

UNTERMAN ON FOOD

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Restaurants

Cafe de la Presse

352 Grant Avenue (at Bush),
San Francisco 415-398-2680
Hours: Monday through Friday 7 a.m.
to 10:30 p.m., Saturday and Sunday
8 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.

Moderate

San Francisco's French quarter stretches along a few blocks of Bush Street and a couple of nearby alleys, Claude and Belden. On Bastille Day, the sidewalks and bistros overflow with noisy celebrants raising glasses as fast as they can. The heart of the action is the corner of Bush and Grant where Cafe de la Presse has been serving European tourists and the city's francophiles for a dozen years. Recently, Laurent Manrique and the Aqua group took over the cafe and the space next door and transformed them into a bistro that would be at home on the Left Bank.

On sunny days the French wicker sidewalk tables and chairs are full with people having cafe au lait and croissants and reading French newspapers. The bar inside by the magazine racks attracts the traveler who wants a glass of pastis and a luscious toasted baguette spread with warm goat cheese, tomato confit, niçoise olives and pinenuts (\$6). You'll find me in the peach-hued dining room admiring the massive country table in the center, which is laden with flowers, bread and desserts, trying to decide which French comfort dish to order. Manrique and his crew know how to hurt a girl.

I returned to Cafe de la Presse two nights in a row so that I could order all the dishes I had to have. I ate my way through a satisfying *salade aux lardons* (\$12), a tangle of *frisée* tossed with little cubes of bacon, croutons and a warm, runny poached egg; a crock of classic, naturally sweet onion soup with its raft of melted cheese on a crouton (\$8); and a mound of bracing, lemony, raw salmon tartare (\$12), wreathed by tiny french beans coated in mustardy cream. My dining companion and I shared a demure little *tarte flambé provençale* (\$8), a crisp, thin round of

pastry juicily topped with tomatoes, basil and black olives held in place by melted gruyere. I can't imagine eating here and not ordering one of these stunning savory galettes.

On night two, the menu held strong, delivering two homey starters that surprised: silky, deep-flavored lentil soup (\$9) and, best of all, three plump sardines preserved in olive oil and served with toasts and three little dishes of condiments: butter, tapenade and conserved lemon peel in olive oil. I spread some of each on a toast, plunked one of the exceptionally mild sardines on top and ate with enormous pleasure.

Manrique comes from Gascony, and he really knows how to give a duck leg, slowly cooked in duck fat, a magnificently crackling skin and velvety flesh (\$21). Roast chicken (\$19) and bavette steak with crisp, thin fries (\$23), probably the most often ordered bistro fare, are not the most impressive dishes on the menu here. Try the *lotte à la marseillaise* (\$20), a stack of monkfish slices, whole sun-dried roma tomatoes, baby leeks, wedges of fennel, olives and fingerling potatoes that are moistened by saffron-scented juices at the

bottom of the bowl, so rich that the toasts and saffron mayonnaise served on the side are hardly needed.

A *crème caramel* (\$7) in a thick glass jar with a layer of caramel at the bottom is second only to irresistible profiteroles filled with hazelnut ice cream (\$7) and draped in warm chocolate sauce.

Uncomplicated French wines go perfectly with this food, though a \$19 Beaujolais was too thin and acidic. A \$29 Chapoutier Rhone did the trick.

This sidewalk cafe and bistro, so strategically placed downtown, has now become a destination in its own right.

Restaurants

Imperial Tea Court

Ferry Building Marketplace,
San Francisco 415-544-9830
www.imperialtea.com
Hours: Monday through Friday 10 a.m.
to 6 p.m., Saturday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Inexpensive

A visit to the Imperial Tea Court, a peaceful enclave of traditional Chinese furniture, hanging lanterns and birdcages in the bustling Ferry Building Marketplace, is about personal restoration. When you sit down at one of the dark cherrywood tables on a square-seated, straight-backed Chinese chair, you enter a different reality, one already skewed by the strange sensation of being indoors but feeling as if you are in an outdoor cafe. If you choose a table near the tea shrine at the entry, you can watch the indoor street life pass by in the sky-lit hallway of the Ferry Building.

And when the waiter preparing to take your order asks how you're feeling, you know that this is no ordinary dining experience.

"She has a cold," I told him, indicating my pal, the mother of three young children freshly infected from the new school year.

"May I ask your symptoms?" he said.

"A cough, stuffy nose, the usual," she said. He delved further, much further, asking for texture, color, consistency. You wish your family physician were as thorough. He mulled all this over for a moment and then recommended a mix of chrysanthemum and white teas to loosen up the nose, sooth the cough and moisten the membranes.

