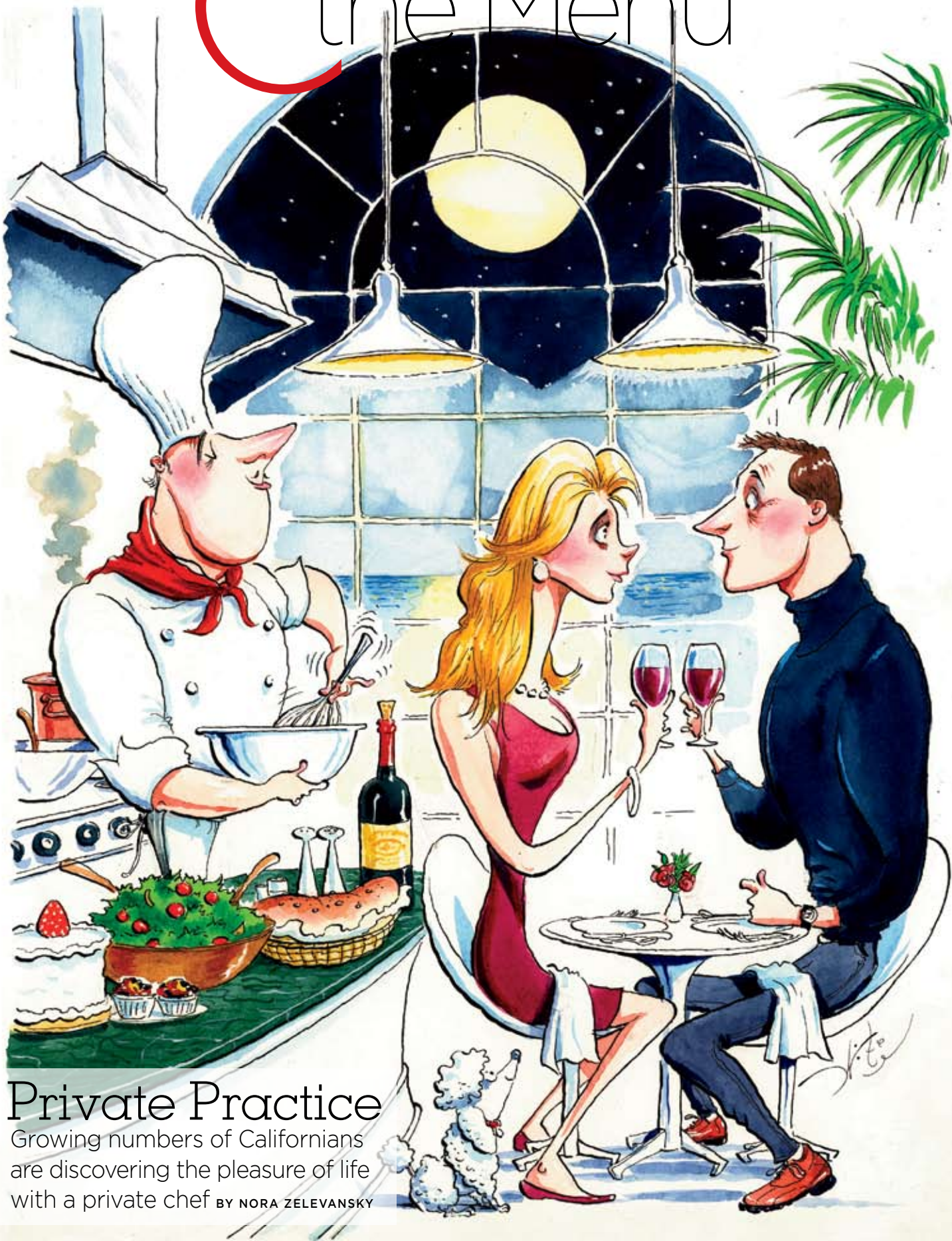


C the Menu



Private Practice

Growing numbers of Californians are discovering the pleasure of life with a private chef **BY NORA ZELEVANSKY**

Inside high-profile households—from screen sirens’ estates to media moguls’ spreads in Malibu—answering the question, “What’s for dinner?” is a complex proposition. Whether for a 200-guest dinner party or an intimate supper for two, large but effectively invisible staffs are responsible for putting on the show. Increasingly, the cornerstone of these well-oiled, behind-the-scenes machines is the private chef.

