

The Punk Rock Chef

BY CLARE KLEINER

Because of its famed history and celebrity clientele, the Chateau Marmont in West Hollywood, California was never really known for its cuisine—it never had to be. The beautiful patio restaurant, where on any given night you're likely to glimpse an Oscar winner, and the neighboring Bar Marmont gastropub, where an Olsen twin is rumored to have danced on a table or two, featured perfectly fine menus. But they weren't exactly pushing the gastronomical envelope.

Enter Chef Carolynn Spence. In August 2006, the self-proclaimed “old punk rocker,” who had most recently opened and nurtured New York's celebrated Spotted Pig restaurant as sous chef, was brought in as executive chef of both the hotel and bar restaurants. Though Spence did make some changes to the hotel restaurant's menu (being a hotel, certain tastes need to be catered to), she had complete reign over the Bar Marmont menu—and that is where her kicked-up comfort food now takes center stage. But in a town where fruit salad is considered an indulgence by some, would Spence's big, bold flavors find a following?

“I came into it fairly blind, and that worked to my advantage,” says Spence of the L.A. scene. “I definitely think that most people didn't understand the menu at first. But then some people who miss the East Coast style of food started coming, and slowly we got some regulars.”

Still, the beginning was not without its hiccups: “On our opening night, the first question we got was from someone asking why we didn't have shrimp cocktail on the menu,” says Spence, wincing. “That is probably the most heartbreaking question you could ever ask a chef on the first night. I wasn't trying to be snobby by saying we don't have it...but you gotta help a sister out!”

What Spence is cooking is superb pub fare. There are gigantic spicy potato chips with a cool, creamy dip; hot, cheesy gougères that are ridiculously addictive; pickled vegetables of all colors; a hearty, luscious burger (appropriately named the Damn Good Burger); and a delicious double-cut pork chop with bacon-wrapped apples. Her desserts, including a salty-sweet pistachio cake with ice cream, and Earl Grey madeleines with pear compote, are warm, homey and unpretentious.





BEEF CARPACCIO WITH FRIED CIPOLLINI ONIONS

SERVES 4

Cipollini onions are small, flat white onions and are very sweet. If you can't find them, use another sweet onion such as Vidalia or Walla Walla.

For beef carpaccio

- 1 cup red wine
- 1 teaspoon salt, plus more to coat beef
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, plus more to coat beef
- 1 pound eye of round beef, cut to order and extremely fresh
- Fine sea salt

For onion rings

- 5 cipollini onions, cut into rings and separated
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 3 cups buttermilk
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- Salt
- Canola oil, for frying

For aioli

- 2 egg yolks
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons dry English mustard
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/4 cup Worcestershire sauce
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cups canola oil
- 1/3 cup water

Optional garnishes

- Mâche greens
- Chopped hard boiled eggs
- Ground green peppercorns

1. Mix red wine, 1 teaspoon salt and 1 teaspoon pepper. Place beef in a shallow dish and pour marinade over. Cover and refrigerate for 2 hours.
2. Prepare onion rings. In a bowl, mix 1 cup flour, buttermilk, cayenne pepper and salt. Soak onions in this mixture for 2 hours.
3. Make aioli. In food processor, blend yolks, garlic, mustard, lemon juice, Worcestershire

"I try to cook what I like to eat. Like with the pistachio cake, I remember the taste of pistachios from when I was little, but then I kind of lost it. I wanted a way to emphasize that flavor so that it makes you feel like a kid again," says Spence.

Originally from New Jersey, Spence attended Northeastern University on a rowing scholarship, and was majoring in journalism and advertising, with a minor in art history. But after completing an internship in her chosen field, she jumped ship for culinary school. "I had to dress up in a suit and work in an office, and after that I knew there was no way I was going to do that kind of work for a living," says Spence, who has a penchant for tattoos and the Clash. "I loved animals, but working with animals could be kind of sad; I loved music, but that industry is crazy. I knew I loved food, so that was it."

