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A preserved lemon coulis
brightens asparagus layered
with surrey arugula. OPPOSITE
A fallen redwood tree refash-
ioned as the community table
in Ubuntu's dining room.



uniquely ubuntu

THE UNLIKELY STORY OF HOW A MEAT-FREE NAPA RESTAURANT IS REVOLUTIONIZING
THE REALM OF ORGANIC CUISINE WITH A STEADFASTLY INDULGENT APPROACH

BY NATHAN COOPER PHOTOGRAPHED BY LISA ROMEREIN



S

ometime this spring, the comment sections of food blogs—those semi-professional online digests of culinary obsession—lit up in unison. The question, posed by gourmands with a potent fervor born equally of hunger for food as well as status, was, “Have you been to Ubuntu?” A cooing review in *The New York Times* had thrust a vegetarian restaurant in downtown Napa with a hard-to-say name and a built-in yoga studio front-and-center on the national food scene, and devotees to everything new and delicious have been jamming the reservation lines ever since.

Ubuntu’s meteoric streak out of the gates and into the winner’s circle raises the question: What combination of ingredients yields this kind of once-in-a-decade restaurant launch? Countless other ambitious eateries around California have no doubt thrown open their doors in the last year, and while many will thrive, none has struck the kind of operatic high notes of

of Americans identify as vegetarian.) Furthermore, there’s certainly no shortage of fine dining establishments in Northern California’s wine country. Also working against it, Ubuntu (ooh-BUN-too) is tucked away on a side street in downtown Napa—traditionally the least desirable neck of the wine country woods. Most people returning from a “trip to Napa” likely never set foot in the town; they prefer to sample epicurean bliss lurking in the more refined neighboring villages of Yountville, Rutherford and St. Helena. Propping the restaurant’s hurdles even higher, a full-fledged yoga center hovers above Ubuntu’s double-height dining room.

Let’s just say most restaurant business consultants would have run screaming from this plan. “The concept of a vegetarian restaurant and yoga studio was definitely met with a little skepticism,” admits Lawrence, who signed the lease on her space in August, 2006.

So why has Ubuntu worked? Yes, the kitchen, steered by executive chef Jeremy Fox, performs its mission flawlessly. And yes, it’s unique. Those two accomplishments are certainly enough to launch almost any eatery into the rarefied air of unbridled success stories. But the truly special ingredient at Ubuntu is the joyful way it defies expectation. That is to say, there are few other restaurants in the world that so deftly marry surprise with satisfaction. Sure, molecular gastronomy wizards like Ferran Adrià of Spain’s El Bulli tickle guests’ palates with such unorthodoxies as freeze-dried foie gras and popcorn clouds, but that’s exactly why food tourists trek around the globe for a seat at his table—they know



Executive chef Jeremy Fox surveys the crops at the restaurant’s private one-acre biodynamic garden in the hills above Napa. Produce that

praise, inquiry and excitement streaming around Ubuntu.

On paper, the safe bet would have been against this restaurant, conceived by Napa resident and yoga enthusiast Sandy Lawrence. To begin with, the market for meatless restaurants brings with it a seemingly low ceiling. (A survey of surveys indicates no more than 2.8%

just what they’re getting. Ubuntu, on the other hand, inverts preconceived notions at every turn. Vegetarians looking for an exalted health food menu find themselves sampling such unabashedly indulgent elements as truffle-laced Pecorino cheese and a deep-fried egg with brown-butter emulsion. Epicureans dashing through the wine country in search

of the most extravagant menus imaginable have their own curve balls to contend with at Ubuntu. Caviar, Wagyu beef and other hallmarks of haute cuisine are nowhere to be found; instead, diners are left to contemplate the unexpected richness of earthly delights such as English peas, transported to uncharted heights in a consommé of their own shells, sprinkled with crushed macadamia, white chocolate and mint.

The early flickers of Lawrence's idea for Ubuntu—a term from the Bantu languages of Southern Africa referring to openness, community and a spirit of sharing—came during, of all things, a potluck dinner. Before moving to Napa full time in 2005, Lawrence owned a Miami-based company organizing international conferences for natural resources companies. “Around the time that I sold my business, my focus turned to yoga,” says Lawrence, who began hosting retreats and community yoga nights at her rambling property high in the mountains above Napa. “Some of the best chefs in the valley came to those nights, and everyone brought covered dishes, the bulk of which were vegetarian,” she says. “Everyone began to ask why there wasn’t a really delicious vegetarian restaurant in Napa.” While her notion to answer that question with a business left many advisors scratching their heads, Lawrence’s memories of those magical early dinners fortified her confidence.

Ultimately, the compact fluorescent light bulb lit up over Lawrence’s head when she saw a “for rent” sign in the window of a futon shop on Napa’s Main Street.

crafted from a fallen redwood tree. The fact that Lawrence herself is not vegetarian was completely beside the point; she simply wanted to give produce its due.

