

VALLEY BITES

BY PAMELA HAMILTON

I hope you enjoy this issue's focus on food writing and cookbooks as much as I did.

The article on M. F. K. Fisher was especially apropos, as my foodie book club is reading her classic *The Gastronomical Me* this month. In these days of media "food porn" it's somewhat shocking to note that Fisher's revels in the sensual pleasures of gastronomy were considered outré for her times. Today her luscious descriptions would hardly merit a batted eye.

My friends know that I have a not-so-secret vice. It's my ever expanding 1,300-volume food and cookbook collection. While my husband has perfected the art of removing one book for every new addition to his library, I cling to all but the most hapless volumes that have ever crossed my threshold. Despite periodic attempts at organization, the books tumble from my nightstand, teeter in haphazard stacks atop my overflowing bookshelves and threaten to invade and overrun my careless piles of cooking magazines.

I'm a hungry and omnivorous reader. And while I never follow a recipe exactly as printed, I greedily seek inspiration from everything from a vintage flea market community cookbook to the latest, sleekest Ferran Adria beautifully bound multimedia extravaganza.

It's a special pleasure, however, when I discover a book that speaks to our environment here in Arizona and the Southwest, so I feel doubly blessed to have discovered two new regional gems. The books are even complementary, with one focused on vegetables and seafood and the other brimming with wonderful meat and game dishes.

The first discovery was *Cooking with the Seasons at Rancho La Puerta* (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 2008) by Deborah Szekely and Deborah M. Schneider with Chef Jesús González. Chef González, who teaches at Rancho La Puerta's cooking school, La Cocina Que Canta, was in Phoenix recently as part of an exchange with local teacher Barbara Fenzl. Fenzl spent a week at the Rancho La Puerta spa in Tecate, Mexico, and

taught cooking classes, and then Chef González came to Phoenix and Fenzl's Les Gourmettes Cooking School to return the favor.

Although Barbara says she's "not really a spa person," she called her visit to Rancho La Puerta magical and is already planning a return visit with her husband. While he was in Phoenix, Chef González prepared a seasonal menu that was light on the salt, heavy on the herbs and filled with pure flavors from the organic ingredients (much like most of the recipes in the cookbook). For dessert he offered a quince tart, a Mexican fruit that I think is highly underrated and underutilized here in Phoenix.

As you know, I'm a big fan of Chef John Sharpe and have been eagerly awaiting the debut of his *La Posada's Turquoise Room Cookbook* (JPS Desert Oasis, 2008), my second regional cookbook discovery.

Many of my favorites from the restaurant are in the lavish, color photograph-laden book, including the corn maiden breakfast, signature corn and bean soup, churro lamb sampler and prickly pear bread pudding. Background is also provided on La Posada, its history with the Harvey company and Chef Sharpe's culinary philosophy.

One of the pleasures of living in the Valley is that we eat ice cream in the winter. A friend of mine steered me to **Sweet Republic** (9160 E. Shea Blvd., Scottsdale; sweetrepublic.com) for its small-batch, local-ingredient-inspired, often quirky flavors. The flavors change daily, but keep an eye out for salted butter caramel and coconut. For the adventurous, basil lime and the cheese course duo (a pairing of Roquefort blue cheese and local Medjool dates) are worthy of a taste.

Another sweet treat that I've been very fond of recently is **Simply Bread's** chocolate baguette (2117 N. 24th Street, Phoenix; simplybread.com). Place thick slices in the toaster oven for just enough time to slightly melt the chocolate and you've got a perfect breakfast (or dessert.) On my next visit I'm going to purchase a second baguette for a decadent bread pudding and pick up a loaf of Simply Bread's special orange anise holiday bread.