After completing culinary school in Boston, Spence worked under Chef Chris Schlesinger at the East Coast Grill and the Blue Room, cooking on the line and making ice cream and pastries. She then moved to New York, intending to continue in pastry, but ended up as a sous chef at Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill, where she stayed for three years. After that was a stint at Patricia Yeo's AZ. She followed as the opening sous chef of Danny Meyer's Blue Smoke restaurant before landing the sous chef position at yet another brand new restaurant, the Spotted Pig. Though she'd opened a few restaurants before, opening the much buzzed-about New York hotspot was an entirely new experience.

"It started out as Executive Chef April Bloomfield, me and one other kid, sanding the floor, setting up the kitchen—literally putting the place together—and our first night was supposed to be dinner for twelve people, but it ended up being about thirty people. We had a lot of celebrity clientele right away," says Spence. "We didn't know what we were getting into. We took a chance on this tiny little joint in the West Village and it just kicked in the first day and never stopped. It's still going crazy."

While Spence admittedly misses New York, she loves the lifestyle of laid-back Los Angeles. "I went swimming yesterday. I ride my bike a lot. I go to the farmers' market all the time," she says. Perhaps Spence's appreciation of the Southern California culture and her East Coast sensibility is most apparent in her cuisine: good, modest, simple food with just the right amount of attitude.

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CREAMY POLENTA WITH CARAMELIZED CAULIFLOWER AND GRUYÈRE CHEESE

SERVES 6 TO 8

For polenta

- 4 cups water
- 2½ cups polenta
- Kosher salt, to taste
- 4 tablespoons butter
- ½ cup Gruyère cheese, grated

For cauliflower

- 1 head cauliflower, divided into florets
- 4 tablespoons butter, cut into chunks
- ½ cup water
- 3 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves, chopped
- 2 tablespoons coriander seed, ground
- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns, ground
- 2 teaspoons red pepper flakes
- ½ cup water

For garnish

- 4 sprigs thyme
- Extra virgin olive oil

1. In a medium pot, bring water to boil and season with salt.
2. Sprinkle in polenta, stirring. Simmer for 1 hour, stirring frequently.
3. When polenta is smooth and creamy, stir in butter and cheese.
4. Prepare cauliflower while polenta cooks. In a large heavy skillet with a lid, add all cauliflower ingredients. Cover and turn heat to medium. Allow to slowly steam.
5. When all water has evaporated, remove lid and allow cauliflower to slowly caramelize in pan, becoming soft and golden.
6. Divide polenta onto plates and top with cauliflower. Garnish with thyme and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.



DOUBLE-CUT PORK CHOPS WITH BACON-WRAPPED APPLES AND BRAISED CABBAGE

SERVES 4

Brine the pork the day before you plan to cook it; cook the apples and cabbage just prior to serving.

sauce, salt and pepper. With machine running, slowly drizzle in olive oil, then canola oil. Slowly add water to thin mixture—it should look slightly thinner than mayonnaise. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

4. Just before serving, remove beef, pat dry and coat with salt and pepper to form a crust. Heat a sauté pan over high heat and sear beef on all sides, making sure inside stays rare. Cool. Slice thinly using a mando-

line or sharp knife.

5. When ready to serve, heat several inches canola oil in a deep-fryer or in a heavy pot to 350°F. Toss soaked onion rings in remaining 1 cup flour to coat. Fry until crispy and golden, about 2 minutes. Transfer to paper towel-lined plate and season lightly with salt.

6. To serve, arrange beef and onion rings on plate. Season beef sparingly with fine sea salt. Garnish with aioli, as well as mâche, chopped egg or green peppercorns, if using.