Depending on clients’ priorities, chefs may have exclusively culinary duties or even act as house managers. They may be plucked from swanky restaurants or “close” friends’ kitchens. Whatever the arrangement, private chefs are highly potent status symbols, key in putting a best foot forward. A truly great private chef acts as magician and mind reader—discerning unspoken needs, addressing health concerns, juggling outlandish requests, keeping abreast of trends and, most important, disappearing on cue.

Finding the right private chef is not simple. First, a distinction is made between private and personal chef. The latter works for multiple households, preparing and stowing the week’s meals with heating directions, while the former cooks exclusively for one employer, organizing breakfast, lunch, dinner (and over-the-top soirees) on a full-time basis.

A patient and flexible temperament is key for the private variety, according to Christian Paier, founder and president of Private Chefs, Inc., a Beverly Hills agency for in-home chefs. Paier himself worked as a billionaire’s chef for eight years. “Not every chef is right for the home. You have to be diplomatic and presentable, and you roll with the punches.” He continues, “Cuisine styles need to be varied, as one day a client might want Chinese; the next, Italian.”

Dietary restrictions add another hurdle for private chefs to jump. “Movie stars may strive to gain or lose weight for a role. Sting’s chef is macrobiotic, for example,

which is has become really popular in the last five years,” says Paier. “They say, ‘Never trust a skinny chef.’ In the private sector, it’s the opposite.”

Other requests for chefs to juggle include religious restrictions, levels of formality, kid-friendliness, private jet cooking (one plane had an emergency landing because of burned microwave popcorn), familiarity with illness and spontaneous or constant travel. “A Saudi Prince at university requested someone of Middle Eastern descent, while another gentleman requested a Japanese chef for his private island in Tahiti,” says the expert. “Just when you think you’ve seen it all, they throw you a curve ball.”

Paier launched Private Chefs, Inc. 13 years ago in Beverly Hills, the industry’s epicenter. In the last four years, he has opened seven new offices and is now developing a

TV show. Business, he says, is booming. “Look at *Forbes*. The rich are getting richer, and there’s more of them,” he enthuses. “The private chef is one of the most important roles on an estate.”

One culinary hired gun within Paier’s arsenal is Chef Albert Melera, whom the entrepreneur courted for three years before ultimately placing him with Adam Sandler, a client of six years. According to Melera, “L.A. is definitely the private chef mecca. There are more here than anywhere else in the world.”

Having cooked for everyone from John Travolta to Drew Barrymore, Melera confirms needs often vary depending on personality type. “I cooked for David Geffen, and every two weeks, he’d change his mind,” he confides. “I’d write a formal menu, and he’d fax it back to me. With Adam, it’s a lot more laid back. Satisfaction lies in being able to meet the desires of your boss. I think that’s why I’ve been with Adam so long. We gel, and he has a lot of respect for what I do.”

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CHEF’S CHOICE Private Chef

Lorin Adolph shares his essential shopping list for a weekend of gourmet cooking in Los Angeles

- **LA BREA BAKERY** “I always ask for George, for his wonderful service, and Michelle, who turns me onto the latest cheeses or smoked fish.” 624 S. La Brea Ave., L.A., 323-939-6813.
- **JOAN’S ON THIRD** “Their hand-wrapped burrata is as soft as a pillow.” 8346 W. Third St., L.A., 323-655-2285.
- **PURITAN POULTRY** “With a quick call ahead, these expert poultry fabricators will de-bone chicken thighs for you.” 6333 W. Third St., L.A., 323-938-0312.
- **BOULE** “They have a selection of super-fresh and hard to find spices from Le Sanctuaire.” 408 N. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., 310-289-9977.
- **O. & CO.** “I stock up on tomato powder and olive paste blends.” oliviersandco.com.
- **CITY BAKERY** “They carry a terrific selection of amazing sausages that Paul Bertolli [of Chez Panisse fame] is making.” 225 Sixth St., Santa Monica, 310-656-3040.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46 Melera cites a private chef's most important qualities as resourcefulness, intuitiveness, flexibility, boldness, experience, spontaneity and comfort under pressure.

