

instyle

MARCH 2003

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cooking up a new life

BY SHARON BOORSTIN

Driving down Highway 128, a two-lane blacktop that snakes through Sonoma wine country, you come across what looks like an old-fashioned general store. Signs on the green-trimmed yellow building proclaim "Jintown Store" and "Good Coffee & Real Food."

There's a red '53 Ford pickup parked out front, and a phone booth that reminds passersby of the days before cell phones. Inside, you'll find the fresh, hearty food of the California countryside, including sundried-cherry scones, goat cheese and homemade chocolate pudding; outsider art and antiques; hand-made brooms; oilcloth by the yard; and shelves of nostalgic novelties, such as stick-on moustaches and Silly Putty.

"We stock things that make customers remember childhood," says owner Carrie Brown. A lanky 48-year-old with short blonde hair, Brown is wearing Fifties-style harlequin frames from her considerable eyeglass collection. Collecting them was one of the passions she shared with her late husband, John Werner. She points to three words on an old board above a window: "Zip, Zest, Zeal." She comments, "That's our motto around here." And then, quietly: "It's part of John's legacy."

The Jintown Store is the realization of a fantasy born on July 4, 1987, when Brown and Werner stumbled across an abandoned, hundred-year-old cluster of buildings with a For Sale sign. "We were a couple of New York artists with food connections, visiting friends and family in wine country," she recalls. Werner had studied at Parsons School of Design; a self-taught chef, he was one of the original partners in the Silver Palate food business in New York City. Brown had grown up in the Bay Area and earned a degree in fine art from the Academy of Art College in San Francisco; after graduating, she worked as a decorative painter in San Francisco and New York City. "New York was fun," she recalls, "but John was longing for something new."

When they stopped at the former country store and post office, they felt as if they'd stepped back in time: An antique cash register sat on a dusty counter; faded dry goods

This page: Carrie Brown's husband left her a legacy that includes a wide circle of friends and family (seen with her at dinner), a thriving business to run and memories of his love. Above, left to right: Carrie Brown's farmers'-market caisins; brownies at the Jintown Store; Brown at one of her casual Sunday meals.

PHOTOS: MARGARET SAMSON; HAIR AND MAKEUP: TERRY ANDERSON

were stacked on a shelf; fishing lures hung on the pine-paneled walls. "We saw the potential," remembers Brown.

Within a month, they had decided to give up their New York apartment and start a new life. It took a year and a half to buy the place and another year to remodel the store, various outbuildings and a cottage that they transformed for themselves. Brown's parents, Caroline and Charlie, who live just a few miles away, agreed to take charge of the antiques and collectibles part of the business.

The refurbished Jimtown Store opened on Memorial Day 1991. Gradually, local winemakers and field-workers—even high school kids—became regular shoppers. "It takes time to be accepted by a rural community, but once you are, they're there for you," says Brown. A line of condiments and a catering business contributed to the store's fame. Soon, tourists started to stop by as well.

In 1990, before the store opened, doctors had removed a malignant polyp from Werner's colon and given him a clean bill of health. Eight years later, however, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. This time, the prognosis was not good. "John was very brave and strong," says Brown. "He was concerned with refining the way he lived,

"I had developed the self-confidence necessary to make decisions on my own."

accomplishing what he set out to do and connecting with people on a deep level." Indeed, when he died in December 2000, 400 of their family, friends and neighbors showed up for the memorial service.

Brown's eyes sadden when she speaks of her late husband: "John was the most generous, inclusive person. He looked on me as an equal. We always did things as a team, and he gave me the confidence to carry on without him."

During the two years before his death, Werner continued to work with Brown in the store and on the *Jimtown Store Cookbook* (Harper Collins, 2002). The couple traveled to Argentina, Zanzibar and Greece, and Werner planned a surprise for a trip they took for Brown's forty-fifth birthday.

Brown looks back on the vacation as her husband's way of building a support system for her. "We checked into the Grand Hotel in Biarritz, then went to a restaurant for dinner," she recalls. "Suddenly, to my surprise, twenty-one people from all different times in our lives showed up. They were festooned with ribbons; they were my presents!"

When Werner died a year later, the group embraced her. "I didn't have to hide my sadness or myself. John had made sure of that," she recalls. She knew she should go on—running the store, finishing the cookbook. "At first, I thought, 'How can I? I don't have a partner to bounce ideas off of.' A few weeks later, it was like someone put his hands on my shoulders and shoved me forward. I realized that over the past two years, I had developed the self-confidence necessary to make decisions on my own."

