

Each issue of La Toque profiles a member of our Chefs' Council and describes how his or her training and experience combine to form a resource rich with creative ideas for our clients.

P R O F I L E

Craig Stoll

Owner/Chef Delfina



Here's to Craig!

Years ago, Craig brought a simple dish of baked white beans to a Chefs' Council hands-on session. Those beans redefined white beans for everyone who tasted them,

raising them to the level of luxurious indulgence. The secret, confided Craig, was long, slow cooking in lots of very good olive oil. Those trademarks—simplicity and quality ingredients—continue to distinguish his cooking. In February 2000 the San Francisco Chronicle called Delfina, Craig's and Anne Spencer's restaurant, "the best neighborhood Italian restaurant to open in the past three years." The dining public agrees and packs the sleek yellow room nightly as it has since Delfina opened in November 1998.

Stoll and Spencer may look young but between them they share over thirty years of experience in the top ranks of San Francisco restaurants. For two years running Delfina has been elected to the Chronicle newspaper's "Top 100 Bay Area Restaurants". In the February 2000 issue of Gourmet, restaurant critic Caroline Bates writes: "Stoll seems to excel at almost everything, from a meaty Wolfe Ranch quail with creamy polenta and sweet figs to chocolate-sauced profiteroles oozing coffee ice cream."

First Impressions

Born in 1965 in New York City, Stoll's earliest vivid food memory is, "The smell of the sacks of roasted coffee beans in the back of Zabar's on Manhattan's Upper West Side. I started working in restaurants when I was fifteen and then went to the CIA in Hyde Park, graduating in 1985. To learn the business of restaurants, I enrolled in the hospitality program at Florida International University in Miami and graduated in the late '80s."

Go West Young Man

"I moved to San Francisco, the promised land of food, in 1988 to work with Bradley Ogden (also of our Chefs' Council) at Campton Place. Arnold Rossman, George Morrone, Chris Majer, and Jan Birnbaum (all subsequently star Bay Area chefs) were at Campton Place while I was there."

The Pivotal Experience

"In 1994 while at Splendido, I won a scholarship to Italy from the International Culinary Institute for Foreigners.



The Tuscan landscape, full of inspiration and the makings for some of the world's finest flavors.

For three months in Torino in the Piemonte region, we attended lectures and demonstrations by chefs from all over the country. In the evenings and on weekends, we took field trips, for instance, to see how Parmesan and prosciutto are made." "The second half of the program was a three-month internship. I arranged to work at Da Delfina in Artimino, a small town outside Florence. The owner, Carlo Cioni, is known as 'The Authority' on Tuscan cuisine. All the ingredients come from the restaurant's garden or from the surrounding woods. It was there that I really saw the soul of Tuscan food. Our restaurant is named in honor of Da Delfina."

A Neighborhood Restaurant

"The most important part of the Delfina story is meeting Anne Spencer. In her I found a front-of-the-house partner who had the same passion and energy as I did and who shared the same dream of opening a restaurant. Annie and I

wanted to open the kind of place we look for ourselves when we go out—a casual, inexpensive, warm, personal place that provides a great meal and service without a lot of overhead."

A Napkin Notice

"Annie and I walked through every restaurant space that was advertised. We couldn't get a loan and potential investors vanished. Then one day we stopped to see the owner of the new Bi Rite on 18th Street on the edge of the Mission

district. He led us a few doors down to show us what he'd found: a napkin taped to the inside of a café door saying, 'Restaurant for sale.' Little did we know that we needed two-inch gas lines installed, a better water supply, and that there was no heat. Then our loan fell through. Luckily, a friend helped us find an SBA loan. With it, and our stacks of credit cards all maxed out, we opened. A few months later, the thrift shop next door went out of business and we decided to expand. When we opened we had just 35 seats and eight burners in the kitchen. Now, we have 75 or 80 seats, a wood-fired oven, bar, counter seating, more room in the kitchen and a wine room above the restaurant."

Restaurants with Soul

"I do think independent restaurants with an emphasis on food and service are a trend. People want 'realness', to know someone is at home in the restaurants they patronize. Annie and I wanted to be directly in touch with our customers, cooking for them, serving them ourselves, and developing relationships with them."



Mediterranean is Here to Stay

"Mediterranean ingredients are so much a part of what we are here in California and the Bay Area. Our customers perceive Delfina as an Italian restaurant, though we are not strictly Italian. People love Italian food and I think they always will."

Food That Tastes Like What It Is

"My cooking is not about how creative I can be but how to show off ingredients. In every dish, I try to elicit the flavor of the primary ingredient. Whatever I add will enhance the primary ingredient. I don't like to add lots of supplementary flavors but use just two or three. Plus I'll work with texture."

"For instance, for our crab salad we buy the best crab we can find which means live crab that we cook and pick ourselves. It's dressed simply with salt, pepper, olive oil and fresh chives. This winter, we served the crab on endive and grapefruit sections tossed with a champagne vinaigrette. Our roast chicken is about chicken. We brine it for depth of flavor and a moist, tender texture, then roast it, and serve it with a chicken jus and some sauteed shiitake mushrooms. That's it. Mashed potatoes do come with the dish but are served on a separate plate."

