

# A Delicious Revolution in the U.S.

## California Cuisine as a Lifestyle

Text and photos by Haruko Hagiwara Additional photos by Kenji Miura

Private farm of the French Laundry, a Napa Valley restaurant that serves new American cuisine

### What is California Cuisine?

Among those who live on the U.S. East Coast, where I now reside, few can explain what California Cuisine is. It was the culinary rage of the 1980s, and although they have heard about it, most have only a vague idea of what it is. There were restaurants offering what they called California Cuisine in Japan in the 1990s, so some in Japan also seem to be aware of it. However, their memory is usually nothing more than "Well, it was popular some ten years ago." Wikipedia says, "California Cuisine is a style of cuisine marked by an interest in fusion (integrating disparate cooking styles and ingredients) and in the use of freshly prepared local ingredients." Its characteristics are not conventional and heavy American-style meat-centered meals, but healthy, light dishes prepared with an abundance of vegetables. My own idea of a typical California Cuisine course might be as follows:

- ♪ Baby arugula salad with warm goat cheese
- ♪ Grilled lamb from an organic ranch in Marin County, served with coriander sauce, stir-fried and steamed rainbow chard, and roasted fennel and celery roots
- ♪ Plum tart and mulberry ice cream for dessert

The arugula is, of course, organic. And its baby leaves were picked at the local farm that very morning. In California Cuisine, most salads contain a rich variety of leaves, to



Fully-ripened strawberries go well with vinaigrette sauce.

which are added fruits such as oranges, strawberries, grapefruit, grapes, figs, persimmons and pears, and nuts such as almonds, walnuts and pistachios, as well as cheese. True California style is ensured by adding marinated or warmed

goat cheese, a specialty of Sonoma County, to the salad.

The cut of lamb for the main course is procured at a farm that specializes in pastured, grass-fed livestock.

The use of an open hearth grill and an open kitchen are two features of California Cuisine. Vegetables in season are all contracted from local organic farmers. Both chard and fennel are vegetables that are typical of California Cuisine. Kale, chard, and other hardy greens are stir-fried in a little butter or olive oil, and then covered with a lid to be braised. These dark-green leafy vegetables, with their slight bitterness, go well with meat dishes and are an imperative part of California Cuisine. The plums for dessert are also organically grown, and picked only when fully-ripened at the orchard. The tart and the ice cream are made on the day they are served.



Rainbow chard, grown pesticide-free

### The Trends of California Food Culture

We don't hear much about California Cuisine lately. Yet, since I now frequently visit California, I notice trends in California food culture that cannot be seen in the eastern U.S.

At restaurants in California, it has become the accepted practice to serve dishes using locally grown organic produce in season, meats from livestock that has been raised in a humane and sustainable manner, and sustainably-sourced seafood. In San Francisco, many visitors are surprised by the bustle of green markets at many locations in town and the enthusiasm of customers of all generations shopping there. Other sights include families tending to vegetables in vacant lots that have been turned into community gardens, and lines of people waiting to be served at popular bakeries and ice cream shops.

The most prominent representative of California Cuisine is Alice Waters, the proprietor of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. When looking at the path she has taken and the changes in Californian eating habits, I have to believe that California Cuisine is no longer a cuisine or taste that was a passing fashion, but a whole new way of living.



## Success of Chez Panisse

Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse in 1971 near her alma mater, the University of California, Berkeley. August 2011 marks its 40th year of business. She is referred to as the owner-chef of this nationally renowned restaurant (one that is featured in every tourist guidebook) although she has never received vocational training as a chef at any school or renowned restaurant. In the early years, the chefs at Chez Panisse were mostly amateurs with a love for cooking who went through stacks of cookbooks to find good recipes to build on. Despite this start, Chez Panisse was once ranked as America's best restaurant. Offering only prix fixe dinners of 3 courses and a salad, Alice created the menus after careful-



■ The open kitchen of Chez Panisse Café. Vegetables in season, such as fennel delivered that day, are displayed to catch the eye of customers as they enter the restaurant.

ly examining the available fresh ingredients that had been procured for that day from select sources. Although in the past she herself prepared dishes in the kitchen herself from time to time, Alice now tastes and provides strict instructions to her kitchen team. Thus the essence of Chez Panisse is maintained. The new taste she established created the foundation and imagery of California Cuisine. As her restaurant began to receive nationwide attention, chefs in San Francisco and Los Angeles began to feature similar dishes, using fresh ingredients as Chez Panisse did. In this way, this Bay Area cuisine came into bloom as a full-grown movement. Looking back on her own success, Alice Waters modestly suggests that she was in the right place at the right time. Certainly, all the conditions there were ripe to ensure her success, as we can see below.

