

SUMMER • 2003

Savor

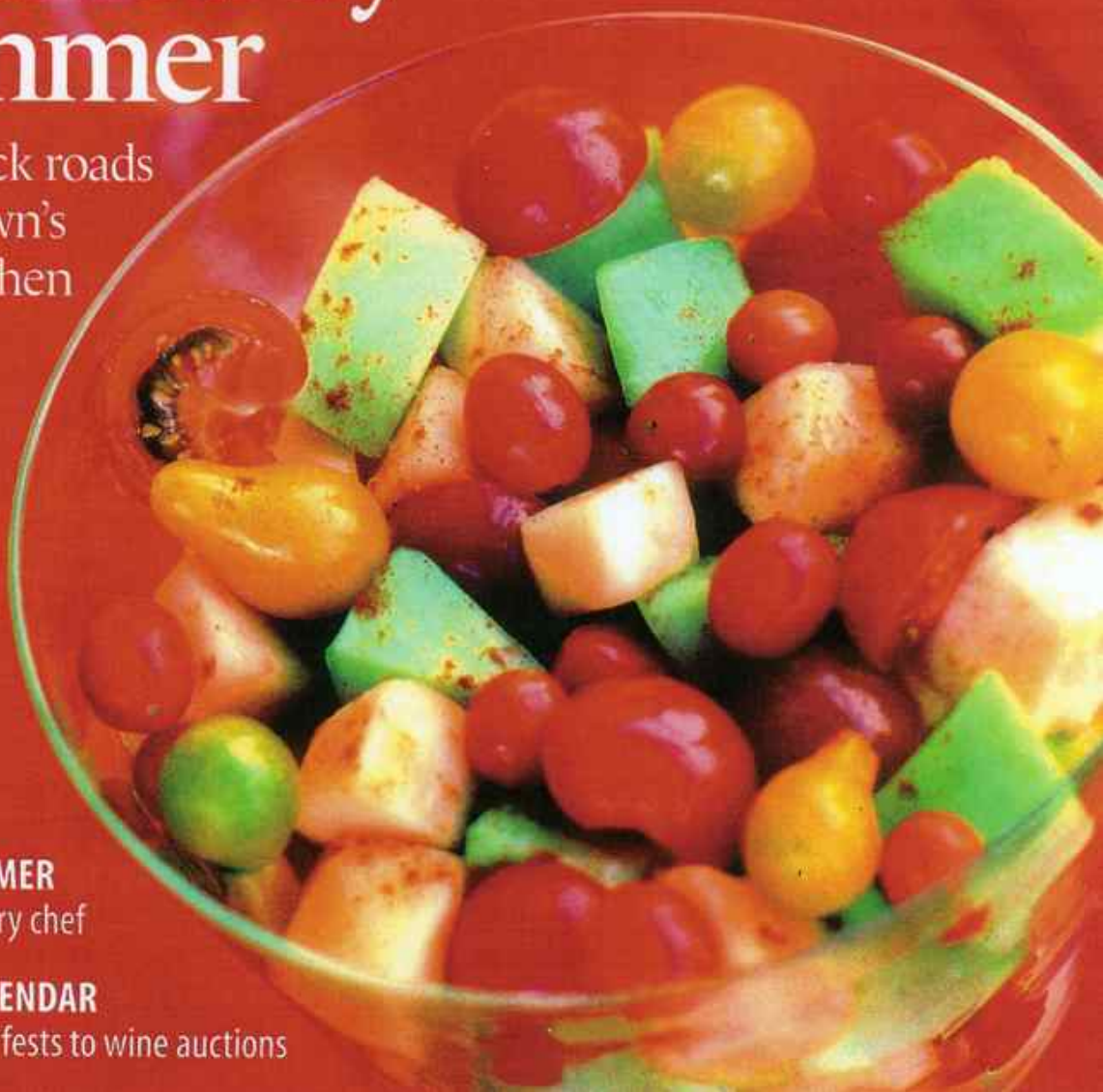
WineCountry

Seduced by summer

Food, back roads
& Jimtown's
farm kitchen

CHARLIE PALMER
City boy, country chef

SUMMER CALENDAR
From lavender fests to wine auctions





On the porch of her Alexander Valley home, cookbook author and Jimtown Store owner Carrie Brown keeps her plum cobbler out of the reach of her two longtime companions, Patty Lewis, left, and Moses.