I hankered for green tea and he suggested a green oolong, asking if I preferred one that smelled of orchids or of vanilla. Since I'm familiar with the elusive perfume of orchids from my husband's now defunct collection (infestation via plants purchased from Berkeley's outdoor botanical garden), I opted for that one. And since we were having tea lunch, I suggested pu-erh, a strong black tea that goes well with food, for our third dining companion.

He soon brought over a thick bronze tray with a punctured top, a metal teapot of hot water and three handleless porcelain tea cups resting on saucers with lids. He made us smell each of the dry tea in the cups first. Then he had us smell them after the water had released their fragrances. The smoky, dry pu-erh smelled like rain on the soil; the budlike green oolong actually captured the mysterious floral sweetness of orchids and the chrysanthemum-white blend struck me as metallic and no-nonsense. Our waiter showed us how to drink the tea by holding the saucer and cup with the left hand, moving the lid just bit with our right to allow for a slit through which we could sip the infused tea without the leaves. If the tea in your beautiful print cup became too strong, you could drain it into the tray and add more water from the pot. The whole process was quite elegant. I could see how pleasantly an afternoon could be spent sipping and refilling.

But we had lunch to eat and indeed, a small selection of handmade dumplings with pure fillings are worth a visit by themselves. Dragon Well dumplings (\$7.50) actually have bits of finely ground

green tea mixed into an almost creamy, natural pork filling with chives. My only objection is that a jamlike sweet and sour dipping sauce was too sweet. Tea broth wontons (\$6) are pure pork in a tea-perfumed broth with bits of tea leaves and scallions—an exciting yet comforting combination. On a dim sum sampler platter (\$6.50) the high-quality pork also makes for juicy, exquisite siu mai, noodle-wrapped steamed dumplings; har gow, shrimp dumplings have sweet, real shrimp flavor; and best of all are the luscious, moist vegetarian spring rolls with their shatteringly crisp wrappers, well worth ordering a la carte (\$3).

If you want to prolong your time at the table, have some peanut cookies (\$2) for dessert, thick, crumbly nuggets that are delicately sweet.

What makes these dumplings so unique is their homey style and the purity of the ingredients that go into them. Considering that the teahouse experience is meant to be healthful to mind and body as well as entertaining, the food here is exactly right.

Restaurants

Jack Falstaff

598 2nd Street, San Francisco
415-836-9239 www.plumpjack.com
Hours: lunch Monday through Friday
11:30 to 2 p.m.; dinner Sunday
through Thursday 5:30 to 10 p.m.,
Friday and Saturday 5:30 to 11 p.m.
Very Expensive

Chef James Ormsby's calling is the preparation of long- and slow-cooked meats. I still remember my first bite of his oxtails at Bruno's in the Mission, meat so tender and silky and full of intense flavor that I followed them to PlumpJack Cafe in Cow Hollow, where they were equally wonderful. Now he has put them on the menu in a different way at Jack Falstaff, the meat picked off the bone and stuffed into big plump agnolotti, pasta purses, scattered with artichokes, wild mushrooms, parmigiano and juices from the braising pan (\$26). I prefer his oxtails on the bone.

The stuffed pasta version is a little tough at the sealed edge, but that deep, winey, long-braised flavor still gets me.

The destination dish at Jack Falstaff happens to be slow-roasted Duroc pork shoulder (\$27), thick, buttery, smoky slices of pig, so expressive, so seductive, I can understand why observant Muslims and Jews are commanded to stay away from it. Ormsby's pork is the ultimate in culinary sensuality, especially with bright-flavored little brussels sprouts tossed with bacon, a tender square of potato and squash gratin with a crisp top and natural pork jus, gently scented with rosemary and garlic—a come-hither perfume.

As talented as Ormsby is with the long-cooked, he's equally inspired by the raw. I know this from his bar menu of ceviches and tartares at Matrix on Fillmore, the high-concept Cow Hollow lounge also owned by the PlumpJack group. At Jack Falstaff he builds a tuna tartare (\$12) with layers of avocado, cubed raw tuna and tiny orange segments, drawn together by extra-virgin olive oil and whispers of chile and citrus. Molded into a layered square and set on

a narrow rectangular ceramic slab, the presentation is as dramatic as the dish is subtle.

