

## BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

**DON'T REMEMBER EXACTLY** what I ordered the first time I visited Lucques, the chef Suzanne Goin's debut restaurant. (It was, after all, over a decade ago.)

I do recall rustic greens—*cavolo nero* or Swiss chard—glistening with olive oil. Bone-in short ribs, spoonably soft after braising for hours in veal stock, red wine, and port, may have been the accompanying entrée. If so—and one evening, at least, it was—then a scoop of mashed potatoes, lazy with butter, was on the plate, too, cut with horseradish cream. As for the dessert, I remember that as clearly as if I had just finished it: a petite white porcelain cup filled with a chocolate *pot de crème*, dark as espresso, denser and richer than it was sweet. I cracked through its thin lid of solid chocolate with a spoon that looked like something from a doll-size tea set, and I don't think I uttered a word until I'd scraped the insides of that cup raw.

Other LA restaurants were championing the farm-to-table credo of Alice Waters when Lucques opened. Other chefs were versed in classical technique, and the idea of California cuisine was well established. But at Lucques, Goin synthesized those concepts with an intensely personal aesthetic. She wasn't building towers or dropping dots of sauce around her plates; she was concentrating on food at once familiar and surprising, food so damn good it rendered you speechless.

Goin has never deviated from her signature balance of indulgence and restraint, highfalutin French and bold directness, and it extends to every aspect of the experience of dining at Lucques. The restaurant is set in a renovated West Hollywood carriage house with exposed wood beams, a big brick fireplace, and an ivy-strewn patio, all tied together with a subdued palette centered on the color of the green French olive for which Lucques is named. Goin's business partner, Caroline Styne, is often at the door to greet guests, and as a hostess leads you to your table, there is a sense that you are being welcomed into a dinner party in progress. "You always feel like you're at Suzanne's house," says the chef Nancy Sil-

verton, who hired Goin at Campanile, one of LA's seminal market-driven restaurants, in the mid-'90s.

Goin, 43, grew up in LA, in a family that planned birthdays and vacations around good eating. "Instead of Disneyland or the theater," she says, "going to L'Ermitage for *crème brûlée* was the big occasion." Her culinary training began in high school, with a position as a pastry assistant at Hollywood's formidable Ma Maison. After studying history at Brown University, she worked her way up through the ranks of world-class kitchens, from Berkeley's Chez Panisse to the three-Michelin-starred L'Arpège, in Paris. While she draws notes from Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Asian cuisines, Goin's dishes are at their core Southern Californian, inspired by ingredients grown here. Roast chicken slathered in fiery Moroccan harissa is served with a bright orange dollop of carrot purée and a scattering of dandelion greens (see page 90 for a recipe); a generous squeeze of lemon intensifies the tang of the buttermilk dressing on a winter salad of thinly sliced raw beets, tart apples, and walnuts (see page 86 for a recipe).

In the wake of Lucques's success, Goin and Styne have opened two more places, both reflecting remarkable prescience about the way people in this city want to eat. AOC, which was at the vanguard of LA's new wave of wine bars, offers small plates with big ideas: duck confit with shell beans and ham hocks, paddlefish caviar and warm corn pancakes. To create Tavern, Goin and Styne transformed a former burger joint into a trio of easygoing spaces: a bar-lounge; an airy dining room more informal than the one at Lucques but equally characterized by premium ingredients and bold flavors; and a take-out area and café. "There's just something about the way we live and eat in LA," Goin says. "We're casual. When Lucques opened, people would call it a fine-dining restaurant, and we'd think, Really? We try to give great service, but in a personal way. Now people get it." —Margot Dougherty, a freelance journalist in Los Angeles

**GREAT STUDIO COMMISSARY MOMENTS** In 1924, MGM studio chief Louis B. Mayer puts his wife's matzo ball soup on the menu; in the 1940s, Warner Brothers commissary cooks keep hot dogs on hand for Bette Davis.



PENNY DE LOS SANTOS; ILLUSTRATION: BRENDA WEAVER



Suzanne Goin, chef and co-owner of Lucques, AOC, and Tavern.