For pork and brine

- 1/2 cup salt
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 quart apple juice
- 1 quart water
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, whole
- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns
- A few sprigs sage
- A few sprigs thyme
- 1 tablespoon red pepper flakes
- 1 tablespoon mustard seeds
- 4 double-cut pork chops
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

For bacon-wrapped apples

- 1 gallon apple cider
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 tablespoon coriander seeds
- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns
- 3 allspice berries
- 3 cardamom pods
- 1 cup Jack Daniels or other high-quality bourbon
- 3 tablespoons salt
- 3 Granny Smith apples, partially peeled, cored and each cut into 6 wedges
- 18 slices bacon, fully cooked but still pliable
- 18 toothpicks

For pork jus

- 1 cup apple poaching liquid
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 3 tablespoons butter

1. Prepare brine. In a large pot, combine all brine ingredients (salt through mustard seeds) and bring to a boil. Cool and refrigerate until thoroughly chilled.
2. Once brine is cool, add pork chops. Refrigerate for twenty-four hours.
3. Prepare bacon-wrapped apples. Combine all ingredients except apples and bacon in a large pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes.
4. Add apples to liquid and steep until tender but not mushy, about 20 minutes. Remove apples with a slotted spoon and reserve 1 cup cooking liquid.
5. Wrap each piece of poached apple in a slice of bacon. Secure with a toothpick and set aside.

6. Preheat oven to 400°F.

7. Prepare pork chops. Heat an oven-safe skillet large enough to hold all 4 chops over medium-high heat. Add olive oil. Add chops and sear on both sides. Transfer to oven. Roast for 15 minutes, then turn over. Cook to internal temperature of 160°F.
8. Remove chops from oven and set aside to keep warm. Place pork skillet on stovetop over medium-high heat. Add reserved apple poaching liquid and cook until reduced to consistency of syrup. Add 2 cups chicken stock and simmer until 1 cup liquid remains. Add butter.
9. Serve chops with bacon wrapped apples, jus and braised cabbage (recipe follows).

BRAISED CABBAGE

SERVES 4

- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 head savoy cabbage, chopped into medium-sized pieces
- Pinch kosher salt
- 2 cups chicken stock

1. In a medium heavy skillet or Dutch oven over high heat, add oil. Add cabbage and lightly brown. Season with salt.
2. Add chicken stock and simmer until tender, about 20 to 30 minutes.

EARL GREY MADELEINES

MAKES 24

You will need a madeleine pan (or two) for these soft cake-like cookies. Madeleine pans have shell-shaped molds and are available at most cookware shops. Chef Spence likes to dunk the madeleines into homemade pear compote (recipe follows).

- 10 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons Earl Grey tea leaves
- 1 1/2 cups flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- Pinch salt
- 4 eggs
- 2/3 cup sugar
- Zest of 1 lemon, finely chopped
- 4 tablespoons buckwheat honey or other strong honey
- 4 teaspoons vanilla extract
- Confectioners' sugar, for dusting cookies



1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Butter and flour 2 madeleine pans, which will make 24 small cookies. If you only have 1 pan, work in batches.
2. In a small saucepan, melt butter. Add tea leaves and stir to combine. Allow to steep 15 minutes, then strain. Discard tea and reserve butter.
3. In a medium bowl, stir flour, baking powder and salt together.
4. In bowl of a standing mixer (or using a hand mixer), beat eggs, sugar and lemon zest until thick and light.
5. Beat in dry ingredients, honey, vanilla and strained butter, until well combined.
6. Spoon batter into prepared molds and bake about 13 minutes, until golden and firm to touch. Sprinkle with confectioners' sugar while still hot and serve with pear compote, if desired.

PEAR COMPOTE

MAKES 2 TO 3 CUPS

- 1 quart cider
 - 1 vanilla bean, split
 - 5 pounds Bartlett pears, peeled, cored and diced
 - Pinch salt
1. In a large, heavy pot on medium-high heat, bring cider and vanilla bean to a boil. Reduce heat to medium and add pears and salt.
 2. Simmer pears until very tender and slightly mushy, about 30 minutes. Cool. Refrigerate if not using immediately and use within 1 week.