Even though I have eaten thousands of them, I loved Ormsby's perfectly dressed salad of baby red oak leaf lettuces (\$9) tossed with tart Pt. Reyes blue cheese, walnuts and apples. But I've never come across a delicate, custardy chicken-liver flan (\$10) with a real caramel topping—almost a dessert. The richness of salty, savory toasts of serrano ham, chopped olives and red-pepper aioli deserved its refreshing salad of fuyu persimmons and jewel-like pomegranate (\$10), a lively combo. And if you aren't up for the fully realized pork, try the Quinault River wild salmon (\$29), so perfectly cooked that it delivers similar satisfaction.

If coconut-Meyer Lemon (\$9) cake, an old-fashioned icebox cake from Ormsby's mother, is on the dessert menu, order it. I suspect his mom didn't serve it with Meyer lemon sorbet and fresh-grated coconut. The pumpkin cheesecake (\$9) with a nut crust satisfies primal dessert longings as well.

The Jack Falstaff outdoor space happens to be one of the most dramatic

in town, evoking the urbanity of New York instead of the pretty scenery of San Francisco. In a heated, glass-enclosed outdoor dining area nestled below a high ceiling, you sit surrounded by sidewalks, looming brick warehouses and wide trafficky streets. It's exciting, but so is the quilted, ultrasuede-upholstered walls and chairs in the cozy dining room inside. Man-about-town Stanlee Gatti did the design. He may have been subliminally influenced by the sensuality of Ormsby's cooking, as the room seems to embrace its inhabitants.

With its dramatic SOMA indoor-outdoor setting and dressy, voluptuous food, the Jack Falstaff experience doesn't come cheap. But ordering a couple of the interesting and very reasonably priced appetizers with a cocktail or a glass of wine from the far-ranging list is one way to approach this special-occasion place on an everyday budget.

Medicine New-Shojin Eatstation

161 Sutter Street, San Francisco
415-677-4405
www.medicinerestaurant.com
Hours: Monday through Friday 11:30
a.m. to 8 p.m.; tea and desserts only 2
to 5 p.m., Saturday 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Inexpensive

Devout practitioners of Zen Buddhism believe that all food should be healthful and restorative. They would feel right at home at Medicine, a new place that serves vegetarian, mostly organic, Kyoto-style temple fare in an aerie that seemingly floats above the Financial District. ¶ The sidewalk elevator on Sutter Street opens onto a glowing natural light-filled room with floor to ceiling windows that face some beautiful old downtown buildings directly across the street. Diners can sit at a long narrow table with benches right at these windows, to get an intimate view of architectural detail one never gets to see at street level,

or on benches at one of the long mahogany refectory tables lined up in the airy white room. This seating arrangement welcomes both the single diner and a group. No reservations are taken nor are they needed in what is essentially a dining hall, albeit a serene, elegantly handcrafted one.

The menu offers five smallish set meals and, additionally, 14 or so small plates featuring artisanal tofu in different forms—fresh cakes, silken custard and yubu, the slightly chewy skin that forms on the top of tofu as it is fermented—along with miso soups and Japanese vegetables. Much of the food is raw and unsauced and depends on a little grated radish, a few clippings of seaweed or a drop of soy sauce for seasoning. In fact, the flavor profile in this style of vegetarian cooking is so circumspect that it does not permit onions, garlic or any other member of the pungent lily family. Not intended to be indulgent, this food engages with its purity, texture and presentation. You must open up to it, clear away your preconceptions about what satisfies, and let these quiet dishes speak for themselves. They do. In fact, they sing because the ingredients are so fresh.

The menu does a decent job of helping

you order and the young wait staff are well versed in the makeup of the dishes.

The nigiri set (\$10.95) begins with a covered lacquered bowl of hot, creamy, coconutty white miso soup with chunks of carrot, daikon, burdock and toasted soy beans and accompanied by a tiny saucer of barely pickled vegetables. For \$1.25 extra, you can also get a cake of fresh tofu. This naked tofu has natural sweetness, a delicate crumbly texture and no aftertaste. Stop yourself from reaching for the smart soy sauce dispenser; if at all, you will want to add only a drop. You can also opt for shiraae (\$1), a salad of vegetables and fruit coated in a thick white miso-based dressing suggestive of mayonnaise. It's the most voluptuous dish on the menu.

When the pretty nigiri sushi comes, topped with wisps of shaved vegetables, tiny sprouts or a perfect leaf, you wonder how this could taste like anything. The platter includes pickled ginger but not wasabi—and none is smeared on the sushi. But each piece, as clean as it could possibly be, had lovely, distinctive flavor. Against a background of such purity, a paper-thin slice of mushroom becomes richly smoky and meaty, and each little kernel of corn

explodes with flavor. See for yourself.

The tempura set (\$10.95) performs the same magic with lightly battered and fried vegetables, as the sushi does with chilled ones. Order the tempura set if only to taste the corn tempura, and also the cold, clear, surprisingly smoky soup with the pickles that come with it. Both are thrilling.

