

THE REAL MASTER CHEF

DECONSTRUCTING DAVID KINCH: How Manresa's resident genius is confidently changing the course of California cuisine

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SECRET INGREDIENT:
Many of the Bay Area's celebrated chefs—and the most distinctive dishes on their menus—bear the unmistakable imprint of David Kinch. His boldly original approach has pushed the Bay Area to the top of the list of international dining destinations.

SEE PAGE 48



**David Kinch
steps up to
the plate**

IN THIS AGE OF FLASH-IN-THE-PAN CULINARY STARDOM, MANRESA'S INNOVATIVE LEADER HAS BUILT HIS REPUTATION THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY—AT A SLOW SIMMER. HIS CAREFUL REINVENTION OF CALIFORNIA CUISINE HAS EARNED HIM THE RESPECT OF HIS PEERS AND THE PRESS, AND TODAY HE STANDS AS ONE OF THE GREATEST CHEFS OF HIS GENERATION.

BY JOSH SENS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK HOLTHUSEN





In early 2008, David Kinch, the man behind two-Michelin-starred Manresa in Los Gatos, agreed to appear on *Iron Chef America*, committing to a competition that gave him pause. Kinch hardly has the makings of a Food Network personality. Soft-spoken, bookish, a reluctant self-promoter, he's something of an anti-celebrity chef. The producers of the show had tried to land Kinch before, but he'd turned the offer down: The idea of culinary competitions runs counter to his vision of what cooking is about. But when the second invite came, times had changed. Economic quakes were rattling high-end restaurants around the country. Alarmed by the slowdown in his own dining room, Kinch shelved his reservations about reality TV.



"In a climate like that, I figured that any publicity was good publicity," Kinch says. "And I decided that as long as I was going to do the show, I might as well try to win."

Kinch didn't just win. He trounced Food Network star Bobby Flay in a cabbage-themed cook-off, his 10-point victory amounting to a food-world version of a landslide at the polls. Watch the episode on YouTube, and you feel a twinge of pity for the outmatched Flay. To Flay's pedestrian take on corned beef and cabbage, Kinch responds with a modernist reworking of stuffed cabbage, a napoleon of sorts composed of rutabaga, turnip, fennel, and onion layered between leaves of savoy cabbage. Where Flay contents himself with filet mignon and kimchee, Kinch conjures a dish he calls Cabbage Patch, a gathering of cabbage stems and leaves, some raw, some cooked, over bits of country ham, splashed with a riesling dressing and underpinned by a toasted-hazelnut-and-chicory "soil" that has since become one of Kinch's most imitated creations.

From a business standpoint, the show paid off; no sooner had it aired than Manresa's phone lines flooded. But for Kinch, 15 minutes of fame were enough. After the taping, when others might have pressed for more attention, the chef retreated from the spotlight, returning to his post as the artful curator of his out-of-the-way restaurant, where, it just so happens, a more lasting kind of recognition has found him anyway.

Kinch, who is 50—an elder statesman by industry standards—is the leader of a movement that is fashioning nothing less than a defining new genre of regional cuisine.

Just how to characterize that cuisine is a slippery question; like most original forms, it eludes classification. But you know it when you see it, and you see it at a host of the Bay Area's most interesting restaurants, where a Kinchian aesthetic clearly holds sway. Some, like James Syhabout's Commis in Oakland and Napa's Ubuntu under Jeremy Fox, were launched by chefs who trained in Kinch's kitchen. Others, like Saison and Commonwealth in San Francisco, have no direct lineage from Manresa but could pass for blood relations in the way they turn our regional conventions on their side.

The sum of these efforts led *GQ*'s restaurant critic, Alan Richman, in July 2011, to call out San Francisco as the most exciting dining scene in the country and Kinch as its central figure. In December, the same magazine named Kinch its chef of the year.

To Kinch, the attention is both flattering and bemusing. "It's been fun, and I've enjoyed it," he says, "though I'm almost embarrassed by it." But to his peers and protégés, the recognition has been a long time coming.