Jimtown cuisine

Cookbook author and chef Carrie Brown's cooking philosophy is a lot like her famous little Alexander Valley store and cafe — happy, homey and tied to the land

When Carrie Brown walks out of her farmhouse to greet a guest, the screen door slams shut behind her, the dogs howl and the rooster crows a gruff greeting.

Inside the cheerful yellow kitchen, visitors step back into a simpler, gentler era, when grandma's hands did the ironing, rolled the pie dough, made dinner and washed the dishes — all in the same tiny space.

"This is the kitchen unplugged," said Brown, a cookbook author and owner of the retro-hip Jimtown Store in

Alexander Valley. "It's old-fashioned. You have to use the table as a surface."

Like her renowned store — a homey, roadside cafe open for breakfast and lunch daily and stocked with nostalgic toys, gifts and antiques — Brown's kitchen pays homage to the past without slavishly re-creating it. It's a kitchen rooted in the landscape of Wine Country and tied intimately to the local traditions of creating artisan foods and growing fresh produce.

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Stories by **Diane Peterson** Photography by **Chad Surmick**

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Brown works on her Plum Cobbler with Creme Fraiche Biscuit Topping.

Country Carrie Brown

Age: 48

Career: Cookbook author and owner of the Jimtown Store in Alexander Valley

Family: Parents, Charles and Caroline Brown, are partners in the Jimtown Store and the adjacent antiques store called Mercantile and Exchange. Sister, Julie Brown, lives in Marin County.

Dogs: A Redbone Coonhound named Patty Lewis and a Dachshund named Moses

Favorite kitchen utensils: A milk glass rolling pin, Grampa Henry's folding tool for incorporating egg whites into angel food cakes, Luella's jam funnel and her mortar and pestle. "When it's a small amount of crushing, it's nice to put a little elbow grease into it." She is also partial to cast-iron skillets, which absorb and retain heat efficiently.

Favorite collectibles: Anthropomorphic and vegetable pitchers (birds, dogs, cats, carrots, fennel); yellow ware, including Frankhoma ceramics from the '40s, yellow Bakelite utensils from France and Grandma Luella's cookie jar; Talvera pottery plates from Chihuahua; Vernon Kilns "State Plates"; vintage enamel plates; vintage cookbooks. For outdoor entertaining, she collects unusual trays made from old matchsticks, woven telephone wire and pressed wood.

Seasonal quote: "June is the anticipation of summer. You have the entire summer ahead of you, and it's luxurious."

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A city girl who fell in love with the country, Brown admits she could not live without her electric blender, Cuisinart and beloved Faema Contessa espresso machine and coffee grinder.

But there are no brutish-looking stainless-steel appliances or sleek granite countertops. The stove is a simple, four-burner gas range tucked into a corner, the "nondescript" refrigerator is covered with photographs, and the countertops are zinc.

The dishwasher consists of two hands and a sponge, and the only air-conditioning is nature's Northern California kind, coaxed in through a split Dutch door and a row of windows with hinged screens.

Impressed by potential

Both Brown and her late husband, restaurateur John Werner, had traveled the world by the time they landed in the Alexander Valley. It was on a 1980s trip from their home in New York to visit Brown's parents, who had settled in Healdsburg, that they first stumbled on Jimtown. Impressed by the site's history and potential and in love with the Sonoma County landscape, they bought the one-acre Alexander Valley Road property and gutted the migrant-worker's cottage out back while waiting for permits to renovate the 100-year-old store near the road.

"Everything you see, we did," Brown said. "We lived with my parents (in Healdsburg for six months) and fixed up the little house."

For Brown, it was a trip down memory lane; there had been Sunday afternoon drives through that same countryside during her childhood. The daughter of two Southern Californians, she grew up in Berkeley and Sausalito except for a two-year stay in Caracas, Venezuela, with her family when she was 11. She studied art in Mexico for a year then returned to the Bay Area and graduated from San Francisco's Academy of Art College in 1978. She painted murals and faux finishes in New York and San Francisco for a decade before entering the food world for a living in 1990.

Brown, 48, met her husband in the early 1980s at a party in Oakland thrown by mutual friends who lived a bi-coastal life; they knew Brown from California and Werner from New York. Werner started his culinary career as a partner in New York's Silver Palate restaurant.

