

Life//[Food HYPERLINK](#)

Chef/scholar revives indigenous foods and native traditions in his cuisine

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Fernando Divina pours a glass of wine from a barrel stored at Cave B Estates Winery in Quincy. As the opening chef at the Tendrils Restaurant, Divina has created his own menu, literally from the ground up.

ANDY ROGERS/P-I



An entree of culotte steak with wine merchant butter, caramelized sweet onions and potato leek cake as prepared by Fernando Divina, executive chef and manager of Tendrils Restaurant at SageCliffe. Divina also is developing programming with an emphasis on indigenous foods for the Center for American Food & Wine at SageCliffe, which he helped establish.

ANDY ROGERS/P-I

QUINCY -- Next door to The Gorge Amphitheatre, where tens of thousands of screaming music lovers descend upon this particular bend in the Columbia River every summer, a quiet movement has taken root.

A chef has cooked up a vision for a place where people of like culinary minds can gather.

Fernando Divina is the executive chef at Tendrils Restaurant at the two-year-old Cave B Inn at SageCliffe. Being the opening chef afforded him the chance to create something from the ground up.

So he planted amaranth, quinoa, orach (mountain spinach), farro or emmer, and Ozette potatoes in addition to garlics, berries, lettuces, melons and numerous herbs. He also discovered at least 30 varieties of sage growing on the property that's home to the inn and the Cave B winery.

Divina put down roots, taking care to propagate as many indigenous crops as

possible, and then he gave his endeavor a name: the Center for American Food & Wine at SageCliffe.

At its core, the center is a venue for culinary events that celebrate regional foods. So far, Divina has created a "Savor the Region" series of cooking classes and dinners that focus on the area's bounty. The center's broader responsibility is to serve as a guardian of traditional foodways, hence the introduction of more obscure crops such as amaranth and orach.

"Everywhere people live," Divina said, "there's an obligation to carry forward." Divina is active in many organizations that are committed to supporting local, artisanal and sustainable foods. He hopes the center can be a destination venue for RAFT (Renewing America's Food Traditions) events. RAFT is the umbrella group composed of seven prominent organizations, including Slow Food USA, Seed Savers Exchange, Chefs Collaborative and American Livestock Breeds Conservancy.

To Divina, you can't have the new without the old.

"This world didn't start when Europe showed up," said the scholarly chef, to whom cooking is equal parts intellectual and spiritual exercise. "When you look at the regionalization of food in America, you get some lovely dishes. But the rest of it is our interpretation of foods from other cultures.

"We're missing our own history."

Divina, who is part Filipino, grew up in Olympia. His relatives were truck farmers in the Yakima Valley and he spent many summers pitching in. He became interested in cooking because "it was the only way to get off the farm."

Throughout the 1980s, Divina worked along the West Coast from Alaska to California -- and Hawaii. In the 1990s, he and his wife, Marlene, lived in Portland

and opened several restaurants, including Fiddleheads and Bella Coola Cafe, both of which had menus with a Native American theme.

That led Divina and his wife, who is part Chippewa, to a project with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian to help open the museum cafe. They also co-wrote a cookbook called "Foods of the Americas: Native Recipes and Traditions," which won a James Beard Foundation Award in 2005.

After the Smithsonian project, the couple moved with their son, Zoey, to Arizona to further their research into native foods. But Divina ached to return to the Northwest. That's when he met Vince Bryan and his wife, Carol, the couple who started what is now The Gorge Amphitheatre and built Cave B Inn and winery. (The two properties are separated by a tall wooden fence. Read more about Cave B at goto.seattlepi.com/233179)

"When I first met Dr. Bryan, I asked myself what it was that I thought I could contribute," Divina recalled. "For me, furthering the garden-to-the-table thing was exciting."

But he wanted to do more.

Divina has brainstormed myriad ways to use what the land offers. He created an applesauce infused with sage honey and chardonnay grape juice, which is sold through the winery. The trimmings from the vines are sold as fuel for wood-burning ovens. He has arranged to have verjus (the juice of unripe grapes) bottled to sell wholesale to restaurants in Seattle. Verjus can be used instead of citrus to add acidity to a dish. Though the products won't be available for at least a dozen years, Divina also plans to make balsamic vinegars.

The potential of the groundwork Divina has laid is greater than what is apparent: The center's programming is in its infancy. But by the time the official launch takes place later this year -- date still to be determined -- Divina hopes the

center will attract some big names as guest instructors.

In spite of his lofty goals, Divina doesn't strive to become a Copia-like entity. Copia, which calls itself the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts, is a culinary museum and educational center in Napa, Calif., that was founded by the Mondavi wine family.

"They operate on a much grander scale than we could imagine," Divina said.

"We're more grassroots- and community-oriented -- but no less focused on celebrating what we have and keeping the culture flowing."

He hopes the public will be inspired to attend events at the center to learn more about the indigenous foods of this region and about the geography itself.

"It's a paradise-like atmosphere you wouldn't notice," he said about his enviable perch above the Columbia, "unless you stopped."

POTTED

SMOKED SALMON

SERVES 4

1/3 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature

2 tablespoons hazelnut oil

2/3 cup boneless smoked salmon, flaked

1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt

Pinch of freshly ground black pepper

Juice of 1/2 lemon

2 juniper berries, finely minced

Cream the butter in a mortar with a rubber spatula or wooden spoon. Add the hazelnut oil and salmon. With a pestle, gently work the butter and oil into the salmon until it's smooth and creamy. Add salt, pepper, lemon juice and juniper. Fully incorporate the seasonings and spoon the mixture into a decorative bowl to

serve. Serve on crackers or grilled bread. Because the fish is smoked, potted salmon keeps well for up to a month if covered tightly and refrigerated.

From "Foods of the Americas"