Topping her to-do list were two crucial items: securing a source of superlative ingredients for her kitchen and hiring the perfect chef to cook them. The first task called for the planting of a private one-acre biodynamic garden, the land for which Lawrence luckily had to spare at her hillside property. As for the chef, a range of applicants were whittled down to eight contenders from around the country, all of whom were invited to visit Napa for a final-round audition. Relying solely on produce harvested from local gardens that morning, each cook was asked to prepare four appetizers, four entrees and two desserts. Out of the octet of applicants,

Lawrence says one team “clearly stood out from the rest,” that of Jeremy Fox and pastry chef Deannie Fox. At the time, the husband-and-wife duo worked at David Kinch’s Michelin two-star restaurant Manresa in Los Gatos.

“No way.” Those were Fox’s first words when presented with the idea of helming a vegetarian kitchen. At Manresa, where Fox was second in command,

“I’M PROUD EVERY TIME I SEE A NEW CROP OF RADISHES OR INCREDIBLE GREENS. THEY’RE LIKE MY KIDS. AS A CHEF IN CALIFORNIA, YOU’RE SPOILED—IN A GOOD WAY.”



will soon find its way onto Ubuntu's menu includes purple artichokes, ice plant seedlings, micro kale, kohlrabi, baby carrots and edible flowers.

Inspired by the space, with its soaring 24-foot ceilings and 120-year-old stone walls, she signed the lease and, along with architect Michael Bauschke, set out to create a vegetarian Valhalla—complete with floors made from old shipping crates, 100% recycled water glasses, Heath Ceramics pottery and a community table for 26

his duties included preparing its special 14-course pork dinners and overseeing all of the charcuterie offerings on the menu. Meat was a core element of this young Cleveland-born chef’s culinary vocabulary. At the same time, Fox had seen the bounty provided by Manresa’s own private biodynamic vegetable garden and was well aware of the





French breakfast, cherry bella and Italian gold varieties make their way from the garden to Fox's dish of radishes paired with local chèvre, nori, hong vit, black salt and mustard-Banyuls vinaigrette.

savory potential of plant-based cuisine as exhibited by chefs like Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley and Alain Passard of L'Arpège in Paris. With that in mind, Fox overcame his initial hesitation and got on board with two crucial conditions: "No tofu and no brown rice." With those wishes granted, the couple promptly moved to within two blocks of Ubuntu and began crafting a new take on vegetable cuisine.

Fox's methods at Ubuntu are intimately linked to the efforts of Jeff Dawson and Rose Robertson, the gardening talents who have shaped the restaurant's fields and prepare the pristine boxes of produce ultimately informing the kitchen's seasonally evolving menu. Strolling through the garden on a late spring morning, one encounters nothing short of a vegetable safari, including tiny arugula screaming with peppery flavor; seven kinds of radishes, all primed to be plucked at an unusually diminutive stage; 27 varieties of tomato; bunches of *ficoide glaciale*, or ice plant, a dark green specimen with crystalline moisture dotting each leaf, the seeds for which were imported from France; a chorus of micro greens; edible violets; Chinese artichokes, which have

"JUST ORDERING A BOX OF VEGETABLES FROM SOME RANDOM SOURCE LACKS MEANING. GETTING CARROTS WITH DIRT ON THEM THAT WERE PICKED TWO HOURS AGO—THAT'S SPECIAL."

ible greens. They're like my kids," he says. "Just ordering a box of vegetables to use in a kitchen from some random source really lacks meaning. Getting carrots with dirt on them that were picked two hours ago—that's special."

Tasting produce like those carrots—sans grit—transformed by Fox and his team, is special, to say the least. Ribbons of asparagus loop around perfect spears of the same vegetable, glowing as if lit from within. Peppery and crisp French breakfast radishes the size of gnochetti mingle with a quenelle of goat cheese flecked with briny bits of dried seaweed. These compositions practically float above the table, tickling the palate with their unconventionally mixed tastes and textures.

As dinner progresses, Fox subtly veers toward more substantial dishes, preemptively dispelling the famished omnivore's typical worry that a meatless menu, however interesting, could never truly satiate. One of Ubuntu's most delectable declarations of substance comes in an individual cast-iron pot filled with layers of cauliflower treated with the same inventive reverence of a goose's liver in classic haute cuisine. A velvety puree imbued with cream anchors the dish; above that rest several masterfully roasted florets; and nestled to the side, a spoonful of what looks and tastes like couscous but is, in fact, meticulously diced cauliflower. On a wood fire-baked pizza, mushrooms strike a deep and earthy chord resting on a puree of their own trimmings and dotted with ricotta. Golden rice "grits" carry a slow-cooked egg dressed with goat's milk whey, braised



An open kitchen lets Fox survey his guests while finishing each dish. ABOVE RIGHT Proprietor Sandy Lawrence enjoys hosting most nights.

the bubbly charm of edible Michelin men; an array of nettles; and all manner of quince, plums and apples dangling from 33 fruit trees. It's like Willy Wonka's factory for the Whole Foods set.