The Classics

"I like to take classic dishes and work with them. Many classic dishes became menu cliches, I think, because restaurants began using poor quality ingredients and preparing them poorly. For instance, the fish monger told me he had fresh petrale sole so, we did a sole meunière. We didn't call it that, but that's what it was. We dredged the fish in flour, sauteed it in olive oil and butter and added a few capers, a squeeze of lemon, and some chopped parsley. For me, the real test is to take these familiar dishes and prepare them beautifully."

Availability and Seasonality

"The availability of an ingredient will inspire a dish and the season inspires what will be served along with it. Our pork loin doesn't sound sexy but tastes like a revelation. It tastes of itself. None of the flavors are masked. We brine it in a



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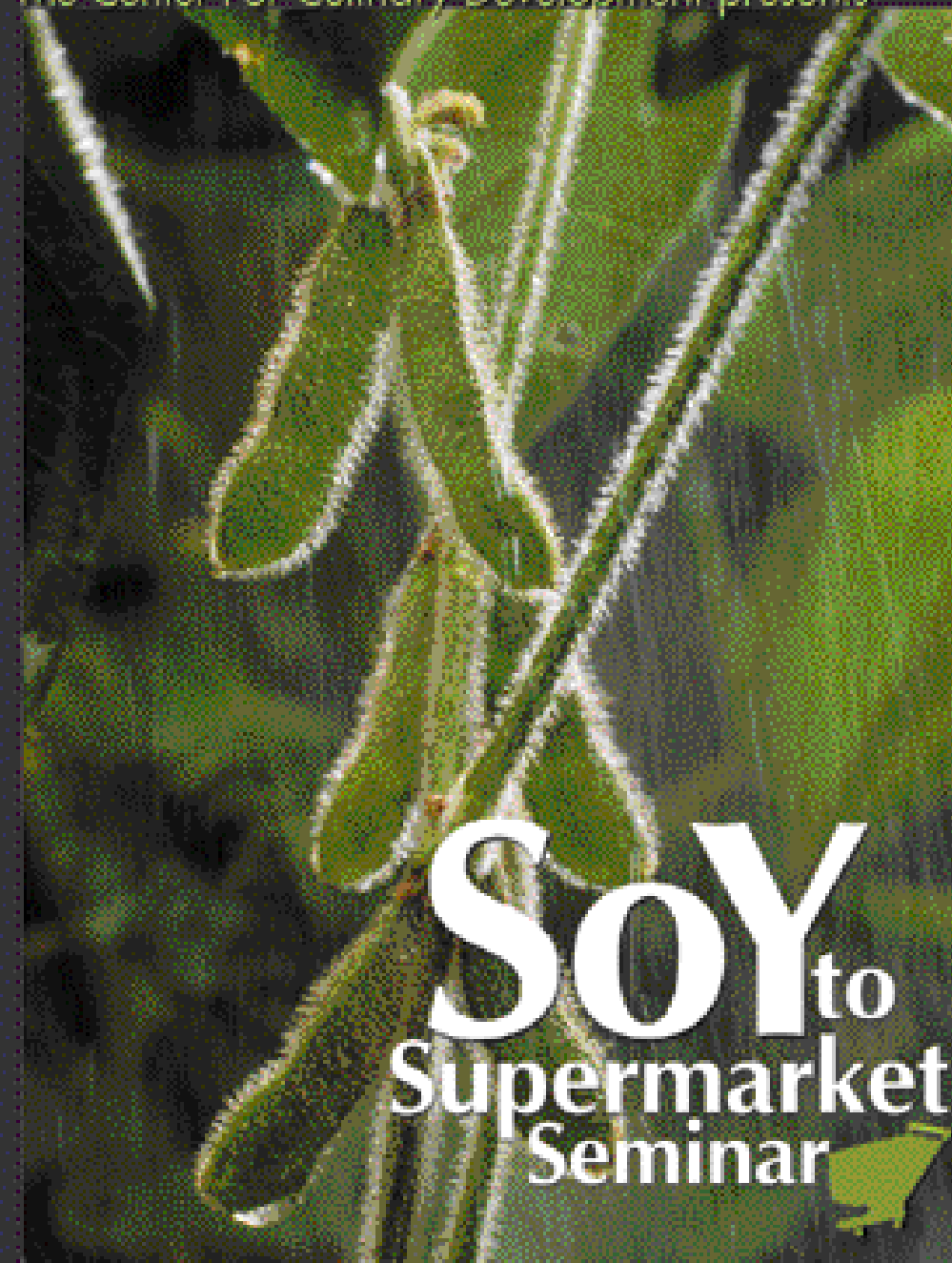
combination of sugar, salt, water, juniper, allspice, bay leaf, thyme, peppercorns, and garlic. Then roast it and serve it with a pork jus with blood oranges."

What's All the Fuss?

Delfina stretches the definition of a neighborhood restaurant. Foodies come from all over the city and reservations can be hard to get. "We did not open Delfina to be in the news though the press has been huge," says Craig. "It keeps the seats full and that's a real value. But what makes me happiest is that people love what we do." 📧

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