"David Kinch is a guru to a younger generation," says Teague Moriarty, of Sons & Daughters in San Francisco. "In everything we do here, we owe our gratitude to him." Syhabout, who served as Kinch's chef de cuisine—and also as his assistant on *Iron Chef*—before earning a

Michelin star for his own restaurant, *Commis*, says, “It may sound like a bold statement, but when you think of all the people who have come through his kitchen, and the way his style has spread to other restaurants, David Kinch has done more than any chef since Alice Waters to reshape California cuisine.”

There is, of course, no matching the extent of Waters’s impact, its ripples having spread from the White House garden to school cafeterias across the country. And like every sentient chef in the country, Kinch acknowledges his debt to Waters. “Anybody who has put the time and resources into procuring the quality of ingredients that she has—how can you not have deep respect for that?” he says. “At *Chez Panisse*, they have very strong opinions and aesthetics, and they have stuck to them, when the easiest thing for them to do would be to stint. I think that’s really honorable.”

Yet many claim that California cuisine as expressed by its original avatar has long been stuck in a creative rut: “It’s not cooking, it’s shopping” is the common complaint. Kinch offers a way out: What happens in his kitchen represents the pinnacle of both cooking and shopping. Not only does Kinch source his produce


that the chef, Dominique Crenn, was doing her own take on David Kinch.

Kinch himself is not above borrowing from other chefs. One of his signature dishes—a lightly poached egg served in its shell and layered with sherry vinegar, crème fraîche, and maple syrup—is intended as an homage to one of his idols, Alain Passard of *L’Arpège* restaurant in Paris.

AN OMNIVOROUS CONSUMER OF FOOD WRITING

and an open admirer of a great number of chefs (he counts Passard, France’s Michel Bras, and René Redzepi of *Noma* in Copenhagen among those he follows closely), Kinch is on a constant hunt for bleeding-edge ideas. Even when he can’t claim wholesale credit for them (“I’m leery of anyone who claims to be original,” he says), his frequent contribution is to take a fresh conceit and recast it in a novel California context.

Take the case of green strawberries, unripe incarnations of the fruit that taste like red strawberries on an acid trip. Kinch first saw a reference to them about six years ago, while skimming through Redzepi’s cookbook *Noma Nordic Cuisine*. Intrigued, he rang up Joe Schirmer of *Dirty Girl Produce* in Santa Cruz, asking if he



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almost exclusively from Love Apple Farms, in the Santa Cruz Mountains; he also draws out the character of those products through preparations that the average restaurant kitchen (never mind the average farmers’ market shopper) could never reproduce.

To crystallize the contrast between the two chefs’ styles, consider an iconic dish from Alice Waters: the baby lettuce-and-goat cheese salad, a fixture on the menu at the *Chez Panisse Café* since the 1980s. Perhaps the closest corollary at *Manresa* is a Kinch signature called *Into the Vegetable Garden*, the inspiration for the *Cabbage Patch* that Kinch unveiled on *Iron Chef*. Like that dish, *Into the Vegetable Garden* is a 3-D culinary still life, an assemblage of raw and cooked vegetables (tatsoi leaves and turnips, leeks and dandelions, beets and baby carrots—whatever Love Apple Farms has furnished the kitchen with that week) planted on a bed of Kinch’s edible “soil.”


Just as Waters’s leafy specialty spawned countless doppelgängers, homages to Kinch’s dish have, more recently, cropped up in dining rooms around the Bay Area. Or so it seems to me from the “salads” I’ve enjoyed at, among other places, *Commonwealth*, *Sons & Daughters*, and *Saison*. When a server at *Atelier Crenn* in San Francisco brought me a diorama-like dish called *Walk in the Forest*—a sprouting of mushrooms on a meringue “forest” floor—I couldn’t help thinking

could get his hands on some. “I thought he was nuts,” Schirmer says. “Who in the world was going to want to eat them?”

Pickled and raw, sliced and whole, green strawberries soon appeared on Kinch’s menus as garnishes on meats, as accompaniments to raw-fish dishes, as tart and crunchy counterpoints to geoduck clam in a soy marinade. It wasn’t long before other Bay Area chefs caught on.