For dinner parties, Melera always prepares for last-minute surprises (such as vegetarians or lactose intolerant folks), offering options a la restaurant dining. Since he often travels to remote locations with Sandler on movies, he'll call a hotel's executive chef in advance to form a relationship, beg use of its kitchen and research local resources and restaurants. At home, Melera favors the Santa Monica farmers' markets and Bristol Farms on Doheny Drive for the freshest seasonal ingredients.

Although he says he'll never go back to working in restaurants, Melera credits his vast commercial kitchen experience with making him a better private chef. "You can be a great cook, but there are few people in the restaurant world with enough experience to switch over," he asserts. "As a private chef, you change your menu every day. You have to have experience and a deep repertoire."

Still, not all employers feel restaurant chefs are best suited to the home. One employer of a private chef in Los Angeles, who is married to a prominent entertainment industry mogul, CONTINUED ON PAGE 106

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SELECTION

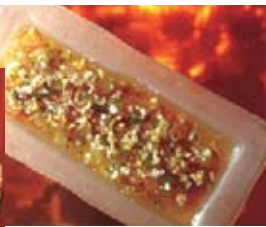
EXEMPLARY ITEMS FROM CLASSIC CALIFORNIA MENUS

LA JOLLA

In 1965, bartender Ray Arcibal blended hefty scoops of cool vanilla ice cream with the warm goodness of crème

de cacao, brandy and Kahlúa. The now-signature result:

The Whaler—like a milkshake for grown-ups—served to navy-blazered patrons unwinding at the pintucked leather booths of La Valencia Hotel's famed The Whaling Bar and Grill. 1132 Prospect St., La Jolla, 858-454-0771; lavalencia.com.



Winter Wonderland

Top chefs take advantage of the season's bounty

QUINCE

COMPOSITION OF SUCKLING PIG WITH HOT QUINCE GELEE, CARAWAY-CABBAGE, BROWN BUTTER
Christopher Kostow, Chez TJ, Mountain View

DUNGENESS CRAB

DUNGENESS CRAB + PRAWN LOUIE WITH AVOCADO, EGG, OLIVES AND CUCUMBER
Evan Treadwell, Lido at Dolphin Bay, Pismo Beach

CHESTNUTS

GRILLED VEAL CHOPS WITH CHESTNUT STUFFING AND PICKLED GOLDEN RAISINS
Suzanne Goin, Lucques, Los Angeles



SAN FRANCISCO

MANGIA MARINA

San Francisco's Marina District may be rife with Gaps and Pottery Barns, but the wine-and-dine scene from which the city's gourmet reputation hangs is also abuzz, what with A16, Mamacita and newcomer **Laiola**. At this sultry, copper-ceilinged brainchild of Frisson's energetic owners, it may be hard to choose between cocktails and wine, but one sure bet is the Merguez-esque lamb meatballs. 2031 Chestnut St., S.F., 415-346-5641; laiola.com.

BY ALISON CLARE STEINGOLD

WHALER: COURTESY OF LA VALENCIA HOTEL

IT BAG

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chicest women I know are carrying interesting, anonymous satchels found off-the-beaten track, or they're recycling their old status bags with an ironic wink. My most fashionable friend has put her early Marc Jacobs buttery black leather hobo back into circulation. Another carries a no-name, '70s-era, coffee-colored haversack bought on the street in Florence. And the *New York Times* Styles section's Bill Cunningham recently snapped photos of scores of Manhattan women schlepping not your standard over-the-shoulder super bags, but discreet (if cumbersome) clutches.

