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The Big Bang Theory

RECENTLY CAME ACROSS NOTES I had taken after hearing a chef from New York talk about the menus that he changed each month at his restaurant. This was several years ago. The organic revolution had not yet become a powerful force. In fact, home cooks were hard-pressed to find vegetables untouched by chemical sprays, or meat from animals not treated with hormones and antibiotics. He talked about 12 seasons, not the traditional four. He was somewhat of a revolutionary in his field.

The more I thought about it, the more sense his talk made to me. Sure, we have foods we traditionally associate with winter, but the dishes I cook in November are not necessarily the ones I crave in February.

The earth, rotating at a dizzying speed on its axis around the sun, brings us our seasons. Living as we do in the Midwest, we're especially attuned to these changes. Our moods lift with the longer days, and our palates shift, as well. This seems especially true in May. This same chef mused that if

our calendar had been planned by a cook rather than an astronomer, our new year would have started in May, rather than January.

May is indeed the culinary awakening, the big bang of our farmers' prowess. This month brings a veritable cornucopia of pale green peas, delicate

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and oh, so sweet. Asparagus stalks, plump and strong, share space in the market with piles of fat fava beans. The extravagant morel mushrooms arrive on the scene, and fiddleheads, the coils of ostrich ferns, announce their very brief presence. Foragers carry in their trophies of ramps, or wild

leeks. Light green and slender, their entire stems are edible. I used to think that if I waited a while to buy these seasonal wonders, I'd get a better selection, a better price. Unfortunately, I learned that to delay was folly; spring treasures hit our stands in a blaze of glory. I now know to make their acquaintance quickly.

Neptune, god of the sea, also responds to the pull and tug of changing seasons and tides. With the onset of spring, he sets forth new proliferations from the lakes, streams, and oceans. With heightened anticipation, I await the arrival of soft shell crabs. (Soft shells are blue crabs, caught within hours of their molting or shedding of their hard, outer shells, in order to grow.) Although they can be gussied up with sauces and condiments, I think they really need no embellishments, other than perhaps a squeeze of lemon. Simply pan frying them in butter and oil until they're crispy on the outside and juicy within, well, you just can't ask for anything better. U

Garden Pea Soup

INGREDIENTS

(Serves 6)

- 3 teaspoons unsalted butter
- 2 medium leeks, white and pale green parts only, cleaned and sliced
- 2 small cloves garlic, peeled and sliced
- 2 medium russet potatoes, peeled and cut into small cubes
- 6 cups chicken or vegetable stock
- 1 ½ pounds peas in their pods, shelled
- Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
- Crème fraiche and chopped mint for serving

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Melt the butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the leeks and garlic and cook until tender, but not colored, about seven minutes. Add the potatoes and stock and season with salt and pepper. Bring the mixture to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer until the potatoes are softened, about 15 minutes. Add the peas and cook until tender, another 10-15 minutes.
2. Working in batches, puree the soup in a blender. For a smoother texture, pass the soup through a strainer into a bowl. Taste the soup and add more salt and pepper if needed. Return the soup to the pot and heat over moderate heat. Or let the soup cool to room temperature, then cover and refrigerate.
3. To serve, thin the crème fraiche with a little milk, if desired. Ladle the soup into shallow bowls. Drizzle the crème fraiche over the top and sprinkle with chopped mint.

Soft Shell Crabs with Brown Butter

INGREDIENTS

- 6 large soft shell crabs, cleaned and dressed for cooking
- ½ cup (or more as needed) all-purpose or Wondra flour
- Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
- ½ teaspoon paprika
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil or olive oil
- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- Lemon wedges and chopped parsley for serving

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine the flour, salt, pepper, and paprika in a shallow bowl. Dip each crab in the flour mixture, shaking off the excess flour. Heat the oil and 1 tablespoon butter in a large skillet until hot, but not smoking. Add the crab, in one layer, and sauté until well-browned and crispy, about 3-4 minutes. Turn and cook until golden on the other side, another 2-3 minutes. Transfer the crabs to a warm serving platter. Garnish with lemon wedges and chopped parsley.
2. Wipe out the skillet with a paper towel and return the skillet to medium-high heat. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons butter and cook until the butter browns and smells nutty. Pour the browned butter over the crabs and sprinkle with chopped parsley. Serve the crabs with lemon wedges.

Zin GastroPub

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The Zin Gastro Pub team is (from left) Mike Kryscha, Sunny Doane, Bob Kryscha, and Chef Steve Geren. This photo was taken at Copper Fiddle in Lake Zurich, as the new gastro pub's space was not yet completed.



A duet of black and white bean soup.

Introducing Zin Gastro Pub

A promising new eatery in Lake Zurich offers the freshest farm-to-table foods in an elegant and intimate farm-style setting.

A recent trip to Santa Barbara's culinary and wine country was enough inspiration for Bob Kryscha and fiancé, Sunny Doane, to decide to open their own farm-to-table restaurant back home. Kryscha confidently states that 80-90 percent of all the food that customers will enjoy at Zin Gastro Pub will only be touched by the farmer, and the distributor who moves the foods on and off the truck. "The produce foods we plan to serve will either be from the ground, or from a tree," Kryscha says. "Most restaurant foods live in a 14-day distribution cycle; we want ours to be only 48 hours. It's as fresh as you can get," he says.

By definition, gastro pubs (a term coined in Britain in the '80s) emphasize the use of local, seasonal, and organic ingredients in their cuisine. Chef Steve Geren, who will establish the menu, has been in the food business his entire life, working in locations such as Phoenix, Las Vegas, Chicago, and most recently, as the first executive chef at Mickey's of Edison Park. "It was a great experience at Mickey's," Geren says. There he learned how to prepare tantalizing dishes that were also conscientious. Geren will procure foods from Midwest farms and local artisan food producers. Cheese from Wisconsin, fruits from Michigan, and potatoes from Iowa will be on his food list. "My hope

is to offer a daily specials menu that is based on seasonality, in addition to a regular daily menu. Vegetarian options will also be offered."

A *prix fixe* brunch will be offered on Sundays. Many of the menu items will be unique, small plates complemented by a variety of beverages including wine, beer, spirits, and creative non-alcoholic drinks. Zin Gastro Pub will offer cocktails made from nearby Lake Zurich's award-winning distillery, Copper Fiddle. Well-known Chicago-based mixologist, Carol Donovan, is consulting with the new owners on drink and food pairings and unique cocktails.

Zin Gastro Pub will offer "farm-style elegance" say its owners as they talk about the space. "We will have simple furnishings, antique lighting,

open brick surfaces, and wine crates to create a relaxing ambiance," Kryscha says. "The focus will be on the food, and we will have room for about 40 people at a time."

Music will also be part of the Zin Gastro Pub experience. Dr. Gino DeLuca, known for his piano and vocal cabaret skills, will bring live music to Zin on weekends.

Zin Gastro Pub is open from 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. on all days except Monday. On weekdays, the kitchen will close at 9 p.m., and on weekend nights at 11 p.m. There will be a lunch and dinner menu, and a *prix fixe* menu on Sundays for brunch. Zin Gastro Pub is located at 583 N. Rand Road in Lake Zurich. For more information, visit www.zingastropub.com, or call 847-946-4167. 



Above: Chef Steve Geren wants to serve the best tastes in the most conscientious way possible. Left: Chicken au jus dinner with a spiced chick pea salad.