For dessert have a chilled coconut cup (\$3.75), a refreshing, juicy, lightly thickened coconut milk soup with jello bits and toasted sesame seeds.

Ryuta Sakamoto and Tadayoshi Okana, the chefs behind this surprisingly simple if eloquent cooking, come from Kyoto where they cooked in a 16-seat family-owned restaurant called Kappa Sakamoto that specializes in kaiseki—highly seasonal ceremonial meals. They are not temple cooks but they understand the importance of pure ingredients. These skillful Japanese chefs call on the diner's sensitivity and awareness to make the pared-down culinary experience work. I must admit that a few tiny glasses of chilled junmai sake (\$8.95 for a 180 milliliter flask) may have helped to open my senses; but, true to the spirit of restraint here, a few thimblesfull felt like enough. I walked out of Medicine buoyant.

Restaurants

Louisiana Fried Chicken

2214 Broadway (between West Grand and 22nd), Oakland 510-836-7888
www.louisianachickenbayarea.com
Hours: Monday through Thursday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Friday 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sunday noon to 6 p.m.
Inexpensive

Chakay McDonald doesn't look like a woman who eats a lot of fried chicken. She's small, slender and perky with a big smile that does not hide her iron will to become the fried chicken queen of the East Bay. If the quality of food and service at her first branch of Louisiana Fried Chicken near downtown Oakland is any indication, Ms. McDonald is well on her way.

¶ The chicken is addictive—tender and juicy inside, spicy and crisp out. On my first visit, after demolishing a two-piece combo of thigh and leg (\$4.99) with an antidote of a side of flavorful braised greens seasoned with smoked

turkey neck, not pork, and a dash of vinegar. I went back to the counter to order a three-wing combo (\$5.79) with a side of macaroni and cheese. The uniformed woman actually gave me four wings because she thought one of the wings looked small. Well, one wing led to another and by the time I waddled out of Louisiana Fried Chicken, I was feeling like a stuffed goose myself.

Even my husband, fondly known as Chicken Bucket, who cooks fried chicken himself in a pressurized stove-top chicken fryer that instills fear in anyone within a 30-foot radius, thought the chicken was fabulous. He ate the lion's share of the macaroni side, a delicate, not overly cheesy, home-style casserole made with elbow macaroni (creamettes, for those of you old enough to remember) and condensed milk. I commandeered his refreshing, lightly dressed, crunchy coleslaw—too PC for him. The food

at Louisiana Fried Chicken tastes homemade—except that siren chicken, which should never be attempted at home.

McDonald buys the distinctive spice mix or the chicken from a chain by the same name in Los Angeles, but she developed most of the side dishes herself from family recipes. The one exception is lively dirty rice, aromatic herb-seasoned rice enriched with bits of meat that actually turn out to be vegetable protein. She buys this mix from the chain as well.

"I want to give working families a place to get homey food at good prices, with reasonably fast service," McDonald told me after my second visit. "We never run out of food, and we make everything from scratch. There aren't a lot of soul-food restaurants around, especially with quick service. I want to fill that need."

Judging by the line out the door at lunch, her idea has caught on. Customers grab tables inside beneath a wall-size

mural of her grandmother's house surrounded by green lawn and lush trees in Simsboro, Louisiana. Others take loaded plates outdoors to eat on a little sidewalk plaza. Of course, many of her regulars take food to go—especially parents picking up dinner after work.

I noticed that many women at lunch pair their fried chicken with the tasty collard greens and a flat, crusty oval of hot-water cornbread, traditional with greens. Though she doesn't exactly consider fried chicken diet food, McDonald uses a new lighter oil that is low in saturated fat, high in vitamin E, has no transfat and allows the spices to come through.

She has plans to open more stores. Next up will be the El Cerrito Plaza near the BART station of the same name in El Cerrito. Chicken this good deserves the exposure.

Travel



SICILY

From a high perch in the top row of the 2,500-year-old Greek amphitheater in Taormina, I gazed—as Goethe did—at the glittering Mediterranean far below and couldn't help rejoicing that nothing really changes on this island. For centuries Sicily has offered amazingly well-preserved Greek ruins in exquisite natural settings, explicit Roman mosaics, stupendously decorative Norman-Arabic monasteries, and baroque chapels.



The temple ruin at Taormina.

Travel



Sicily's erotic Roman mosaics.