“Within months,” Schirmer says, “I get a call from another restaurant, then another, and another. It seems to go like that a lot. David gets onto something, and before you know it, it’s everywhere.” Plenty of other unsung ingredients (fava leaves and ice plant come to mind) have become cult stars on a multitude of Bay Area menus thanks in large part to Kinch.

I can hardly keep track of the number of prodigious talents who openly point to Kinch as their inspiration. Teague Moriarty of *Sons & Daughters* refers to Kinch as “my longtime idol.” His restaurant’s one-acre garden in Los Gatos is an attempt, in miniature, to mimic *Manresa*’s link to Love Apple Farms. Jeremy Fox, who was obsessed with charcuterie when he arrived in Kinch’s kitchen, went on to open *Ubuntu*, where he won accolades for his sophisticated vegetarian menu. (More recently, Fox and Charlie Parker, another *Manresa* alumnus, have teamed up at *Freddy Smalls Bar + Kitchen*, a small-plates restaurant in Los Angeles.) Fox



The 22-acre Love Apple Farms is David Kinch’s personal Eden. It’s the source of his inspiration—and of almost all the produce served at *Manresa*.



describes his former boss as his defining mentor; “the guy who taught me how to think outside the box.” And Jason Fox, of Commonwealth, expresses admiration for a large handful of chefs, but his most quotable commendation came when he told *GQ*, “I worship at the temple of David Kinch.”

TO A BAY AREA DINER, IT CAN SOMETIMES SEEM as if the foremost requisites for a restaurant kitchen job are intimidating piercings and tattoo sleeves. Kinch has neither. But there is a lot of ink on his résumé. That document is a list of eclectic experiences that have taken him around the world and inspired a distinctive approach to cooking and to the job of running a kitchen.

The son of an oil industry engineer, Kinch bounced around the South throughout his childhood as his father moved from one refinery to another; he put down his deepest roots in New Orleans. As a teenager

went to France, where he further mastered the fundamentals. What’s more, he got a chance to really eat.

On his days off, Kinch made pilgrimages to some of the world’s great restaurants, including Paul Bocuse’s three-Michelin-starred L’Auberge du Pont de Collonges. But the meal that left the most lasting impression took place at Restaurant Alain Chapel, outside Lyon.

Even today, Kinch says, recollections of that evening “make the hair on my arms stand on end.” Chapel’s tasting menu, which drew from a garden near his restaurant, included roasted pigeon with braised baby lettuces, peas, and mint in a delicate butter sauce enriched with foie gras. There was also turbot in red-wine sauce; crawfish with vermicelli and chicken liver; and deep-fried white fish called goujons. It was beautiful food, but deceptively simple, each dish stripped of frills so that only the flavors at its heart remained.

“I remember going back to my room that night and having a weepy moment,” Kinch says. “Here I was

Recollections of a meal at Restaurant Alain Chapel outside Lyon “make the hair on my arms stand on end,” says Kinch. “I remember going back to my room that night and having a weepy moment. Here I was thinking I was this hotshot cook who knew everything. Then I have this meal, and suddenly, everything I’d been doing up until then seemed like bullshit.”

there, he took grunt jobs at assorted local restaurants, including Commander’s Palace under Paul Prudhomme, and came to see a sweaty glamour in the work.

“From the start, I was drawn to the cooks,” Kinch says. “I’d go into the kitchen, and there were these very profane guys with flames licking all around them, and they seemed to exude a disdain for everything. But at the same time, they were creating something, and they seemed very happy.”

Kinch’s college years took him to culinary school, at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island. It was 1979, a time when such degrees were low on prestige but high on pragmatism. His classmates were mostly older students: military veterans and assorted thirtysomethings searching for a second or third career.

Then, degree in hand, he moved through jobs of increasing importance at first back in New Orleans and then in New York. In 1983, he was hired as sous chef at Le Meurice, a purveyor of contemporary French classics in Manhattan; later, he was taken on as head chef at La Petite Ferme, another New York City restaurant where one learned to pound out chicken paillards in one’s sleep.

“I was 23, and I was in charge,” Kinch says. “But at that point in my career, it didn’t feel quite right. I felt like I needed to be learning from someone.”

