

## FOOD; The Comeback Kid

By JULIA REED MARCH 23, 2003

I owe my much valued friendship with the screenwriter Robert Harling to the brilliant American chef Jeremiah Tower and his intrepid imagination. Years ago, Bobby and I were seated next to each other at a dinner party in New Orleans, and somehow (though not, sadly, because it was what we were being served) we got onto the subject of Château d'Yquem. I knew, vaguely, that Bobby had written some movies (and later I learned that he had written some of my favorites, including "Steel Magnolias" and "Soapdish"), and I knew he had a big old plantation house in Natchitoches, La., and I knew he was friends with our hostess, who was a really good friend of mine. But none of that impressed me nearly as much as the fact that he had read the same tiny aside I had in Tower's first book, "New American Classics," about the merits -- and the decadence -- of drinking Château d'Yquem with a "rich, aged, perfectly cooked roast beef."

Now Bobby and I both knew a lot about the merits of drinking this most extravagant of all Sauternes with ripe nectarines or juicy mangoes. We knew it often married well with shellfish, especially lobster, and we certainly knew that it was damn good on its own. But I had puzzled over Tower's audacious combination for years, and I was delighted to find that someone else had, too, and even more delighted when he proposed that we try it at his house, with him cooking and providing the wine. So we did, carefully following the instructions about "chewing the beef and taking a draft of the wine, chewing twice and swallowing," and it was every bit as "rapturous" and life-changing as Tower promised it would be. That meal not only cemented my friendship with Bobby; it also upheld my conviction that Tower is a genius.

By then Tower had already changed the landscape of American cuisine as part owner and head chef at Chez Panisse in Berkeley. He had also created Stars in San Francisco, one of the world's great restaurants, a fabulous, improbably intimate "grand cafe" in the style of La Coupole in Paris when it was still cool, but with incredible, then-new food, like salmon tartare and grilled duck with mango-chili salsa, Tower's famous black-bean cake and tiny, perfect pizzas at the bar. I loved Stars, and I used "New American Classics" like a bible, but even before that, I was saved from poverty by Time-Life's "Good Cook" series, for which Tower served as consultant under the great Richard Olney.

This was more than 20 years ago, when I was living in Washington and taking as many semesters off from college as I attended. Fed up with this behavior, my parents ceased to be what I would describe as supportive, so I augmented my meager wages at Newsweek, where I worked in the afternoons, with a morning job sitting in a cubicle and selling those "Good Cook" books over the phone. I was only 20, but I knew they were something special -- with their historical references and brilliantly curated recipes from all over the world and their clear photos that served as foolproof step-by-step guides through endless dishes and techniques (photos that, I later found out, had been Tower's doing). Genuinely inspired, I sold so many of them that I won the whole series as a prize, and more important, I could actually afford to go grocery shopping. By the time I finally got a degree, I had very little recollection of what I had learned in class, but I possessed an impressive repertory of dishes that I could make entirely from the memory of the pictures in those volumes, called simply "Salads" or "Pasta" or "Desserts."

When Tower sold Stars in San Francisco and went off to the Far East to open versions of it there, I thought the memory of that momentous dinner with Bobby, my stained copy of "New American Classics" (now out of print) and the Time-Life photographs of Tower's hands leading me through fabulous variations on, say, a simple salad of poached chicken slices arrayed on a glistening tomato vinaigrette were all that I would have left of my hero. But now he is back with "Jeremiah Tower Cooks," a collection of 250 recipes, charming anecdotes about his well-traveled life and invaluable insights for the home cook, ranging from why you should never plunge vegetables into an ice bath ("You might as well save yourself the time and trouble and buy frozen ones instead") to what is wrong with all those "sprigs of fresh herbs sticking out of the top of every dish today" ("Let's decide that garnishes . . . should be edible and an integral part of the dish").

Tower is refreshingly straightforward, but he has definitely retained his decadent side. In the new book, there's an oyster soup that takes only 15 minutes to make, but its key ingredient is osetra caviar, and a sea urchin soufflé Tower once baked, in its own shell, for James Beard, who pronounced it the best thing he ever tasted. There's a section on sandwiches that begins modestly enough with a chicken club and an open-faced egg salad, but the one I intend to try first is the open-faced foie gras, consisting of a slice of foie gras on toasted brioche, topped with a tangle of arugula leaves tossed with chopped preserved lemon, hazelnut oil and cardamom. There are directions for making the perfect hamburger and a list of toppings, including a simple one of sour cream mixed with coarsely ground black pepper. But on the next page there's a recipe for a truffled burger that he recommends having with "a luscious, old-fashioned, rich and powerful red wine -- in a large balloon glass," lest the burger "falls short of its overwhelming effect."

