



# THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

## 27 September 2007

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This morning while drinking my tea and trying to convince myself that at any moment the desire to crawl back into bed and stay there until the snow comes would pass, I picked up a recent issue of *Gourmet*. Flipping through the ads for cruises, luxury cars and Swiss watches, I happened to notice a description of a dish cooked up by Michel Richard, a top Washington chef: a sampler of four egg creations made of scallops, cheese, gelatin and yellow beets. This being the age of ironic post-modern cooking, the one ingredient the dish naturally did not contain is eggs. Very witty.

Chefs are busy throughout the land making things appear to be something else and deconstructing dishes. Strips of squid and shaved beet stand in for noodles. Swordfish is butchered and presented like a lamb chop. Caesar salad is pulled apart and reconstructed as an anchovy fillet in a panko crust with lemon sorbet and a few drop of pureed romaine. Foie gras becomes foam and a little chemistry set fun makes liquids into solids.

I more or less understand how this comes to pass. It is not simply a question of some cultural-culinary moment arriving. Which is an academic way of saying this sort of cooking is not just a fad, though that certainly has a lot to do with it. Chefs seem to be particularly prone to fads (more so, even, than their fellow entertainers in Hollywood). Dishes and ingredients and cooking methods spread from kitchen to kitchen at a speed that would make a virus envious. Fusion, yuzu, sous vide, foam, short ribs, micro greens, veal cheeks, organ meats: a chef in Soho simply has to think of them and they appear on menus from Madison Avenue to Flatbush Avenue. A cultural epidemiologist would find restaurants fertile ground for study.

But serious chefs are not just busy copying their peers in an anxious effort to gain customers and credibility. They are also a naturally restless lot, a bunch of thrill-seekers. They bore easily. They seek out new tastes and ways of working with food to keep the job interesting. If they hear about a way to turn beef consume into ziti or to spin olive oil coils, if they find out about a weird citrus fruit, if a rumor reaches them about an oven that can roast a chicken in twelve minutes, they want to try it.

Modern American chefs are also on average more knowledgeable than their predecessors. They are aware of far more possibilities. More and better ingredients are available, and the same is true for information. With all those exciting new possibilities, chefs are bound to start trying out new things.

And then there are modern eaters. Even as the average American meal has gotten worse—grown (if it's grown at all) in deteriorating conditions and processed to the point of being poisonous—a growing number of people are becoming food fanatics, obsessed by the quality of their olive oil and the relative merits of Tahitian and Mexican vanilla. They know about cuisines that nobody in this country had ever contemplated twenty years ago. Who ate Cambodian food in the 1980's? (Well, Cambodians, probably, but they don't count.) And they know about chefs. They go to restaurants to be wowed, to be offered dishes they cannot make at home, dishes they would not have thought of even if they could cook them, sometimes even dishes nobody should have thought of, let alone cooked (cubes of steamed potato injected with strong coffee?). In order to satisfy these eaters, chefs have to innovate, amuse, astound, confound, dumbfound.

It is not surprise then, given all this, that a chef like Michel Richard would turn his considerable skills to making “egg” dishes out of shellfish and roots. And in many ways the fact that he does is a good thing. It is a symptom of our increasing awareness of the rest of the world, never a strong point of American culture. It is a sign that we are thinking about what we eat, and giving

## **This week's share: Arugula, Bok choy, Cabbage, Carrots, Garlic, Lettuce, Onions, Peppers, Hot peppers, Potatoes, Tomatoes, Winter Squash, Basil, Rosemary**

careful though to that is increasingly important given the way most of our food is grown and prepared. And it suggests that we recognize that food can be serious and playful at the same time, which is a healthy attitude to take towards just about anything.

And yet, I cannot get over a sense of uneasiness about this clever dish. In part, the growing divide between this sort of cooking and what most people eat (and between the people who eat this food and most people) unsettles me. It is not that people who care about food ought to eat badly in sympathy with the hordes of fast food consumers. But I would like to see more evidence that they care not just about the niceties of each bite they take, but about how we all eat. Reading about these increasingly esoteric, precious concoctions does not cause me to believe that is happening.

I have also always been bothered by fussiness in food. I appreciate serious effort in the kitchen. But I do not take much pleasure from dishes that exist in large part to demonstrate to me just how many people worked for hours to make sure that my garnishes were cut just so, my plate dotted precisely with uselessly small dabs of colorful sauces, my food arranged in soaring baroque configurations. It just makes me think that they should either have gotten off work sooner or spent more time on some task related to flavor.

Plus I cannot really get excited about someone going to great lengths to invent "eggs." Sure, it's clever, but it sounds more like a gimmick than an actual idea. We are supposed to exclaim over the chef's sly wit. But all he has done is imitate an egg, and somehow that does not seem so clever after you have watched chickens, no geniuses to be sure, turn out the real things day after day without giving it a thought.

If you want, you can play around with these vegetables and see what they can become with a lot of effort, some imagination and a small collection of odd chemicals (if you really want to play with your food take a look at [texturasebulli.com](http://texturasebulli.com), which gives a nice recipe for spherical tea ravioli). But I think there is a lot to be said for enjoying them more or less as they come from the fields. A lettuce and arugula salad with a lemon dressing (olive oil, lemon juice, mustard, salt and lots of peppers) may not earn you a reputation as a great innovator, but it tastes good. So do chunks of potatoes roasted with garlic, rosemary, salt and pepper in olive oil at 400 degrees until the outsides are crisp and brown. And winter squash baked whole until soft and pureed with a bit of cream and a little grated nutmeg. And steamed bok choy. And tomato, onion and basil salad. And cabbage-carrot slaw. And hot peppers.

I suspect I lost a few of you on that last one. But here is something relatively easy and definitely tasty you can do with all these hot peppers: make hot sauce. I do not really have a recipe but I can give you a rough idea of what I do. Puree as many hot peppers as you can stand (I usually use 8-10 habaneros) with an onion, two cloves garlic, a chunk of fresh ginger and some tropical fruit (a pineapple, a couple of ripe mangos or papayas). Put the puree in a heavy pot with about a cup each of brown sugar and vinegar (I use cider vinegar), salt, and ground black pepper, allspice clove and nutmeg (sometimes I add some soy sauce) and heat the mixture slowly to a boil, stirring to make sure the ingredients are well mixed. Continue to cook the sauce until it has darkened and thickened noticeably and put in sterilized jars (it fills about three half pint jars). Now you have an excellent hot sauce that will last you all year. Or, if you don't like hot food, gifts for three friends who do. If you cannot quite follow my directions come to the open house on October 7<sup>th</sup> and I will show you how to make the stuff. And once it is done we can turn it into hot sauce air and hot sauce caviar and hot sauce powder and, who knows, maybe even eggs.