Before moving west in December of 1989, the couple lived in New York's

West Village in lower Manhattan for several years, an experience that taught Brown how to do more with less.

"In New York, we had a tiny kitchen the size of a closet, and we often cooked for 50 people or more," she said. "It's important to clean as you go, and as you prepare each dish, you organize a place for it."

When the Jimtown Store opened on Memorial Day of 1991, the offbeat mom-and-pop operation immediately caught the attention of the media both for its food and for its quirky inventory of nostalgic memorabilia. It appeared regularly in national publications such as the *New York Times* and *Food & Wine* and *Gourmet* magazines.

A few years later, the couple launched their own line of dips and spreads that helped put Jimtown on the map. Distributed throughout the West and in New York and New Jersey, the store's picnic spreads are still evolving, with the latest combining the buttery flavor of artichokes with briny capers and olives, fresh mint and lemon.

"When we came here, we had all these ideas," Brown said. "Our concept was that Jimtown would show us the way. Everybody loved the spreads on the sandwiches, so that was a natural."

Sharing recipes

A cookbook was also a natural extension of the Jimtown Store, which attracts local farmers, winemakers and tourists with its menu of savory sandwiches such as grilled eggplant with provolone and delectable desserts like espresso brownies.

"From day one, people have asked us for recipes," Brown said. "People love it when you share with them."

Together with "The Silver Palate Cookbook" co-author Michael McLaughlin, the couple wrote "The Jimtown Store Cookbook," correcting the final proofs just before Werner died of cancer in 2000. The cookbook, published in April 2002, celebrates Jimtown's simple, home-style fare with a twist — or, as Brown likes to describe it, food that's "better than remembered."

At Jimtown, Brown relies on fresh ingredients rather than fancy techniques, resulting in dishes that taste clean and flavorful. A simple tomato and melon salad, for example, is given a piquant twist with a squeeze of lime, some honey and a little chipotle pepper.

In addition to its international recipes, gleaned from the couple's travels abroad, the Jimtown cookbook pays homage to Northern California's Wine

Country by highlighting local growers such as Tierra Farms, the Healdsburg growers offering 20 varieties of fresh and smoked chilies, and the Russian River Rose Co., the Healdsburg nursery where you can find more than 625 varieties of roses.

In the cookbook, seasonal pages offer glimpses of what's happening through the year in the Alexander Valley, from the vineyards to the kitchen and the garden. Canoes float lazily down the Russian River in high summer; workers thin the vineyards' leafy canopy, exposing grape clusters to sun and air; the first crops of figs, peaches, eggplant and tomatillos arrive, stirring memories and appetites.

In her country kitchen, Brown created a cheerful palette with a yellow and teal tile backsplash from Heath Pottery and Tiles of Sausalito. Those colors are echoed in a green antique door, mustard-yellow cabinet and robin's egg blue sideboard topped with marble.

Almost everything in the kitchen is salvaged or recycled, from the ironing board cabinet that now harbors spices to the redwood planks and iron brackets that hold Brown's collection of vintage and regional cookbooks.

Brown's center island consists of a table topped by a chopping block fashioned from a slice of a tree, with rings

and cracks still intact. That's where Brown likes to work on her famous classic American desserts like buttermilk pie or her Grandma Luella's peach pie.

Like Luella Smith's cottage in Ventura, where her grandmother lived for 50 years, Brown's farmhouse is surrounded by an extensive garden that lends itself to entertaining. When throwing parties, she either prepares dishes in advance or asks friends to help finish them, so that she can relax and enjoy her guests.

"Everybody's so busy these days, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't invite people over," Brown said. "When I enlist guests to help, I leave a bowl and ingredients and the recipe in one place."

For summer entertaining, Brown sets up a drinks table on the porch, a buffet table in the shade and a long table where guests can sit and eat under the arbor laden with yellow banksia roses and ungrafted grapes.

Wooden boardwalks and crushed oyster-shell paths crisscross the whimsical garden, which is dotted with perennials, herbs and raised vegetable beds. Sweet peas climb up a miniature windmill, strawberries spill out of containers and a couple of old iron bed frames hold hay for mulching. A chicken coop made from what Brown describes as "all kinds



Brown's plum cobbler recipe follows her philosophy of home-style with a twist.

of recycled bits" houses two Bantam Araucanas — Paprika the rooster and Saffron the hen.

