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Mushroom Mania

In which **Carol Kino** follows local artist Bruce Pearson into the kitchen on his quest to reduce mushrooms to their pure essence

When Bruce Pearson told me that his current favorite recipe involves boiling four pounds of mushrooms down to ten tiny tablespoons of rich, loamy black-brown essence, I wasn't really surprised. After all, the first time I saw his work, in "Faux," a group show at Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1994, mushrooms definitely sprang to mind.

With their sporelike Op shapes and fluorescent colors, Bruce's paintings reminded me of the psychedelic posters that you used to see all over the San Francisco Bay area, where both of us grew

Grilled Salmon with Mushroom Vinaigrette
from Le Bernardin Cook Book: Four-Star Simplicity

by Maguy Lecoze and Eric Ripert
(New York: Doubleday, 1998)
(makes 4 servings)

Eric: Cooking is a combination of taste, passion, and patience — most of it patience, as you'll see when you make

up. He built up their surfaces with Styrofoam, so that they seemed to mutate out from the wall, like a corkboard gone wild. Most were abstract, but a couple had words hidden in the design — a tactic borrowed from subliminal advertising and which he still uses in a more refined form today. Overall, the aesthetic was Art Nouveau on psilocybin.

Today, Bruce is known not just as a painter, but as one of Williamsburg's most ambitious home chefs. He started cooking in 1986, when he was working as a contractor, plugging away at painting, and living in a decrepit 3,000 square foot South Side loft. When I first visited him there, his ceiling had just sprung a leak, every surface seemed marinated in mold and grunge, and the air was thick with cat fur and Styrofoam flakes. But his amazingly elaborate dinner parties, to which he invited artists, curators, collectors, and other art world types — "whoever I was coming across that I thought was cool" — were already

this dish. The mushroom broth alone takes hours, but your taste buds will be rewarded, I promise.

4 pounds button mushrooms, cleaned
16 cups water
1/4 cup plus 1 teaspoon corn oil
3 tablespoons olive oil (not extra-virgin)
4 teaspoons good-quallity sherry vinegar
Fine sea salt, to taste
Freshly ground white pepper, to taste
4 (6-ounce) salmon fillets, as even thickness as possible
1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme
4 teaspoons chopped fresh Italian parsley

Special equipment:
Fine-mesh sieve
Immersion blender
Stovetop grill

1. Place the mushrooms in a large pot with the water. Bring to a boil. Lower the heat slightly and boil until reduced to 10 tablespoons, about 4 hours. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve, pressing firmly on the mushrooms to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard the solids. (The recipe can be made to this point up to several days ahead; store in the freezer.)

2. Place the mushroom broth in a small saucepan and bring to a boil over high heat. Whisking constantly, very slowly drip in 1/4 cup of corn oil. Remove from the heat, tilt the pan to one side, and whip with the immersion blender. Return to the heat and bring to a simmer. Remove from the hat and, whipping constantly with the blender, slowly drip in the olive oil. Add the vinegar and season generously with salt and pepper. (The recipe can be made to this point up to 2 hours ahead; keep the sauce at room temperature.)

3. Start a charcoal fire or heat a stovetop grill until very hot. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Drizzle the remaining teaspoon of corn au over the salmon and

rub it over the top. Season both sides of the salmon with salt and pepper. Sprinkle the thyme over the top. Place the salmon on the grill, top side down, until light grill marks show, about 20 seconds. Give the salmon a quarter turn to make cross-hatch grill marks. Put the salmon on a baking sheet, top side up, and place it in the oven for about 4 minutes, until a skewer inserted into the fish for 5 seconds feels barely warm when touched to your lip; the salmon will be rare.

4. Meanwhile, gently rewarm the sauce.

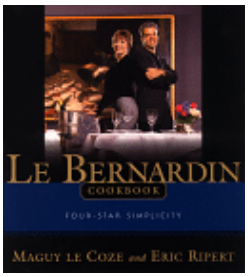
was cool — were already legendary. He was also known for a big annual potluck, which he threw on the roof of his building every Fourth of July.

