when you chew -- and mouthfeel . . . It's a balance of all those and the color," he explained.



Mr.

Melton slices a red pepper while preparing his versatile Multipurpose Red Pepper and Caramelized Onion Confit.

"Not every dish served in the meal has to be a star," he said. There should be supporting characters in a meal that don't need to be gussied up. Green beans tossed in olive oil or butter is a great example, he said. "It confuses the mind if there are too many flavors and everything's a star."

For celebratory meals, Mr. Melton likes to have a show-stopping first course on the table for visual punch. "They see it and think, 'Oh, this is going to be interesting.'" The meal will end with something equally special. What's sandwiched in between is important, too, he said.



Broiling peppers intensifies its flavor.

This approach played out nicely in his Christmas Eve menu. The meal started with celery remoulade and Southern-style pickled shrimp. Sautéed duck breast with a cherry sauce, baked asparagus and a wild rice vegetable pilaf followed. Dessert was a take on the Pakistani walnut tart drizzled with chocolate.

No matter what shimmering offerings are on the Thanksgiving menu, there will always be Great Aunt Mary's kidney bean salad. "It's the traditional dish," he said. He described it this way: Likely it's of German origin, a type of slaw with sweet pickles, pimento, kidney beans, chopped eggs and cabbage. The mixture is dressed in sour cream, sweet pickle juice and spiced with a dash of celery seed.

"For me, cooking is an expression of creativity," Mr. Melton said. Even more importantly, it's a way to honor friends."

That means spending as much time as possible with them during dinner. "I don't want to abandon my friends to go in the kitchen and cook," he added.

Another way he pays tribute to people is by volunteering at Food From the Heart, a Santa Barbara-based nonprofit organization that delivers meals to those in need.



When he cooks, Mr. Melton rarely follows a recipe. Unless, of course, he's baking. While he admits to

being a cook more than a baker, he whips up treats for the holidays and has made three friends' wedding cakes.

What enables him to succeed is that he's efficient and organized. A case in point: Jars of spices are alphabetically arranged in a drawer of the kitchen's butcher-block island.

He also uses his honed sense of observation and attention to detail. "You can only improve those things you pay attention to," he said.



Reid Melton spoons Multipurpose Red Pepper and Caramelized Onion Confit onto soups and stews.

Multipurpose Red Pepper and Caramelized Onion Confit

Makes about 6 cups.

The confit is a low-fat, low-calorie multipurpose sauce by itself. Use it as a component of other sauces, as a sandwich spread or as a colorful garnish. It freezes well, so make a lot. You'll be amazed how frequently you reach for it. Try this base recipe and then vary it to your own taste. Invent your own variations and uses.

2 tablespoons olive oil
4 cups, about 2 1/2 pounds, sliced onions, 1/4-inch slices
5 to 6 large red bell peppers
1 tablespoon herbes de Provence
1/4 teaspoon Tabasco sauce
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
Salt and pepper to taste

Heat the oil in a large non-stick skillet. Add the sliced onions and cook over very low heat, stirring from time to time. Cook until very soft, lightly browned or caramelized. Take care to not let them burn. It will take about 30 minutes. The onions will reduce to about one-third their original volume. Set aside.

Preheat broiler. Cut peppers in half. Remove the core and seeds. Just barely coat the peppers' skin with a little olive oil. Place peppers cut-side-down on a baking sheet lined with foil. Broil until the peppers are blackened. Immediately remove from the oven and seal the peppers in a plastic container for about 15 minutes. When cool enough to handle, remove skin using a paper towel.

Slice the peppers into 1/4-inch wide strips. Add the sliced peppers, herbs, Tabasco and balsamic vinegar. Continue to cook over medium heat, stirring periodically, until the peppers have given up their juices, about another 10 minutes.

Correct the seasoning to your taste with Tabasco, salt and pepper. Add any fresh herbs you like.

You can keep the confit as it is or puree it coarsely or finely, depending on how you want to use it.

Variations:

Use 3 to 4 tablespoons of your favorite fresh herbs, chopped. Use half while cooking and fold in half at the end. Use 36-ounce good quality bottled roasted red peppers. Rinse the peppers, as some brands can be bitter. You may want to add some sugar.

Here are some ideas for using the confit:

- * Garnish broiled fish, chicken or meat.
- * Top bruschetta or focaccia.
- * Swirl color and spice to your favorite soup or chowder (yes, even canned).
- * Spread on almost any sandwich -- especially with a rustic bread for an Italian or vegetarian sandwich.
- * Mix with ricotta (or mayonnaise) as a dip for fresh vegetables.
- * Sauce blanched green beans, broccoli or cauliflower.
- * Sauce pasta. Use 2 cups of the pepper sauce mixed with 2 cups of diced fresh or canned tomatoes, adding more fresh herbs, for a lovely light sauce for pasta.
- * Bake fish or chicken. Pour the pepper-tomato sauce over shelled, deveined shrimp, fish fillets or skinless, boneless, chicken breasts.

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