Fox's appreciation for the gardeners' work runs deep. "I'm proud every time I see a new crop of radishes or incred-

greens and trumpet mushrooms. Spa cuisine this is not.

Since opening in August of last year, Ubuntu's offerings evolved at a rapid pace. "The early menus were quite a bit simpler," says Fox. "We found we could do more than we had imagined. Everything changed quickly." The dramatic seasonal shifts in available produce

CONTINUED ON PAGE 110

Ubuntu pastry chef Deannie Fox showcases superb fruit in each dessert, such as this composition of roasted strawberries, lemon cream, frozen yogurt parfait and lavender meringue.



UNIQUELY UBUNTU

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 98

also dictated a prodigious learning curve for the kitchen (one that has prompted a substantial upgrade to the restaurant's facilities this summer). As Fox and his team excelled, word began to spread. Ubuntu's profile soared, culminating in the food-world equivalent of an actress

appearing on the cover of *People*: a rare review-cum-love letter written by Frank Bruni in *The New York Times*. Lawrence says the effect was immediate; diners were suddenly venturing from overseas to sample Ubuntu's exalted vegetable cuisine. "On the day the *Times* review came out, we got a call from a couple on a plane about to take off back east, saying they were on

their way for dinner," says Lawrence.

In the span of a year, what Ubuntu has achieved, ultimately, is to add itself to the short list of California restaurants—*Chez Panisse* and *The French Laundry* among them—which have transcended geography and made an impact on the gourmet world with the unique expression of just how good food—with or without the perfect cut of beef—can be. ●

SHOPPING GUIDE

ON OUR COVER

Louis Vuitton wool and silk trompe l'oeil dress, \$3,945, select Louis Vuitton, 866-VUITTON. Le Vian diamond band ring, \$4,297, Bloomingdale's, Beverly Hills, 310-360-2832. Meredith Kahn fine jewelry rose gold and diamond pyramid totem ring, \$2,600, Roseark, Los Angeles; meredithkahn.com.

TABLE OF CONTENTS, p.6 Sonia Rykiel printed silk dress, \$6,495, Sonia Rykiel; soniarykiel.com. Brian Atwood Rida platform sandals, \$640, Shoe In, Wynn Las Vegas, 702-770-3465. Bochie gold ring with black onyx and diamonds, \$7,000, Neiman Marcus, Beverly Hills, 310-550-5900; bochie.com. **p.8** Yves Saint Laurent sleeveless dress, \$1,925, black patent belt, \$445, and black patent Trib Two shoes, \$785, select Yves Saint Laurent, 212-980-2980. Playboy sunglasses, price upon request, Jack's Eyewear, Los Angeles, 323-933-1402. Susie Fox diamond band rings, \$2,200 each, by special order, susiefox.net.

C BEAUTY

Berry Bisou, p.39

Czech glass compote, \$48, Tail of the Yak, Berkeley, 510-841-9891. Sugihara Japan glass plate, \$60, Lola, Berkeley, 510-981-8345; lolahome.com.

C HOME

All-Star Open House, p.45

DOWNTOWN, 719 N. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, 310-652-7461; downtown20.net. **ECCOLA**, 326 N. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles, 323-932-9922; eccolaimports.com. **ED HARDY SAN FRANCISCO**, 188 Henry Adams St., San Francisco, 415-626-6300; edhardysf.com. **HOLLYHOCK**, 817 Hilldale Ave., West Hollywood, 310-777-0100; hollyhockinc.com. **JUST FOLK**, 2346 Lillie Ave., Summerland, 805-969-7118; justfolk.com. **OBSELETE**, 222 Main St., Venice, 310-399-0024; obseleteinc.com. **OLIVER FURTH**, 8421 Fountain Ave., West Hollywood, 323-654-4290. **WINDSOR SMITH HOME**, 310-476-9603; windsorsmithhome.com. **SoCal Scrapbook, p.50** **BLACKMAN CRUZ**, 836 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles, 310-657-9228; blackmancruz.com. **BROAD**

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, 323-857-6000; lacma.org. **CAPELLINI**, 8950 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, 310-278-9260; cappellini.com. **THE CHATEAU MARMONT**, 8221 W. Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, 323-656-1010; chateaumarmont.com. **CHUNG KING ROAD**, Chintown, Los Angeles. **DENNIS HOLLINGSWORTH**, dennis Hollingsworth.us. **ELIE BLEU**, eliebleu.com. **LORDS**, 8783 Beverly Blvd., West Hollywood, 310-855-0066; lordsusa.com. **SUZAN FELLMAN SHOWROOM**, 678 S. Cloverdale Ave., Los Angeles, 323-936-7759; suzanfellman.com. **ROSE**, 1225 Abbot Kinney, Venice, 310-399-0040; roseninvenice.com. **RUSSELL YOUNG**, russellyoung.com. **SEATON**, 8920 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood, 310-550-1232; seatonsurf.com.