Before he started cooking, says Bruce, he subsisted on yogurt, cereal and sandwiches — "basic bachelor fare." That all changed when a friend came to visit from Belgium, and was appalled by his eating habits. She showed him how to make a couple of simple dishes — Flanders stew (beef cooked in beer) and vegetable couscous. As a going-away present, she gave him a Wüsthof knife.

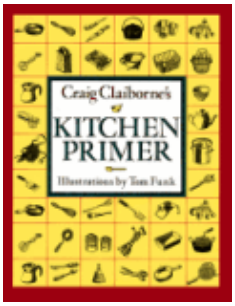
Even though his taste buds had woken up, though, Bruce still felt

at sea in the kitchen. So he got himself a copy of Craig Claiborne's classic Kitchen Primer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), a terrific beginner's cookbook that's now out of print, and taught himself how to chop, slice, and dice. (Weirdly enough, at about the same time, he started using an electrified hot wire to carve up Styrofoam for his

Stir in 3 teaspoons of parsley. Place the salmon in the center of 4 dinner plates and spoon the sauce around it. Sprinkle the remaining parsley over the sauce and serve immediately.

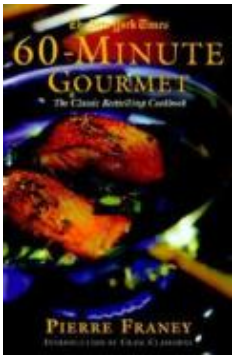


paintings — a tool that, like the knife, he's still using today.)

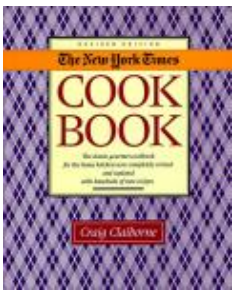


While mastering Claiborne's prep techniques, he also started to try out the recipes — hamburgers, French dressing, and even Eggs Benedict, for which he had to learn to make Béarnaise sauce. "I was, like, amazed by how good everything tasted," he says now. "Then I started getting ambitious."

Next came the Pierre Franey classic, "The 60-Minute Gourmet"

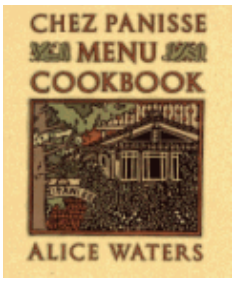


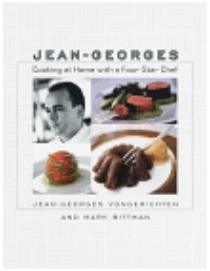
(New York: Times Books, 1979) — a compendium of quick, easy-to-make dinner dishes based on classical French techniques. Then he moved on to Craig Claiborne's "The New York Times Cookbook" (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). "I got really fascinated by the fact that you could take the same ingredients and alter them ever so slightly. By adding curry powder you'd get food that tasted Indian. And then, instead of thyme, you'd

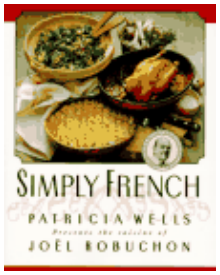


use oregano, and get Italian instead of French."

Here, a deus ex machina arrived in the form of another visiting friend: this one hailed from Berkeley, California, where Alice Waters was busy revolutionizing American food at her fabled restaurant Chez Panisse. When the friend got back to California, she sent him "The Chez Panisse Menu Cookbook" (New York: Random House, 1982) as a thank-you present. Bruce soon segued from French to California cuisine.







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At first, though, he was dismayed by Waiter's insistence on using fresh, locally grown ingredients. "It was really depressing, because I was reading how you're supposed to go to your garden and pick fresh herbs, and I was living on the South Side where things were incredibly desolate." The only locally-grown products that regularly appeared in his kitchen were the empty beer bottles and pieces of rotten fruit that people in the neighborhood enjoyed

lobbing through the windows.