These days, thanks to Daniel Boulud's delicious version at DB Bistro (which also contains foie gras and minced short ribs), burgers with black truffles are all the rage. But Tower first wrote about them, for me, when I was an assigning editor at Vogue in December 1988. (I remember being so happy when I read the first line of that article -- "Christmas seems so obvious" -- because I knew something good was going to follow, and it did.)

Tower can really write, and it is not surprising, since he counts among his influences the wonderful English food writer Elizabeth David. But he was also inspired by Escoffier and Olney and Beard, and by his colorful Russian aunt and uncle who taught him the pleasures of everything from a rustic coleslaw to caviar and blini. The result is a cuisine I call sensuous simplicity. Also, even though Tower is nothing if not modern, he knows that there are not, in fact, all that many ways to skin a cat, that it is still way worth knowing how to make a flawless hollandaise sauce, a mousselike green-goddess mayonnaise, real Russian dressing with horseradish and caviar.

One of my favorite recipes in the whole book is for Montpelier butter -- it's the best version I've ever tried and incredibly versatile. In "New American Classics," Tower wrote that this classic compound butter "transforms hot cauliflower" and that "on top of mashed potatoes it is so good that it should be arrested." Here he says he hasn't changed his mind and further recommends it with hot grilled fish or steaks and, at room temperature, with cold poached salmon. With typical passion, he adds that when it is spooned between slices of leftover roast pork or veal "with the slices re-assembled, left for a day, and then eaten at cool room temperature, it creates a life-long memory." I guess that will be Bobby's and my next project.

### 'Burnt' Passion-Fruit Curd

(adapted from "Jeremiah Tower Cooks")

4 eggs

2 egg yolks

1 cup fresh passion-fruit juice (from about 6 large ripe fruits, pulp removed, puréed in a blender for 1 minute and sieved; see note)

2 tablespoons fresh lime juice

1/4 cup heavy cream

1 cup sugar

Pinch of salt

1/2 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into 1-tablespoon pieces

1/4 cup superfine sugar.

1. Combine all the ingredients except the butter and superfine sugar in a metal nonreactive bowl and beat together until the 1 cup of sugar is completely dissolved. Prepare an ice bath in a bowl slightly bigger than the bowl used to beat the ingredients. Put the bowl with the egg mixture over simmering water and cook, beating constantly, for 10 minutes, or until the curd thickens, being careful not to let the egg mixture curdle. Beat in the butter. Transfer the bowl to the ice bath and beat the curd until it is cold, about 5 minutes.

2. Spoon the curd into four cold, shallow gratin dishes. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours.

3. When ready to serve, heat the broiler to maximum heat. Spread 1 1/8 inch of superfine sugar evenly over the surface of each dish. Place under broiler close to flame until the sugar caramelizes. (You can also use a mini-blowtorch.) Serve immediately.

Yield: 4 servings.

Note: Fresh passion-fruit juice is available at Dean & DeLuca.

### Montpelier Butter

(adapted from "Jeremiah Tower Cooks")

6 leaves spinach

Leaves from 1/2 bunch watercress (1 1/2 cups of leaves)

2 tablespoons fresh flat parsley leaves

2 tablespoons fresh chervil leaves

2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives

1 tablespoon fresh tarragon leaves

2 shallots, chopped

2 cornichons, rinsed and chopped

4 anchovy fillets

2 tablespoons capers

1 garlic clove, peeled

1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper

3 hard-cooked egg yolks

2 large raw egg yolks

1/4 pound unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into 1-tablespoon pieces

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon white-wine vinegar

Salt and freshly ground white pepper.

1. Blanch the spinach, watercress, herbs and shallots in boiling water for 1 minute. Drain, refresh under cold water and squeeze dry. Place the mixture in a food processor. Add the cornichons, anchovies, capers, garlic, cayenne and salt and pepper. Process to a smooth paste. Add the egg yolks, cooked and raw, and the butter and process again until thoroughly mixed.

2. If the butter is still a little chunky (the sauce should be glossy and smooth as velvet), transfer the mixture to a blender and beat in the oil in a thin steady stream while the blender is running. If the mixture is perfectly smooth in the food processor, transfer the butter to a bowl and whisk in the oil by hand. Beat in the vinegar and adjust salt and pepper to taste.

Yield: 1 1/2 to 2 cups.