CAMERA-READY KATE

p.66-67 Alexander McQueen army green dress, price upon request, Alexander McQueen, Los Angeles, 323-782-4983. La Perla black lace bra, price upon request, select La Perla; la-perla.com. Amrapali gold cuff, \$4,200, Amrapali showroom, Los Angeles, 323-651-3184; amrapalijewels.com. **p.68-69** Rachel Roy Crae cocktail dress, \$1,595, Saks Fifth Avenue, Beverly Hills, 310-275-4211. Le Vian diamond band ring, \$4,297, Bloomingdale's, Beverly Hills, 310-360-2832. Meredith Kahn fine jewelry rose gold and diamond pyramid totem ring, \$2,600, Roseark, Los Angeles; meredithkahn.com.

DRESSING UP DOWNTOWN

p.82-83 See "Table of Contents." **p.84** Fendi grey wool bubble skirt, \$1,250, Fendi, Beverly Hills, 800-FENDI-NY. Three Dots turtleneck, \$85, Fred Segal Couture, Santa Monica; threedots.com. Wolford cashmere silk tights, \$235, select Wolford, 800-WOLFORD. Jimmy Choo black suede Gaze sandal, \$760, Jimmy Choo, South Coast Plaza; jimmychoo.com. Donna Karan New York velvet loop pouch, \$795, select Neiman Marcus; donnakaran.com. Bottega Veneta sunglasses, \$520, select Bottega Veneta, 877-362-1715. Tom Binns Effleur Collection gold ring, \$150, shopbop.com; tombinnsdesign.com. **p.85** Bottega Veneta silk georgette dress, \$17,300, select Bottega Veneta, 877-362-1715. Romanek big alligator clutch, \$3,500, select Barneys New York; barneys.com. Susie Fox ring, \$7,200, by special order, susiefox.net.

p.86-87 Chanel black jacket, \$4,000, ecru satin top, \$1,945, and black skirt, \$2,045, select Chanel, 800-550-0005. Playboy sunglasses, price upon request, Jack's Eyewear, Los Angeles, 323-933-1402.

p.88 Louis Vuitton techno ribs turtleneck, \$815, and silk twill spiral hips skirt, \$1,890, select Louis Vuitton, 866-VUITTON. Bottega Veneta Bombe bag, \$5,700, select Bottega Veneta, 877-362-1715. Tom Binns An Original silver cuff, \$1,690, Henri Bendel, New York; tombinnsdesign.com.

p.89 Prada black top, \$1,080, and lace skirt, \$3,290, Prada, Beverly Hills, 310-278-8661. Eres Inédit tulle bra, \$175, Eres, Beverly Hills; eresparis.com. Brian Atwood black patent Madison shoe, \$755, brianatwood.com.

p.90 Lanvin washed taffeta top, \$1,950, and wool trousers, \$2,200, Susan, Burlingame, 650-347-0452; and black Happy Partage handbag, \$2,030, Barneys New York, Beverly Hills, 310-276-4400. Tom Binns Dumont Noir Collection jet crystal bracelet, \$900, Susan, Burlingame; tombinnsdesign.com.

p.91 Stella McCartney black silk cutout shirt, \$995, and black wool skirt, \$645, Stella McCartney, Los Angeles; stellamccartney.com. Manolo Blahnik for Alexander Wang Vella high heels, \$895, by special order at Manolo Blahnik, 212-582-3007.

C TRAVEL

The Local Look, p.104-105

Giuseppe Zanotti gladiator sandals, \$650, Giuseppe Zanotti Design, South Coast Plaza, 714-979-3300. Ksubi white denim skirt, \$200, Barneys New York, Beverly Hills, 310-276-4400. Chloé Mimosa sunglasses, \$290, select Saks Fifth Avenue; saksfifthavenue.com. Denis Colomb Summer G scarf, \$565, Susan, San Francisco; deniscolumb.com. Stella McCartney bikini, \$325, Stella McCartney, Los Angeles, 310-273-7051.

CORRECTIONS

In the June/July 2008 issue, SERENA & LILY (p.30) was misidentified. It is a children's linens and homewares company. serenaandlily.com.

In the same issue, the photographer for VALERIE CONFECTIONS (p.60) was Stan Weightman Jr. valerieconfections.com.