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This year's cookbook crop a bounty for all

From cupcakes to diners to heirloom beans, local food figures share their expertise -- just in time for holidays

By [DIANE PETERSON](#)
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Take a look at the year's local cookbooks, and you'll see a reflection of the way we eat and live.

In the Bay Area, 2008 was the year of eating locally. Thanks to the pioneering efforts of Berkeley's Chez Panisse restaurant, where David Tanis mans the stoves, growing and cooking your own food has become truly hip.

In Wine Country, the upper crust still flocks to food temples like the French Laundry in Yountville, where chef Thomas Keller ups the ante with labor-intensive techniques such as sous vide cooking.

Even those on a budget can afford a slice of aromatic, handcrafted cheese. After 30 years of gathering cheese expertise, the first cheesemonger at the first Oakville Grocery, Clark Wolf, offers a new guide to America's best.

With the economic downturn, people are craving more comfort food than ever, and gravitating toward small pleasures, like cupcakes, that take them back to childhood. Former Martha Stewart Living food editor Shelly Kaldunski provides the perfect cupcake for every taste.

Those who can still afford to dine out are looking for some "lovin' from the oven" at their friendly, neighborhood diners, drive-ins and dives. Thanks to Sonoma County's own Food Network celebrity chef, Guy Fieri, you can find big bites of authenticity all across the United States.

It was also the year that heirloom beans entered the mainstream. The cheap protein makes a nutritious and delicious feast in the hands of our own Jack of all beanstalks, Steve Sando of Rancho Gordo in Napa.

Fresh off the shelves, here's our crop of books nurtured by Bay Area authors. Package them with a bottle of local olive oil, some aged Vella Jack and a bamboo cutting board. Your gift will not only boost the local economy, but help make the holiday green.

Do you need to buy "A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes" (Artisan) by David Tanis, head chef of Chez Panisse? Probably not. But you'll want to, once you see the gorgeous photographs and the two dozen, mouth-watering seasonal menus. Each includes three or four dishes offering exquisite twists on Moroccan, Catalonian, Mexican and seasonal California cuisine.

There's a reason this cookbook is the No. 1 editor's pick on Amazon.com. It will send your foodie friend into a swoon. And those who can't cook? They can still enjoy a platter of figs.

Quote from Tanis: "Simplicity is key. People who cook fussy food for their friends seem to have the least fun."

Thomas Keller's "Under Pressure: Cooking Sous Vide" (Artisan) is another weighty tome from the famous French Laundry chef chronicling his ongoing effort to reach culinary nirvana.

Sous vide refers to a cooking technique whereby raw food is sealed in a plastic bag and simmered at a precise, low temperature so that it cooks slowly and properly throughout.

Will you actually take this 300-page book into your kitchen and cook with it? Probably not, but it appeals to professional chefs and enthusiastic voyeurs alike.

Quote from Keller: "I think all chefs are fascinated by unfamiliar tools and want to see what can be done with them."

Clark Wolf's "American Cheeses" (Simon & Schuster) tells the story of America's best cheese producers, region by region and cheese by cheese.

The restaurant consultant who lives part time in Guerneville worked on the book for 10 years, and it is packed with fascinating anecdotes and cheesy tidbits.

Wolf's distinctive voice as a writer and the simple, black-and-white photos by Scott Mitchell create a lovely pairing. Curl up with it next to a fire, and you'll find it as satisfying as a piece of aged gouda.

Wolf's culinary friends from across the country contributed recipes, from Laura Chenel's Baked Goat Cheese Salad to New York chef Marcus Samuelsson's Black Pepper Cheesecake.

Quote from Wolf: "Eat good, natural, wholesome and delicious cheese in reasonable amounts and you'll be doing right by body and soul."

Shelly Kaldunski's "Cupcakes" (Fireside Books/Simon & Schuster) is a luscious little opus with tempting photos and recipes for bakers of all skill levels.

Kaldunski knows how to have fun with this bakeshop favorite, creating delicious twists like Rocky Road Cupcakes, Tiramisu Cupcakes and a PB&J Cupcake, perfect with ice-cold milk.

The pastry chef worked in several San Francisco restaurants before becoming a food stylist and food editor at Martha Stewart Living. She now teaches baking at the Santa Rosa Junior College Culinary Arts Department.

Quote from Kaldunski: "What's not to love about cupcakes?"

Guy Fieri's "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives" (William Morrow), written with Ann Volkwein, is based on his top-rated Food Network show by the same name.

Fieri, who lives in Santa Rosa and co-owns five restaurants in Northern California, won the second season of "The Next Food Network Star" and launched a second career as a TV host.

In the book, you get to ride along with the larger-than-life Fieri as he takes an All-American road trip to 60 of his favorite restaurants across the nation. From the A1 Diner in Gardiner, Maine, to Duarte's Tavern in Pescadero, these restaurants are the real deal, served up with a splash of Fieri's fiery enthusiasm.

Will you want to make the recipe for Rahall's Red Hot Weenie or the Chorizo Garbage Plate? That's up to you.

Quote from Fieri: "I'm just a dude that owns restaurants and loves people, likes to tell stories and to have a good time."

Steve Sando's "Heirloom Beans" (Chronicle Books), written with Vanessa Barrington, pops with bright graphics and yummy color photographs. It offers a guide to the 30-some varieties of heirloom beans Sando grows at Rancho Gordo, plus tips on buying, storing, soaking and cooking beans.

The foreword -- written by Thomas Keller -- shows how far the lowly bean has come since Sando started collecting heirloom varieties from all over the New World, then testing them in Napa.

Now chefs and home cooks from around the Bay Area flock to the farmers markets to buy his heirloom beans and showcase them in dishes ranging from Mediterranean bean dips to Latin American stews.

Quote from Sando: "The truth is all beans are superfoods -- loaded with protein and devoid of cholesterol."

You can reach Staff Writer Diane Peterson at 521-5287 or diane.peterson@pressdemocrat.com

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