As it happened, the brother of the owner of La Petite Ferme had a well-regarded restaurant, Hôtel de la Poste, in Burgundy, and so, with that connection, Kinch

thinking I was this hotshot cook who knew everything. Then I have this meal, and suddenly, everything I’d been doing up until then seemed like bullshit.”

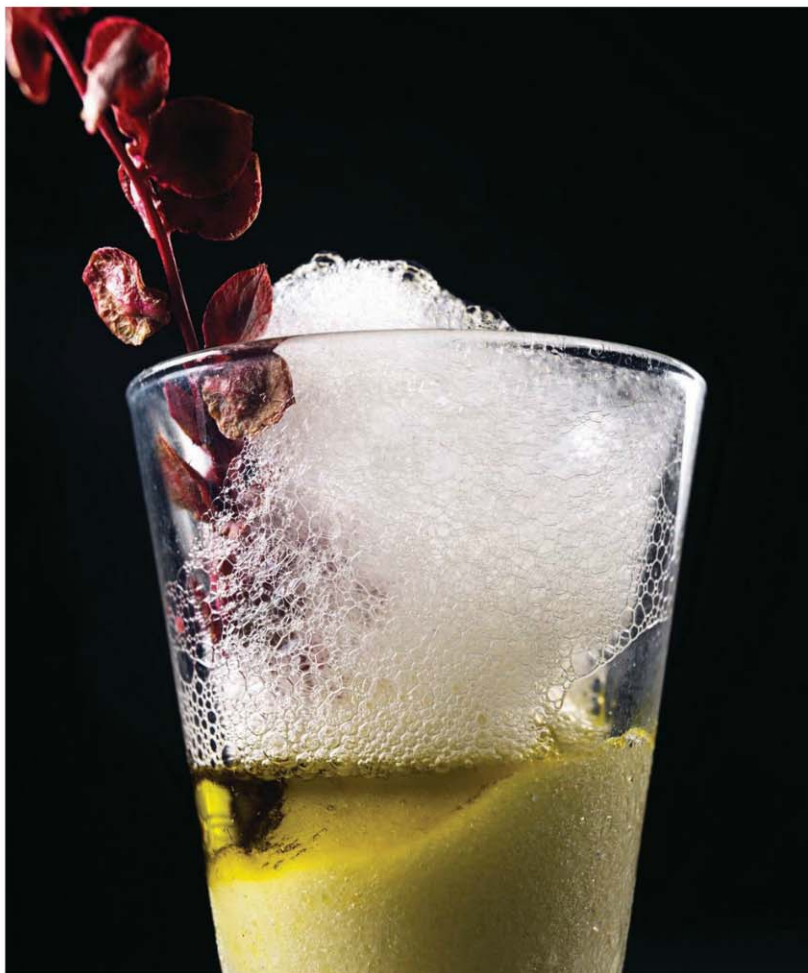
Returning to New York determined to try something different, Kinch found his way to the Quilted Giraffe, a defining 1980s-era restaurant that ran counter to everything the country knew of high cuisine. Run by Barry Wine, a former attorney and self-taught chef, the kitchen turned its back on Gallic tropes (this was not a place for flour-thickened sauces), trafficking instead in everything from flash-cooked beef negimaki to such native riffs on French staples as duck confit with creamed corn. Widely hailed as a groundbreaking restaurant, the Quilted Giraffe helped shape the careers of a disproportionate number of contemporary food-world bigwigs—the celebrity chef Tom Colicchio and Jan Birnbaum of San Francisco’s Epic Roasthouse are just two of the acclaimed cooks who once worked with Wine.

The restaurant left a vivid mark on Kinch as well. Among other influences, it sparked his interest in Japanese cuisine, an interest manifested at Manresa today not just in the frequent use of ingredients like shiso, dashi, and seaweed but also in a minimalist style that allows the essence of each product to shine.

