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Summertime and the Cooking Is Plentiful

I like to think of myself as a cook rather than a chef. Chef is such a lofty title and in French it actually means boss, who really wants to be called that? The title Chef has its place in the hierarchy of a well-run kitchen, but at home not so much. When I'm cooking at home I am not running a brigade of 25 people, I am my own prep cook and for the most part dishwasher too. I shop for my own groceries, schlep them up the stairs into the house, plan and organize my little domain. I don't have to direct people or inspect hundreds of plates leaving the kitchen. It is quiet in my home kitchen; there is not the incessant droning of the hoods sucking the air out of the room. I can hear how fast eggs are cooking in a pan on the stove in the morning or whether the water has boiled for tea. My kitchen at home is a place to relax and unwind and do what I love to do unbridled by the demands of the professional kitchen, it is my sanctuary.

People can never believe that I still love to cook as much as I do, but for me making a meal is a relaxing and social experience, an easy way to share my passion with the people I love. Cooking at home is a revelation for someone who spent 24 years working six nights a week under the hum of a commercial hood, sweating and stressed and giving everything I had in the pursuit of perfection. Now it can mostly be just about dinner.

Where do I seek inspiration on what to cook for dinner? It comes from all sorts of influences; my garden, the farmer's market, places I travel to, or my favorite local market. I am the type that can only shop for one dinner at a time. So I usually walk eight blocks to the Bi-Rite market on 18th street in San Francisco's Mission District. The place has become like an addiction for me; even though I have access to amazing ingredients at my restaurants, Bi-Rite always seems to find great new purveyors of fine poultry, meats, and wild and farmed fish that I must try. Other nice things about the market are their great selection of prepared foods that you don't need to cook, but can simply heat and serve; their produce is seasonally appropriate, culled from the best local farms and the selection of cheeses, coffee, wine, and chocolate are all off the hook.

I tend to cook the same things at home over and over again, probably just like everyone, I have my repertoire of dishes that are easy and always seem to be crowd pleasers. My go-to staples include Grilled Ribeye (Five Dot), Salsa Verde, Duck Fat Fried Potatoes (Full Belly Farm), Little Gem Caesar Salad along with Della Fattoria Bread. But the other night I walked into Bi-

Rite, determined to expand my horizons. I bought a whole McFarland Springs Trout (that was so large I had to cut the head off in order to fit into my pan) and seared it to crisp the skin, then flipped the fish and stuck it in the oven to cook a bit more slowly, finally I finished it with brown butter, Meyer lemon, capers and parsley. I also made summer squash (I dislike zucchini intensely) with red onion, garlic and basil, roasted rose potatoes and Little Gem Salad with Aged Balsamic. The whole meal was very impromptu and perfect for a summer day -- I walked in at 7:15 and served dinner at 8:30.

For me, the most important thing is finding inspiration wherever I am and choosing the right recipe for the moment and the location. In the early years of my cooking career, the discipline was all about learning structured techniques and methods but now it is all about the ingredients and letting them speak to me. One of the best things about the summer is the abundance of locally grown ingredients that to me "taste" like the season. That's where I find the most inspiration -- from the ingredients themselves. After years of being the boss, I let the ingredients tell me what to do.