"This kitchen is really peaceful," Brown said while sliding a fragrant plum cobbler out of the oven. "It's just far enough away from the store, and instead of the road, I hear my chickens."

Along with its vintage feeling, the kitchen carries memories of her late husband.

"I feel very connected to Johnny, especially in the kitchen we built and cooked and ate so many wonderful meals together," she said. "It is tremendously comforting."

High summer in Sonoma County means firing up the barbecue and inviting family and friends over for a casual — which is not to say mundane — backyard lunch or dinner.

Here is a simple summer menu from "The Jintown Store Cookbook" that's guaranteed to please: It features grilled steak sandwiches.

Brown soaks the steak — skirt, flank or London broil — in her favorite Backyard Bourbon Marinade. After grilling and slicing it thinly, she serves the steak on rustic ciabatta rolls from the Downtown Bakery and Creamery in Healdsburg.

To complement the sweetness of the marinade, Brown garnishes the sandwich with Point Reyes Original Blue Cheese, balsamic red onions, fresh watercress and a slather of Jintown Store's Fig and Olive Tapenade.

GRILLED STEAK WITH BACKYARD BOURBON MARINADE

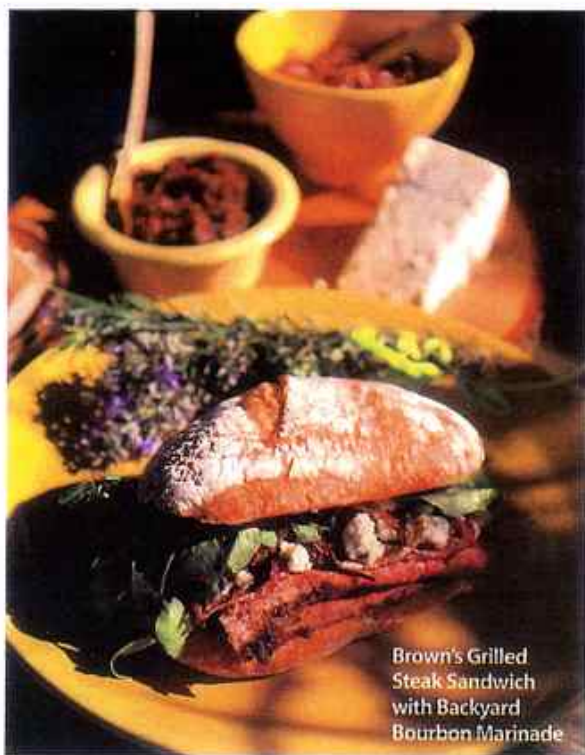
Serves 6 with leftovers

- 6 cups water
- 1¼ cup regular soy sauce
- 1 cup bourbon
- 1 cup packed dark brown sugar
- ¼ cup Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon hot pepper sauce, preferably Tabasco
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 (2-inch-thick) top round steak (about 2½ pounds)
- Kosher salt

In a large nonreactive container (something plastic with a snap-on lid is convenient), combine the water, soy sauce, bourbon, sugar, Worcestershire sauce, lemon juice, pepper sauce, and pepper. Add the steak, cover, and refrigerate for at least 3 hours or overnight, turning once or twice.

Light a charcoal grill and let it burn down to medium-hot, or preheat a gas grill to medium-high. Set the rack about 6 inches above the heat source.

When the grill is ready, lightly oil the rack. Lift the steak from the marinade, reserve the marinade, and lay the steak on the rack. Cover and grill, rotating the position



Brown's Grilled Steak Sandwich with Backyard Bourbon Marinade

Country barbecue

of the steak once on the rack to create attractive marks and basting occasionally with the marinade, for 7 minutes. Turn, cover, and continue to grill, again rotating the steak once and basting it often, until the meat is done to your liking — about 15 minutes total for rare beef.

Transfer the steak to a cutting board and let it rest at least 5 minutes. With the knife vertical to the cutting board, carve the steak across the grain into thin slices.

Arrange the slices on a platter, season lightly with salt, and serve hot, warm or at room temperature.