But something has changed—prices. Since my last visit two and a half years ago, the cost of the same hotel room, dinner in the same restaurant and admission to museums and ancient sites has tripled. Still considered one of the poorer regions of Italy, and a world apart from the north, Sicily has adopted mainland price tags along with the euro.

Yet the food, especially in the best restaurants, is still a bargain compared to almost anywhere else in Italy or Europe. Developed out of poverty, the unique Sicilian diet makes a feast out of Mediterranean vegetables—eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, wild greens and fennel; breadcrumbs, sheep's milk cheese, chickpeas, pasta, couscous; inexpensive fish like sardines, smelt, once-local swordfish and tuna and cephalopods; occasional lamb; tiny shots of espresso stirred with equal amounts of sugar. At excellent restaurants that wel-

come foreign travelers, such as Sant'Andrea in Palermo and Don Camillo in Siracusa, the chefs draw on a wider range of ingredients and add a level of refinement while they stay true to the simple heart of the cuisine. Such was the case with two other restaurants in small villages, both of which deserve a special detour.

We were turned away three times by Al Duomo [Vico Ebrei, 11 (on the Piazza Duomo), Taormina; (39) 0942-625656; www.ristorantealduomo.it], a small, casual restaurant in a very touristy if lovely hillside town. We finally just showed up at 9 p.m. and were seated outside on the terrace, though the weather was considered to be unseasonably cold. For San Franciscans, it felt like Miami Beach.

The chefs at this beloved restaurant make traditional local dishes that taste better than any place else. An antipasti featured room-temperature egg-

plant parmigiana made with slices of the sweetest eggplant, creamy sheep's milk ricotta and a sparkling tomato sauce, the best version I have ever eaten. Also on the plate was a chunky caponata of gently sauteed eggplant, three kinds of peppers, pine nuts, capers and celery, all gently sauteed, the ingredients melded yet distinct—the best version of this dish I've ever tasted, as well. Almost chewy spaghetti (al dente is seriously applied in Sicily) tossed with tons of moist, pink, super-salty bottarga (cured tuna roe), parsley and olive oil appealed to my adventurous palate. Small, narrow penne with fried bits of zucchini, eggplant and a little tomato sauce turned into something sublime when the waiter spooned a mixture of toasted breadcrumbs and grated ricotta al forno, sundried ricotta, on top. Though vegetarian, it came off meaty, chewy, deep—an example of the miracle of cucina povera.

Travel



We devoured the succulent meat from braised lamb neck and juicy, pink patties of ground pork grilled on lemon leaves, two modest dishes that I long to eat again. For dessert we had fresh sheep's milk ricotta whipped with sugar—a free-form mousse—and a shimmering, refreshing blanc mange, molded almond milk, which had the richness of coconut milk.

The meal used the same ingredients over and over, yet every

dish tasted new. I adored little, casual Al Duomo. I could eat there every night. With a EUR 30 bottle of Sicilian red from vineyards planted on looming Mt. Etna; two glasses of moscato, a raisiny, aromatic local dessert wine that completed the desserts; and a bottle of water, this meal came to EUR 113 (about \$150) including tip.

Many consider Duomo [via Capitano Boccheire, 31, in Ragusa Ibla; (39) 0932-651265;

www.ristoranteduomo.it], to be the best restaurant in Sicily. It's fancier than Al Duomo, though located in a less fancy inland hill town, Ragusa Ibla, where most of the buildings are carved out of the side of a limestone mountain. Duomo is in a quaint village house. The walls of the parlor-like dining rooms are covered in fabric, and the tables are draped with layers of material. But the cooking of Ciccio Sultano is cutting edge, brilliant and refined and



View at Ragusa, Sicily, Italy.

Travel



unmistakeably of the place. A warm seafood salad of squid, shrimp, octopus and cuttlefish on a “pizza,” a paper-thin chickpea wafer that melts into the shellfish juices and the dressing of fresh tomato puree enriched with a little fresh ricotta, sparkled, luscious and bright at the same time. I’ve never tasted anything like it. Nor have I ever encountered such a deep and vivacious squid-ink pasta tossed with seafood, the same kinds of seafood, in fact, as in the salad, along with broccoli stems. The chef is a poet in the language of local ingredients.

The composed formality of the main courses, separate components on big square plates, scared me until I tasted them. Again, authentic flavors ruled. On one plate, gamey, dark-meat chicken rolls were



stuffed with chicken livers. They sat next to a rice and potato cake that was crisp outside and creamy inside; slashes of a meat-enriched sauce of pureed beans pulled the two together. The ingredients were all very Sicilian and peasantry but creatively and elegantly presented. Another main-course plate brought nuggets of black pork (a succulent, flavorful breed of pig) and a black-pork chop stuffed with a filling of bread-crumbs, sheep’s milk cheese and tomatoes; a cake of pureed purple beans; a crisp and creamy potato cake in a cylindrical shape; and a dark brown sauce enriched with bitter chocolate. It all worked.