The big name designers, perhaps sensing the consumer malaise, have begun to up the ante, unveiling high-concept bags seemingly meant to signify a woman's artistic spirit rather than her jet set status. For spring, Prada will offer whimsical multi-colored striped handbags, some depicting

Art Nouveau fairies. Fendi has shown Mondrian-inspired "Color Block" and "Patchwork" purses, and, this fall, an impractical, oversized envelope: the clutch on growth hormones. At Louis Vuitton, artist Richard Prince has reinterpreted the house's classic brown duffel—in suede, bright pastels and with cartoon graphics. Finally, Marc Jacobs presented a Schiaparellian duo of bags: a grandmotherly snap-shut pouch affixed to the side of shopping tote.

Bags such as these point to the primary reason behind the decline of the Its. While designers are correct that women desire novelty in their accessories, they do not seem to have accounted for how the escalating cost of such accoutrements (due to the poor exchange rate, among other factors) would affect consumer behavior. In a recent *New York Times* article titled, "Is This It for the It Bag," Eric Wilson compared the "handbag bubble" to the luxury housing bubble and asked whether the former may also be about to

burst. When the economy is hiccuping, it no longer seems acceptable to spend the equivalent of a monthly mortgage payment on a piece of ornamented leather.

There are certainly women who are still willing to pay thousands of dollars for a handbag (Hermès Birkin bags are as in-demand as ever), but these women do not want to see their investment—or a shoddy imitation of it—on every shoulder in America. And so many are steering clear of blockbuster bags, the most likely candidates for knock-offs, in favor of the handiwork of designers such as Anya Hindmarch, Luella Bartley, Nancy Gonzalez, Devi Kroell and Kendall Conrad. Some, particularly California women, are forgoing a purse altogether and carrying the essentials in their car. Still, others have figured out what WASPs have long known: When everyone looks rich—the point, in the end, of any It bag—the surest way to stand out is to appear like you're not trying. That old cracked leather sack? That'll do. ●

PRIVATE PRACTICE

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had a bad experience with a commercial chef. "He was just out of a restaurant and wanted more flexible hours," says the client, "but it was a very hard transition into catering to our needs, stocking the fridge and maintaining a clean kitchen."

The client's household necessitates a hybrid chef/house manager, so a chef with more private experience fared better. "Our new chef is great and his only experience is working in homes. He does everything: manages the house, takes the cats to the vet, organizes parties for 120 people." He's also not too proud to pick up take-out.

Most important, the chef's personality must mesh. "It's like a marriage. I see him more than I see my husband," the client explains.

One private chef who knows a thing or two about long-term relationships is

Lorin Adolph, who has remained loyal to one employer for 17 years. He and his boss, a hugely successful real estate and investment mogul, travel between Chicago and Malibu on a bi-weekly basis. Adolph's lengthy tenure with his employer has taught him the value of chemistry. "When I graduated from The Culinary Institute of America in 1984, Gloria Vanderbilt was looking for a chef," he recalls. "I remember she went through a lot of people. Being sensitive to your client's needs is hugely important. You watch the plates come back, cleaned or not cleaned, and you try to expand their horizons with new preparations or ingredients."

Adolph takes care of his client, bringing him matzo ball soup when he's ill. But he also places importance on knowing when to back off. "The private part is harder than the chef part. I'm there when I'm needed, and I try to be out of the way when I'm not," he explains. "Many people who have

private chefs tend to want their lives to be private as well."

Adolph is intimately acquainted with his employer's needs, and also the likes and dislikes of frequent visitors, routinely contacting guests in advance to research restrictions. "I cater to dietary needs without anyone feeling denied." For example, his boss loves heirloom tomatoes with burrata, but he must take into account that a pregnant guest would avoid soft cheese. Occasionally, he'll recreate favorite restaurant dishes as well. Once, after visiting Ben Ford's former restaurant Chadwick, his employer's wife asked him to reprise the first course. While shopping for ingredients, he actually ran into Ben Ford.

And that's the beauty of L.A. Adolph raves about the fabulous specialty shops and markets in California. "When we're in Malibu, I'm at Santa Monica's farmers' market every Saturday," he exclaims. "Even when it's raining, I think about all that beautiful produce that needs rescuing. I love coming to California." ●