### Haruko Hagiwara

Born in Yokohama, Japan, in 1946. After graduating from Asahigaoka High School in Nagoya, Japan, she moved to the U.S. to attend college. After graduating from the State University of New York, she got married and raised two children. She obtained an MBA at Rice University in Texas in 1985, and worked for a local bank in Houston, Texas. After becoming a Certified Public Accountant, she worked at the New York office of the accounting firm of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, where she became a director in 2002. Upon retirement in 2007, she started a writing career. Ms. Hagiwara authored *The American Food Culture—How It Has Evolved over the Past 30 Years*, translated *Alice Waters and Chez Panisse* by Thomas McNamee, and was Translator-in-Chief of Alice Waters' *The Art of Simple Food*, which is scheduled to be published in October 2011 by Shogakukan Inc. She currently resides in New York City.



### ● Abundant Ingredients

The climate of California is mild, with short winters, and this means a long growing season. It is a massive production area for vegetables and fruits, and it is not an exaggeration to say that California harvests enough fresh produce to feed the entire United States. Beyond farm products, California has an abundance of fresh oysters, mussels, shrimps, crabs, salmon, sardines, and other seafood along its extensive coastline. California is home to the country's finest wines as well. The 1980s were when California wines matured as premium wines and gained widespread popularity and respect. As Napa Valley and Sonoma County, which are especially famous for their wine production, are just an hour's drive north of Berkeley, this also worked favorably for Alice.

### ● An Encounter with European Food Culture

Another advantage for Chez Panisse was the unique nature of Berkeley, a university town. The University of California, Berkeley offers extensive graduate education, and has a great faculty of professors and researchers who are knowledgeable of foreign cultures and cuisines. The 1970s was also a time when Europe became an affordable destination for college students from the U.S. Many of them tasted delicious European cuisine and became gourmets.

Alice was one of these people.

### ● Cooperation from Hippies and Immigrants

A third advantage was that, when Chez Panisse was trying to find quality ingredients, there were many in northern California who had sympathy with its principles and responded to the restaurant's needs. This group of supporters included ex-hippies, naturalistic intellectuals who were getting bored with their studies, and immigrants who were intimately familiar with the genuine cuisine of their home countries. With the cooperation of these people, Chez Panisse was able to manage the daily procurement of ingredients, and prepare simple dishes that brought out their flavors to the fullest. In this environment, the "taste" of Chez Panisse was created and the foundation of California cuisine was established.

## The Search for Quality Ingredients

While Alice certainly started in favorable conditions, without her singular efforts would it have been possible for her to maintain a popular restaurant for forty long years, and come to be eventually called the "public face of California Cuisine" or the "mother of Slow Food?" Let's take a closer look at the path she has taken.

### ● The Age of Industrialized Food Production

Following the opening of the restaurant, Alice Waters appears to have driven her battered, old car around Berkeley every day in search of quality ingredients. While doing this,



she realized that America was quite different from France in terms of the infrastructure of food production.

America at that time was at the peak of frozen and industrialized food production. People ate out at either fast food restaurants or suit-and-tie restaurants that offered continental (French style) cuisine. When it came to a home-cooked meal, meat and potatoes were the standard. Soups were all out of a can. Vegetables were usually frozen. Salad comprised crispy but colorless iceberg lettuce, with tomatoes that one could identify more by color than by taste. The main dish was primarily made from either partially or wholly processed food for quick preparation (without messing up the kitchen).

It was a time when this type of food culture was seen as a symbol of progress, and it permeated the lives of America's middle-class families.

### ● Networking with Organic Farmers, and Green Markets

Alice knew what genuine flavors were, and her efforts to secure genuine ingredients led her to create a network of



■ Green garlic in a farmers' market. The young bulbs are cooked together with their green leaves.

small local farmers who supplied her with a wide variety of flavorful vegetables, fruits and cheeses. These were all grown organically, without pesticides or chemical fertilizers. Networking with local small farmers was not an easy task to achieve in the U.S., as they were scattered around the far reaches of vast land areas, and maintain a rugged individualism. Chez Panisse hired its own “foragers” (professionals who search for quality foods), and this idea has since spread throughout the restaurant industry.

The foragers would find farmers who grew quality sustainable produce. Alice advocated this idea through various activities, including writing articles that encouraged networking between restaurants and farmers. Since farmers would not be able to survive by simply supplying produce to Chez Panisse, Alice actively helped them set up green markets to regularly sell their produce directly to local consumers. In addition, she began to buy meat from livestock that were not bred on inhumane and cramped factory farms, but were treated well and allowed to graze in pastures. She also procured seafood from those fishermen who only used sustainable practices.

## What Local Production for Local Consumption means

Alice Waters was not fully conscious of environmental and social problems when she began to support organic agricul-

ture. Yet, she did have a profound conviction and philosophy as her base. Since her university days, she had been sensitive to political and social issues. She began a restaurant operation because she wanted to move towards building a better and more comfortable community. Her motivation in opening the green markets and promoting organic food was her belief that the small selections made by each individual consumer would drive change in society and lead to a more comfortable living environment for all.

It seems to have worked, as organic agriculture is now conducted on a large scale in the U.S. The success of the Whole Foods Market supermarket chain, which offers a large supply of organic foods, indicates that organic agriculture is commercially viable. Consumers who consider it better to eat foods grown without agricultural chemicals have increased in number, and their awareness has been raised to the level that they are willing to pay two or three times the prices for organically produced food.