Today, Brown's friends and relatives make up what she calls her "expanding circle." On a late Sunday afternoon, a group of them are squeezed into the tiny kitchen of Brown's cottage. Among the guests, who prepare the meal together, are Carrie's parents, as well as her younger sister, Julie, and her husband, Dan, who have driven up from Marin County. Others are artists, designers, chefs and wine marketers from San Francisco and Sonoma County. Like most of the furniture in Brown's house, the linens and tableware are antiques or collectibles.

Brown has enjoyed entertaining since high school, but she pinpoints her wedding in 1986 as the start of her serious party planning. The event, held in a 19th-century





Brown likes to devise dishes that are rustic, beautiful and playful. Left, she holds a bowl of bulghur salad. Above, her ultra-smooth Old-Fashioned Chocolate Pudding (recipe, this page). Right, a Fifties windmill model sits near an arbor on the store's property.

winery that looks like a Tuscan villa, took two months to organize. However, casual parties, like today's, are more Brown's style. She plans the menu around what's in season at the local farmers' market. She hefts a colorful platter of roasted vegetables. "Zip, Zest, Zeal." That's the litmus test," she says.

Brown travels often to spend time with acquaintances who live on the East Coast. "One thing you learn when you're in your forties," says Brown, "is that you can have deep bonds with people you don't see often, that time doesn't interfere."

On the evenings when she is home alone, Brown reads and watches the sunset from a deck overlooking neighboring vineyards. "Sometimes I have a flash of Johnny. I tell him things," she admits. "I miss him, and I'm sad that he's gone, but I'm never lonely. I felt so loved by John, and now by my family and friends. If I never meet someone else, so be it." She shrugs gently. "I feel self-contained, whole—comfortable with myself."

Sharon Boorstin writes frequently about food and travel, and is the author of "Let Us Eat Cake" (ReganBooks/HarperCollins, 2001).

DINNER FOR EIGHT

A Sonoma Pinot Noir is a fitting accompaniment for this main course. Serve it with roasted vegetables, grain salad and a rosemary-and-fig tapenade, which you can make with a recipe in the "Jintown Store Cookbook" or order from www.jintownstore.com.

GRILLED LAMB CHOPS

- 12 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1/2 cup fresh rosemary leaves (or 2 tablespoons dried)
- 1 cup loosely packed fresh parsley sprigs
- 2 ounces (1 tin) anchovies in olive oil, drained
- 2 teaspoons dried thyme
- 3/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 cup dry red wine
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon pepper
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 24 baby rib lamb chops, each 1 inch thick

1 To prepare the marinade: In a food processor, finely chop the garlic and rosemary. Add the parsley, anchovies and thyme, and process until chopped. With the motor running, pour in the oil, wine, lemon juice, pepper and salt, and blend well.

2 Place the lamb chops in 2 or 3 resealable plastic bags, add the marinade, and seal the bags. Refrigerate the bags of meat for at least 3 hours, but no longer than 24 hours.

3 Prepare the grill, or preheat the broiler. Wipe the marinade from the bones, and arrange the chops on the grill or broiler pan. For medium-rare meat, cook for about 2 minutes per side.

4 Place three chops and a dollop of tapenade on each plate.

OLD-FASHIONED CHOCOLATE PUDDING

- 6 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 6 tablespoons plus 1/2 cup sugar
- 3/4 cup cornstarch
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 pints half-and-half, divided
- 2 large eggs plus 4 egg yolks, beaten
- 1 1/2 cups semisweet chocolate chips
- 4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) unsalted butter, cut up
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- unsweetened whipped cream

1 In a small bowl, whisk together cocoa, 6 tablespoons of sugar, cornstarch and salt. Whisk in 1 cup half-and-half; set aside.

2 Bring the remaining half-and-half to a boil in a heavy-bottomed medium saucepan. Whisk in the cocoa mixture, then bring back to a boil, mixing constantly. Reduce heat and cook, while continuing to whisk, until very thick (about 4 minutes).

3 Whisk half of the cocoa mixture into the beaten eggs, then whisk the egg mixture back into the remaining cocoa mixture. Remove from the heat. (pudding temperature should register 160° on an instant-read thermometer.) Add the chocolate and butter, and whisk until smooth; stir in the vanilla.

4 Divide pudding among 8 dessert cups, and let cool to room temperature. Cover with plastic wrap, and chill for at least 4 hours before serving. Serve with whipped cream. ■