“When I go to Japan, it still blows me away how fresh and original so much of the cooking seems,” Kinch says. “I’ll have a dish that’s nothing more than eggplant with fish in a simple broth. Very familiar ingredients, but somehow they’re presented in a way that seems completely new.” ▶

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Carrots from Love Apple Farms are paired with fresh coriander flowers, stems, seeds, and roots; foie gras and trompette squash royale with squash-
flower tempura and exotic spices; a courgette sorbet made with various summer pumpkins, pistachio oil, and a lemon emulsion; aged and hung wood pigeon roasted whole in savory salt.





THE KINCH EFFECT

HIS PROGENY

A GENERATION OF CHEFS WHO'VE TRAINED AT MANRESA ARE TAKING WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED FROM KINCH AND LEADING THE WAY TO A NEW CALIFORNIA CUISINE

Kim Alter

Kinch's collaborative style marked a change for Alter after years of working in more classically structured kitchens. "David taught me that the process of creating a dish can happen organically. Everything doesn't have to fit onto a three-compartment plate." Alter later worked at **Ubuntu** with Jeremy Fox and a handful of other Manresa alumni, before opening **Plate Shop** in Sausalito. Her cooking there may have been a little too forward-thinking for Marin; she left after just six months. Alter now heads the kitchen at **Haven** in Oakland.

Belinda Leong

After a nine-year run at **Restaurant Gary Danko**, Leong took on the top job in the pastry kitchen at Manresa in 2010. "When I would create desserts, he would always want to change something up," recalls Leong. "He pushed me to make things that would cause people to say, 'Hmm...'" She left Manresa after 13 months to start **b. patisserie**, a wholesale pastry business, with an eye to opening a shop sometime in the future.

Jeremy Fox

Meat was the focus of Fox's interest when he started working in the kitchen at Manresa. But by the time Fox left, four years later, Kinch had persuaded him that vegetables were a more interesting ingredient. Fox went on to open **Ubuntu**, where his groundbreaking vegetarian menu led the *New York Times* to name the restaurant the second-best in the country in 2008. Fox left **Ubuntu** in 2010 and is currently working on restaurant projects in Los Angeles.

Kendra Baker

In 2007, Kinch plucked Baker from the kitchen at **Bar Tartine** to head his pastry department. Baker, who left in 2010 to open the **Penny Ice Creamery** in downtown Santa Cruz, describes her time at Manresa as "magical."

Charlie Parker

Kinch was instrumental in getting Parker the top job at the **Cellar Door Café**—owned by renegade winemaker Randall Graham—which went on to be profiled in the *New York Times*. After a brief turn at **Plum**, Parker is now in Los Angeles, preparing to open **Freddy Smalls Bar + Kitchen** with Fox.

Marty Cattaneo

Cattaneo landed at Manresa in 2006 and worked as Kinch's sous chef for two years before heading to Napa to work at **Ubuntu**. He briefly worked at **Plum** until he broke both his feet cheering for the San Francisco Giants in the 2010 World Series. He has since returned to Los Gatos to be the executive chef at **Dio Deka**, where, this past October, the Michelin Guides awarded him a star.

James Syhabout

After arriving in Manresa's kitchen in 2003 at the age of 22, Syhabout worked his way up to sous chef before leaving in 2005 to take the top job at **PlumpJack Café**. His modernist style never quite caught on with the Marina crowd, and Syhabout returned to Manresa to be chef de cuisine in 2006. Three years later he opened **Commis** in Oakland, where he was awarded a Michelin star in 2010. In May of 2011, he also opened **Hawker Fare**, with a menu inspired by the Thai food he learned to cook from his mother.

Deanie Hickox

Hickox worked in Manresa's pastry kitchen from 2003 to 2007, when she left to join Fox (the two were married at the time) at **Ubuntu**. "David has stayed true to what he envisioned Manresa could be and hasn't wavered from that," she says. "He taught me to trust my judgment without compromising for what's popular." After a run as pastry chef for the Daniel Patterson Group, where she worked in the kitchens at both **Coi** and **Plum**, Hickox is now taking some time off.



HIS LEXICON

KINCH'S DISTINCTIVE PLATING INVITES DINERS TO THINK ABOUT A DISH'S ORIGINS AND THE ROLES THAT FLAVORS PLAY.