Our palates were refreshed by a chunky peach sorbet, just intensely flavored ripe peaches chopped up and frozen—fantastic—and then some inven-

tive desserts, like chewy black “gnocchi” made of boiled grape must moistened with cinnamon granita and almond milk. It tasted medieval and wonderful. Bite-size sweets followed—cinnamon gelatin, prickly pear jelly, almond and pistachio brittles with a bitter coffee edge, all in little gold foil cups.

Sultano, the chef behind this refined but daring food, is no amateur. He started cooking at age 5 and spent 20 years in professional kitchens in New York, Germany and Italy. But he’s a local boy who came home to this charming and mysterious hill town to open his own place. His partner, Angelo, looks like Jerry Garcia and has the gentle demeanor of a hippie and a nice command of English. The partnership is as surprising as the food.

above left: A cathedral in Palermo. Photo by Stephen Downes.
above right: Greek temple ruins at the archeological site of Selinunte in Sicily. Photo by Steve Geer.

Travel

Duomo is a special-occasion restaurant. Work up an appetite by walking up and down the steep hills and stairways of Ragusa and Ragusa Ibla, peering into churches and strolling through the public gardens. Lunch for two, consisting of three courses with wine, was EUR 135 (\$160). A meal at this level France would cost at least three times as much. ☞

Where to Stay:

In Taormina: the Hotel villa Belvedere [via Bagnoli Croce 79; (39) 0942-23791; www.villabelvedere.it], a charming turn-of-the-century three-story building set in descending gardens on a hillside, with a spectacularly positioned swimming pool that looks way, way down to the sea. Reserve months in advance to get a room with a view of the water. (Doubles start at \$215 with breakfast.)

In Ragusa Ibla, reserve in advance for one of the ten stunning hillside rooms at Locanda Don Serafina [via XI Febbraio, 15; (39) 0932-220065; www.locandadonserafino.it], where the walls are carved out of rock. You will be right in the center of the village and walking distance to the great Al Duomo. (Doubles start at \$170.)



A baroque balcony angel.

In Palermo, I highly recommend the Centrale Palace Hotel [corso Vittorio Emanuele 327; (39) 091-336666; www.centralepalacehotel.it], centrally located at the historic Quattro Canti (the four corners), near everything. The newly renovated rooms in this 18th-century palazzo are light and airy with luxurious marble bathrooms, and each double has an outdoor patio filled with potted palms. (Doubles start at \$215.)

Reading List for Any Visit to Sicily:

The Leopard, by the Count Lampedusa, which will come alive for you when you are on the island.

Sicilian Walks: Exploring the History and Culture of the Two Sicilies, by William J. Bonville (Mills & Sanderson, 1988) is a must. It’s out of print, so try to find a used one online. Carry it with you as you walk in Sicily. ☞



below left: Rock walls at Locanda Don Serafina, Ragusa Ibla.
below right: palazzo style at the Centrale Palace Hotel, Palermo.

A Handful of Seasonal Recipes

I am currently testing seasonal recipes for a small book, and I thought you might like to try some of them. Inspired by what I find at the farmers' markets—mostly Ferry Plaza on Tuesdays and Saturdays and the Civic Center market on Wednesdays—they are all very simple yet extremely tasty because most of the work

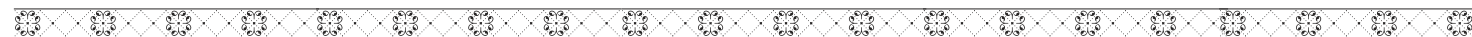
has been accomplished by the farmers and by you, who buy from them. Of course, the recipes work with produce from stores as well. The focus is on relatively quick, minimal fuss home cooking.

The way I try to eat at home these days is to fill at least half of the plate with vegetables.

When I lost two pounds after three weeks of unfettered piggishness in Turkey and Sicily, I realized that the diet made the difference. There I had eaten tons of vegetable dishes, olive oil as the only fat, yogurt, some feta, some sheep's milk cheese, lots of fish and a little lamb and chicken. I had mostly fruit for dessert and

a few sweets, and hardly any were made with butter.

This little sampling of recipes does include a pumpkin pie, which doesn't come close to fitting into the Mediterranean diet described above, but it's so good and easy that I had to tell you about it.