BALSAMIC RED ONIONS

Makes about 1¼ cup

- 3 tablespoons fruity, good-

- quality olive oil
- 2 large red onions, halved and thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

In a large, heavy nonreactive skillet over medium heat, warm the oil. Add the onions and stir to coat with oil. Cover the skillet and lower the heat slightly. Cook until the onions begin to soften and turn translucent, about 5 minutes. Stir in the sugar, vinegar and salt. Continue to cook, covered, stirring often to avoid scorching, until the onions have lost their crunch and are dark and caramelized, 15 to 20 minutes. If the onions begin to stick before they are done, add a teaspoon or two of water to the skillet and lower the heat.

Remove from the heat and season generously with pepper.

Use the onions immediately, or cool to room temperature, cover and refrigerate. Return the onions to room temperature or rewarm before serving.

This Tomato Melon Salad was inspired by the street foods of Mexico. "The lime and the honey turn the melon into something perfume-y," Brown said. "As the summer progresses and more tomatoes are available, you can do it on a platter with thin slices of melon and tomatoes."

SAVORY TOMATO MELON SALAD

Serves 6 to 8

- ½ medium green-fleshed melon, seeded, peeled and cut into ½-inch chunks
- ½ medium orange-fleshed melon, seeded, peeled and cut into ½-inch chunks
- 2 (10-ounce) baskets mixed red and yellow cherry tomatoes, stemmed, all but the smallest halved
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 1 teaspoon light floral honey, such as wildflower
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground cayenne pepper or Tierra Farms chipotle powder

In a large bowl, gently toss together the melon chunks and cherry tomatoes.

MENU

SAVORY TOMATO MELON SALAD

GRILLED STEAK and BLUE CHEESE SANDWICHES

PLUM COBBLER with CREME FRAICHE BISCUIT TOPPING

In a small bowl, whisk together the lime juice and honey. Pour the lime dressing over the melons and tomatoes and toss. Sprinkle the salad with the salt and cayenne and toss again.

Transfer the salad to a deep platter and serve more or less immediately.

You can make the biscuits for the cobbler ahead of time and keep them chilled.

You can also substitute an equal amount of ripe peaches and apricots, pitted and sliced, for the plums, adding ½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg to the other spices. Bellwether Farms makes a commercial creme fraiche available at Trader Joe's and Whole Foods Markets.

PLUM COBBLER WITH CREME FRAICHE BISCUIT TOPPING

Serves 8

Biscuit topping:

- 1½ cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- ½ cup yellow cornmeal, preferably stone-ground
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter, chilled, cut into ½-inch pieces

1 cup creme fraiche

Filling:

- 3 pounds firm but ripe red or black plums
- 1 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¼ cup quick-cooking tapioca
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground mace
- ½ cup plus 2 tablespoons whipping cream

Position a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat to 450 degrees. Butter a shallow oval baking dish or any 2-quart shallow baking dish with enough surface area to accommodate 12 biscuits.

To make the biscuits, into a medium bowl, sift together the flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Add the butter and, with a pastry cutter or two knives, cut it into the flour until bits the size of small peas remain. Add the creme fraiche and stir until moistened. Gather the dough into a rough ball and gently knead it 5 or 6 times in the bowl.

On a lightly floured surface, pat or roll out the dough to a thickness of ½ inch. With a 2½-inch round cutter form 10 biscuits, transferring them as you go to a baking sheet or other flat pan. Gather the

scraps into a ball, roll or pat it out about ½-inch thick, and cut out 2 more biscuits, transferring them also to the baking sheet. Cover and refrigerate while you prepare the filling. (For convenience, the biscuits can be prepared to this point up to 1 day ahead. Refrigerate until baking, covered in plastic wrap.)

For the filling, in a large bowl combine the fruit, 1 cup of the sugar, the tapioca, lemon juice, cinnamon and mace. Let stand at room temperature, stirring once or twice, for 15 minutes. Spoon the fruit and any juices from the bowl into the prepared baking dish and spread evenly. Drizzle ½ cup of the cream over the fruit. Brush the tops of the biscuits with the remaining 2 tablespoons cream and sprinkle them with the remaining 1 tablespoon sugar. Place the biscuits on top of the cream and fruit mixture.

Bake the cobbler for 10 minutes, then lower the oven temperature to 425 and bake until the tops of the biscuits are golden brown, the filling is bubbling and the fruit is tender when pierced with a knife, another 10 or 15 minutes.

Let the cobbler cool on a rack for 20 to 30 minutes. Serve warm.