



Chef Todd Aarons

Keeping kosher in mind

Written recipes are not necessary as Tierra Sur chef Todd Aarons honors holidays with food, spirit

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September 20, 2006**

It's all in Todd Aarons' head. The ingredients, the measurements, the times and temperatures. Everything.

"I don't really write my recipes out," said Aarons, executive chef at Tierra Sur Restaurant in Oxnard. "I'm a big fan of eyeballing it."

So it is that he might whip up a potential new dish for everyone in the kitchen to taste and talk about. Then he'll make it again as the cooks watch, jotting down notes if need be.

"But they usually don't need to," said Aarons, 37. "They just know the cooking style and the techniques that we do here. They pretty much get it."

The style at the white-tablecloth restaurant inside Herzog Wine Cellars is Mediterranean, with fire-roasted peppers from Spain, spices from the Middle East and cured meats made in the Italian tradition.

Tierra Sur also happens to be kosher, as is the winery with which it shares its industrial park address.

For the winery, being kosher means the cellar crew observes the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship and the wines are created without the yeasts or animal-based fining agents that fall outside kosher dietary laws.

For the restaurant, it means — among other things — keeping meats separate from dairy products and doing without such fine-dining staples as shrimp and lobster.

It's not as limiting as it sounds, said Aarons, who, as an observant Jew, wears a yarmulke, or skullcap, with his black chef's jacket.

Yes, they make their own lamb sausages and milk-free ice creams in-house, because that's the only way to ensure that such items are indeed kosher. "But I'd do that anyway," added Aarons, whose old-school culinary skills are illustrated by the canning jars he has filled with jalapeños, onions and corn, labeled with handwritten

scrawls on masking tape and lined up on the counter between the kitchen and the dining room.

As far as the younger cooks at Tierra Sur are concerned, he added, that do-it-yourself spirit might just as well be "what the chef prefers in that restaurant. They might not even think of it as kosher."

Diners might not notice the kosher distinction, either, if it weren't for the framed notice from the Orthodox Union at the host station and the fact that the premises are closed Friday evenings and all day Saturday in observance of the Sabbath.

Another clue: As summer gives way to fall and the approach of Rosh Hashana, the menu planner in Aarons' head starts to spin with ingredients and dishes associated with the holiday, which for the Jewish community marks the start of a new calendar year.

In keeping with the holiday's focus on the sweetness of life, he might come up with a dessert made with date honey. Or he might pair a cut of meat with sweet-tart quinces poached in cabernet sauvignon sweetened with a dash of white zinfandel. Or he might marinate lamb in juice from the ruby-red seeds of the pomegranate, a fruit so prominent in Jewish lore that it also is featured in the Tierra Sur logo.

But on the holiday itself, which this year begins at sunset Friday, Aarons will be at home in Los Angeles, celebrating with his wife, Nava, and their three young daughters.

There, Aarons likely will prepare a whole red snapper by baking it in a thick coating of salt and egg whites. The crust acts like a clay pot to steam the fish, which is brought to the table with its head still attached. The gesture is symbolic of the wish to be at the head, to lead by example. And there's the fact that Rosh Hashana means "head of the year," Aarons noted.

Has he ever written this family recipe down?

"No," he said, looking a little sheepish. "Maybe I should have you talk to my wife."

Eating locally, thinking globally

Tierra Sur is not what some might think of as a "typical" Jewish restaurant. There isn't a deli case or gefilte fish in sight.

But these things represent just one facet of Jewish cuisine — specifically, that of Eastern European or Ashkenazi Jews, Aarons said. Many of the dishes at Tierra Sur are inspired instead by Sephardic traditions from Spain and the Middle East.

"There is no one food that is a 'Jewish' food," he said. "The foods of Jewish people in general just happen to be those of whatever area they were (living) in."

In the case of Aarons, who grew up in a non-observant Jewish household, that area happened to be Los Angeles, where he developed an early taste for Mexican fare. "Comfort food to me is Mexican food," he said.

As a kid, Aarons tried to figure out flavors whenever his family went out for Italian or Chinese food. And he joined a Boy Scout troop that only encouraged his interests.

"For a 50-, 60-mile hike, we'd pack our Dutch ovens. We'd catch fresh trout and cook them over an open fire with fennel seed. We didn't believe in bad food. That was our credo," he said with a laugh.

Aarons went on to enroll in the environmental design program at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, but soon found architecture too exacting. So he changed his major, made beer for his senior project and earned a bachelor's degree in food science. Aarons' next stop was at the California Culinary

Academy in San Francisco, where he juggled his studies with a kitchen job at the foodie haven Zuni Café and as a baker at a French patisserie.

After graduation, Aarons landed what he called the perfect job. As chef de cuisine at the Savoy in New York, he designed and cooked a new, greenmarket-inspired menu every week. There was just one problem: Work was all he had.

"I started on the journey that a lot of people take, looking for spirituality in their life," he said. Aarons also wanted to get married and start a family. After exploring other religions, he returned to his roots and went to Israel to learn more about Judaism. There he met and married Nava, a teacher. They are now expecting their fourth child.

Where there's smoke ?

Respectable parenthood aside, Aarons still likes to wear T-shirts for the punk band The Clash under his chef's jacket. These jackets are black rather than the traditional white for the simple reason that he also likes to cook on the restaurant's outdoor grill, soot and ash be darned. "Smoke is flavor," he said, pumping his fists.

Aarons typically loads up the grill's fireplace with mesquite and gnarly chunks of oak firewood about 3 o'clock, after the winds have died down. Later, he uses a small shovel to move the glowing embers to the space just under the grill grate. To the already fragrant combination Aarons adds an ingredient not readily available to other barbecuers: handfuls of oak chips that have been soaked in wine and then dried.

Encased in mesh bags, the chips were at one time placed in the winery's stainless steel tanks to impart oak flavor to Herzog's nonreserve wines. Dried out, they scent the air — and everything from salmon to rib-eyes — with a savory whiff of the fruit of the vine. "They're just a by-product of the wine-making process," Aarons said. "But we use whatever we have in a positive way."