Broccoli With Anchovies

The anchovies in this broccoli dish add marvelous depth of flavor yet become invisible in the finished dish. You don't have to tell anyone that you used them. This broccoli is delicious cold the next day if you happen to have any left.

1 1/2 pound bunch of broccoli

4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil (Stonehouse California olive oil at Ferry Plaza Marketplace is buttery and affordable)

4 anchovies packed in olive oil, chopped

1 large or 2 small cloves of garlic, chopped

2 teaspoons kosher salt

1 pinch hot red chile flakes

1 1/2 cups water

You will need at least a 3-quart saucepan with a cover.

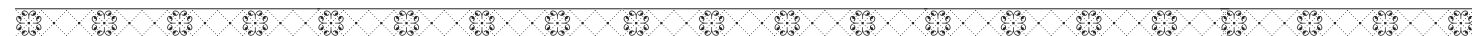
Cut the dark green flowers off the broccoli and separate into florets with a paring knife. Cut the bottom off the thick stalks and pare off the outer skin until you get to juicy white flesh. Cut the peeled stalks into half-inch

pieces. Put all of this into a bowl or colander.

Put olive oil, garlic, salt, pepper and anchovies into the pot. Cook over medium heat until the garlic just begins to turn golden. Then pour in the broccoli. Toss with a spoon for a few seconds and then add the water. Stir again. Bring to a boil. Cover and cook for 10 to 15 minutes on medium high heat, checking to make sure that the water does not boil away. Add a little more if the broccoli gets too dry. Cook until the broccoli is fork tender and olive green. You want to have only a little liquid, almost none at all, left at the end.

Cover with tin foil and puncture the foil to let out steam.

Bake for 20 minutes. Remove the foil and turn potatoes with a spatula, scraping the bottom. They will be tender but pale. Bake uncovered for 20 minutes more. Turn the potatoes and scrape under them again. Continue baking for 5 to 10 minutes more until potatoes are dark brown and crisp. Serve immediately. These potatoes are sublime hot from the oven. You must eat them all right then.



Crisp Roasted Potatoes

These are addictive. They will make your children, or just about anyone, love you.

2 pounds red creamer potatoes, scrubbed

8 inches of fresh rosemary branch

4 large cloves garlic, unpeeled and crushed with the side of a knife

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon, more or less, red chile flakes

You will need a cookie sheet with sides at least 14" x 18".

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Cut potatoes into halves if they are tiny, or into wedges, so that the thickest part of any piece is less than 1 inch. Toss them with the salt, pepper, olive oil and rosemary broken into two pieces. Lay them out in a single layer on the cookie sheet.



Tim's Baked Apples

You can go two ways on these. If you buy Rome Beauties from, say, DeVoto Farm, you will get lively flavor and melting texture but skin that separates from the flesh. If you use a harder apple like a Fuji, a Pink Lady or a New York Special from Schmitz, the apple will hold together but it won't be as soft.

4 Rome Beauty or other apples

1/4 cup brown sugar, packed

2 heaping tablespoons of raisins (I use Hamada's pint carton of mixed raisins)

1 tablespoon ground cinnamon

1 tablespoon butter

3/4 cup apple juice or water

2 tablespoons maple syrup (1/4 cup if you are using water)

Straus yogurt (optional) for serving

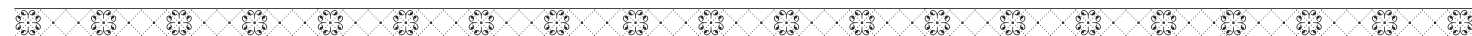
Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Use a baking pan, round or square, that just holds the apples.

Pare off a strip of skin around the top of the apples. Dig down with a knife and remove cores and seeds, excavating enough apple to make a half-inch-wide empty column and making sure you don't cut through the bottom. Place the apples in the baking pan.

In a small bowl mix the brown sugar, raisins and cinnamon, and stuff the mixture into the apples, pushing down to use all of it. Dot the tops with the butter.

Boil the apple juice or water with the maple syrup. Pour around the apples. Cover them loosely with foil and bake, 40 minutes for Rome Beauties and up to 1 hour for other apples, depending on size. Insert a paring knife into the top near the center. If the center is hard, continue cooking until tender. Remove from oven and baste the apples with the pan juices as they cool. I serve them with Straus yogurt, either nonfat or whole milk.



Old-Fashioned Pumpkin Pie

This version of pumpkin pie frees up an oven full of turkey. I prefer this soft custard to the firm texture of baked fillings. You can add more spice, or alter the mix of spices; for example, you could use freshly grated nutmeg, mace, allspice, powdered ginger and no cardamom. This recipe also calls for the flavorful and firmer butternut squash, a regular replacement for pumpkin.