### ● Various Advantages

Having said that, eating locally grown vegetables and fruits and locally caught seafood is a little different from consuming organic foods. Buying locally supports local farmers and fishermen, and boosts the local economy. In addition, it is environmentally sustainable as less energy is consumed for long-distance shipping, and fewer carbon dioxide emissions are produced. These are the most discussed advantages of local production for local consumption.

Another advantage is the increase in food variety. Recent years have seen small farmers disappearing to make way for large industrialized farms, and industrialization has meant that only limited varieties of foods are produced, mostly under the aegis of large corporations. Varieties that taste good, but are less than perfect in shape or color, easily bruise, or rapidly spoil, fall by the wayside to make way for more industrially efficient varieties. If this practice continues for a number of years, the seeds for these tasty varieties may become extinct. Out of concern for this situation, the preservation of seeds is being called for not only in the U.S., but in many parts of the world, including Japan. These are the seeds of plants called heirloom or native species.



■ Heirloom tomatoes of diverse shape and color

A few years ago, heirloom tomatoes suddenly appeared in farmers' markets on the East Coast. They were widely varied in color, from green to yellow to orange to blackish red. Their sizes and shapes were equally varied, ranging from big and sprawling to small, cherry-sized fruits. Yet, these tomatoes gained quick popularity for their rustic flavor, which reminded consumers of something they hadn't tasted since childhood.



In view of the fact that Chez Panisse and California Cuisine achieved popularity because of the wonderful taste of diverse ingredients, supporting organic agriculture was a matter of natural course for Alice Waters.

## The Delicious Revolution Takes on the Unhealthy American Diet

While the seeds she had sown spread nationwide and grew as the organic vegetable boom, Alice Waters also addressed more fundamental issues.

### ● Edible Schoolyard Project

In the 1980s and 1990s, while raising a daughter, Alice Waters realized that American families dined together with decreasing frequency, even when they were all at home.



■ Vegetables harvested in the Edible Schoolyard Project

Frozen food heated up at home or fast food restaurants were the norm in children's daily diets. She was worried that society might progressively decay if children grew up

without knowing the wonderful flavors of genuine food or were unaware of where their food came from.

First, she thought it essential to see that children took an interest in what they ate. In a crumbling middle school in her neighborhood, she began a curriculum in cooperation with the city's education division that started by tearing up schoolyard asphalt to make a vegetable garden and raise chickens. Children tended to the vegetables and the chickens, prepared delicious soups, salads, and pizzas in the kitchen, and the entire class ate lunch together.

Children got in touch with nature and came to understand the cycle—crops are cultivated and harvested, kitchen waste is made into compost, and the compost fertilizes the soil. Moreover, dining together had a soothing spiritual effect on the children. Indeed, this was a delicious revolution. The now-famous Edible Schoolyard Project has since grown nationwide.



■ First Lady Michelle Obama harvesting crops at the White House kitchen garden, with schoolchildren from the neighborhood (Reprinted from White House Official Webpage)

Since the Clinton Presidency, Alice has tried to involve the White House in her movement. She believed that the White House could lead by example in changing the way Americans eat. Her wish was realized in March 2009, when Michelle

Obama recruited middle school students from the neighborhood to start a vegetable garden on the South Lawn of the White House.

### ● Spread of the Movement to Private Corporations

In the 21st century, childhood obesity has been a growing problem. Michelle Obama has appealed to food production and distribution companies to develop more healthy food.

In line with this trend, McDonald's stopped using lard to deep-fry potatoes, and added salad with apples to their menu. Walmart, the largest retailer in the world, announced that they would sell fresh produce at more affordable prices and significantly reduce salt, trans-fat and sugar contents in processed foods.

## A California Trend Becomes a Lifestyle

Alice Waters' intention in opening a restaurant was to provide people with a place where families and friends could dine together to enjoy communication over savory food. As she was striving for that goal, more and more people became her



■ A farmers market held twice weekly in Berkeley

supporters, and her idea took root as a lifestyle.

This trend, like so many that have spread through America, had to be initiated in California. Californians shared an aspiration to create their own culture in opposition, not only to the establishment on the East Coast, but also against the influence of obsolete European cuisine. That spirit of California was the driving force behind the development of California Cuisine and the organic vegetable boom. Nonviolent resistance and the iceberg lettuce boycott in support of migrant lettuce pickers in the 1970s led to recent movements for fair trade and reduced carbon emissions. Thankfully, the delicious revolution took place in between.

There are many chefs who gained experience at Chez Panisse and went on to open their own restaurants, spreading Alice's principles. Those principles spread to community residents, and farmers began to regularly open green markets in addition to selling their produce to local restaurants. Tasty and organic fresh produce grown in season has become the standard, and people come to these green markets looking for healthy and flavorful vegetables and fruits. Friends and relatives often gather together to share the preparation and eating of what they buy at green markets.

California Cuisine, which today is rarely called by that name, is not merely a style of cooking. The underlying lifestyle and social awareness were passed on in the form of local production for local consumption and organic food, and has been gradually spreading throughout America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.