One evening, he heard the sound of breaking glass and saw a raw chicken carcass hit the floor. But even though he was broke, Bruce by now had real standards where food was concerned — he didn't even consider trying to cook it.

Eventually, fresh herbs became easier to find in stores, at least in Manhattan. That was lucky, because Bruce had already started to cook for neighbors (not the chicken-throwing ones) and friends. "I found that it was really fun to invite friends over to eat, for them to bring nice wine, so you could just sit and drink and talk." For a while, he even considered becoming a chef. "But people that are serious are putting in 16 hour days, 6 days a week. I figured I'd be better off sticking it out as an artist."

In 1995, after his first solo show at Pierogi 2000, his career finally began to take off. But in 1998, the South Side dinner parties came to

a sudden end: the Williamsburg real estate market started to boom, the building he'd lived in for 17 1/2 years was sold to a developer, and Bruce was cruelly evicted from his loft. He moved into a small studio in Greenpoint where, for about a year, he didn't even have a stove. Then, in May 1999, came his second solo show at Ronald Feldman Gallery: while this was nice, careerwise, it didn't leave much time for cooking.

Luckily, last December, he finally moved into a real apartment on Grand Street with his girlfriend, poet and Ph.D. candidate Mónica de la Torre. He unpacked his black and white Mikasa china, they bought a long teak dining room table from R on Wythe Street, and the dinner parties started up again.

Right now, Bruce is hooked on cooking food by fashionable French chefs like Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Joel Robuchon. "They start with very simple

things, but they've figured out how to draw the maximum flavor out of what they use." But he's only rarely had the chance to eat at their restaurants. "I think one of the reasons I've learned to cook this stuff," he explains, "is because I can't afford it." When he's shopping locally, he goes to the Garden in Greenpoint. For special occasions, he buys in Manhattan — usually at the Garden of Eden on 14th Street or, if he's visiting galleries, at the Chelsea Market.

Curiously, when it comes to cooking, Bruce claims to be a paint by numbers kind of guy. "I found that basically if I can read something, I can make something." Yet when he cooked dinner for me recently, he did plenty of improvising.

Take his main course, centered around a recipe that incorporates the mushroom reduction I mentioned above. Even though the recipe calls for button mushrooms,

he chose varieties that were considerably more exotic — porcini, crimini, and shiitake. "If I had a substantial budget," he says, "I'd dip into the chanterelles, the morels, and the lobster, and all the other nice mushrooms that I can't afford."

The sauce is spiked with vinegar and pooled around salmon steaks. To cook the fish, you grill the steaks for one minute — Bruce used a barbecue on the rooftop of his new building — then briefly bake them. "The fish has a slight smokiness from putting it near the charcoal," he explains. "And then by finishing off in the oven, you get this kind of tender middle. So you have a certain sweetness with the salmon balanced with the herbiness of the mushroom reduction, and then the slight spike of the vinaigrette. It seems like it gives more layers of flavor than even the ingredients that were used." To serve with the fish, Bruce recommends a light red

wine.

That night, he also prepared asparagus, from Vongerichten's "Jean-Georges: Cooking at Home With a Four-Star Chef" (New York: Broadway Books, 1998). He blanched the stalks, browned them quickly in butter, and topped them with sautéed mushrooms and Parmesan cheese. Bruce served this dish on black plates, dusted with a confetti-like sprinkling of chives. But, though many of his guests remarked that the result greatly resembled a Jackson Pollock, "That's just the way they tell you to do it," he modestly demurred.

After a green salad, he served a deliciously bland vanilla ice cream draped in raspberry sauce. The ice cream recipe can be found in *Simply French* by Patricia Wells and Joel Robuchon (New York: Hearst Books, 1995). He created the sauce himself, by cooking

down fresh raspberries with sugar and lemon juice to taste, then straining the mixture through a sieve.

A successful recipe, Bruce explains, is "one that balances the complex and the simple — where all the ingredients can be tasted, and yet they add up to more than the sum of their parts."

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