1 butternut squash (over 1 pound to yield 1 1/2 cups of cooked squash)

1 1/2 cups heavy cream

1/2 cup brown sugar, packed

1/4 cup white sugar

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon clove

1/2 teaspoon cardamom

1-inch piece of fresh ginger, peeled

4 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla or 2 tablespoons dark rum

1 baked 9" piecrust (An admission: I use a frozen one made with butter.)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Cut the butternut squash in half lengthwise and scoop out seeds and string. Place cut side down on a baking pan and roast for about 45 minutes until the flesh is very tender. Let cool.

Put 1 1/2 cups of the squash in a food processor and puree. Then add the cream, sugars and dry spices. Grate the ginger over the processor so that the juice falls into the mixture. Scrape

the ginger pulp on the inside of the grater into the mix, but throw away the stringy part that is left in your hand. Lightly beat the eggs and add. Pulse the mixture until it is smooth and blended.

Pour mixture into a saucepan with a heavy bottom. I am iconoclastic here: You can spend hours stirring it over a double boiler or you can cook it directly over a medium flame, whisking vigorously the whole time until the mixture thickens (until you see the first bubble of a boil). This takes about five minutes. The mixture will be slightly grainy at this point, but don't worry. Let it cool a bit. Stir in vanilla or rum. Then put the mixture back into the clean processor and blend until smooth. Pour into the baked piecrust and cool completely in the refrigerator before cutting it, if you want it to set up.

Travel

Sicily in San Francisco

Vivande 2125 Fillmore Street,
San Francisco 415-346-4430
www.vivande.com

Luckily, we have restaurants in San Francisco where you can get a taste of Sicily. Vivande chef-owner Carlo Middione is Sicilian, and he offers some lovely, authentic dishes on his daily changing menu. His silken capunatina palermitana (\$8.50) can save you a trip to Palermo. Unlike the version at Al Duomo, his eggplant, onions, celery, tomatoes, capers and olives are cut small and form a scrumptiously integrated relish that you pile onto thin crostini. He makes an uptown version of a big deep-fried rice ball called arancino—a Palermitano street dish—filled with chicken, peas and pecorino cheese (\$9.50). His spaghetti with sardines from Monterey Bay, currants, pinenuts, fennel and saffron (\$16) proves that he can cook the best of Sicily right here. And Vivande's rare tuna steak encrusted with fennel seeds, accompanied with sweet and

sour cipollini onions (\$19.50) is better than similar dishes I had in Sicily. For dessert, the cannoli (\$6.95) have the requisite shatteringly crisp shell and creamy, barely sweetened filling—another trip saver. As at the best Sicilian restaurants, you can order a saucer of Sicilian extra-virgin olive oil (\$3) for pre-prandial dipping.

A working kitchen with a dining room in it, Vivande recently removed some of its deli cases to install counter seating and a small-plate wine-bar menu. At table or counter, you can get a full Sicilian experience with delicious Sicilian wines right in the heart of Pacific Heights.

A-16, 2355 Chestnut Street,
San Francisco 415-771-2216
www.a16sf.com

Down the hill in the Marina at A-16, chef Christof Hille reconstructs Sicilian dishes with typical insouciance. I can't say I'm wild about his version of caponata (\$11), with raw tomatoes, conserved tuna and big hunks of toasted

bread. His take on eggplant parmigiana (\$9), a thick layer of fresh ricotta sandwiched between slices of properly olive-oil drenched eggplant with a layer of cooked ham, works if you remove the ham. But his roasted lamb with garlic, herbs and lemon (\$21), a dish we had everywhere in Sicily, is unsurpassed by any of them. He uses young Napa Valley lamb cut into hunks with some bones (just as in Sicily), but he cooks it medium rare so that it stays delicate and juicy. The grill-marked pieces sit on a bed of wild arugula moistened by the most wonderful clear, natural juices.

Of course the wine selection from Campania and Sicily is as good as you can find anywhere, including southern Italy. The list is curated by Shelley Lindgren, who offers tastes of the ones she thinks you should have, as does the nice male bartender, if the bar is the only place where you can find a seat at this perpetually packed trattoria. ☞



Unterman on Food is published six times a year by Patricia Unterman, food writer for the *San Francisco Examiner*. Each issue consists of reviews and articles in edited form that have appeared in the *Examiner* or in other publications, plus other articles written exclusively for the newsletter. To subscribe, send a check for \$30 made out to **Unterman on Food, c/o Hayes Street Grill, 320 Hayes Street, San Francisco, CA 94102**