VISUAL PUNS

Manresa's tasting menu begins and ends with madeleines and pâté de fruits. Though the dishes look identical, the flavors are savory at the start (black-olive cookies and red-pepper jellies) and sweet at the end (chocolate madeleines and strawberry candies). Kinch calls it a signal that the meal has come full circle.



SOMETHING BORROWED

One of the kitchen's trademark dishes is a lightly poached egg, served in its shell, layered with maple syrup and cream and topped with snipped chives. Called *L'Arpège* Farm Egg, the dish is an homage to French chef Alain Passard, who serves an egg just like it at *L'Arpège*, his restaurant in Paris.



EDIBLE DIRT

This blend of chicory and ground almonds is perhaps Kinch's best-known creation. The "soil" is the result of a collaboration between several cooks in his kitchen and is a key element in Manresa's signature salad, *Into the Vegetable Garden*.



PLATED LANDSCAPES

Dishes like *Into the Vegetable Garden* and *Winter Tide Pool* are edible landscapes intended to suggest very specific places—in this case *Love Apple Farms* and *Monterey Bay*. With this naturalistic style of plating, Kinch hopes to evoke a sense of place both visually and in terms of flavor.

KINCH'S AESTHETIC WAS STILL EVOLVING WHEN

he settled in the Bay Area in 1988. Among other jobs, he worked at Silks, in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in San Francisco, where he bridled at the demands of a kitchen that required him to set everything aside when an order for a room service hamburger came in. At 34, with an "early midlife crisis" already behind him (a crisis that had driven him, post-Silks, to sell his possessions and travel the globe, visiting 28 countries over the course of a year), Kinch felt ready to launch his own venture. He saw his chance in a crumpled want ad: A restaurant in Saratoga was for sale. Kinch bought it. Inspired by the food of Catalonia, a region he knew intimately from his travels, Kinch christened the space Sent Soví, medieval Catalan for "sweet taste." It was 1994.

The upside of the South Bay at the time was the memories it stirred of Catalonia's *mar-i-muntanya* landscape. The downside was its sleepy restaurant culture: the presence of sweetbreads, squab, and squid

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ink on his menu prompted no small number of puzzled looks from diners. Sure enough, though his restaurant gained a local following and sufficient critical acclaim (in 1996 the *San Francisco Chronicle* awarded it three stars and named Kinch a Rising Star Chef), by 2002 he had decided that the scope of his ambitions had outgrown the modest space.

With an eye out for a new venue, Kinch searched first in San Francisco, but that hunt came to a halt when he ran across a site in downtown Los Gatos: the shell of a building that had once housed a tearoom.

"Los Gatos didn't have the energy of a big city, but I loved that," Kinch says. "I'd almost always been in cities, and that's partly why I relished the idea of being outside one. I liked the idea of being off the beaten path." But most of all, Kinch wanted a location that would provide what he considers a restaurant's most vital quality—a sense of place.

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When you show up at Manresa, it's not immediately apparent just how the restaurant fits with its location—a low-slung commercial district. Unlike Chez Panisse, a landmark of Berkeley's gourmet ghetto, or the French Laundry, which looks as if it has sprung from a Yountville vineyard, or even Coi, where the neighboring North Beach strip clubs provide a fleshy foil to Daniel

Patterson's cerebral aesthetic, Manresa could be plopped down in almost any well-heeled Silicon Valley suburb.

Yet when Kinch talks about a sense of place, he means something richer than real estate. It's not the Los Gatos address of his kitchen so much as the provenance of the ingredients used there that sets his restaurant apart.

Before she met Kinch, Cynthia Sandberg, a back-to-the-land former attorney, had run Love Apple Farms as a bootstrap business, with a roadside stand that sold tomatoes in the summer and seasonal vegetables throughout the year. From time to time, restaurateurs had sought her out as a source of produce, but she'd never found one who felt like the right fit. That changed in 2005, when Sandberg celebrated her birthday at Manresa. When Kinch emerged from the kitchen to make his rounds of the dining room, he and Sandberg got to talking, and Kinch asked to buy some of her produce. "I'd had some wine, so David caught me at a good time," Sandberg says. "Plus, it was the most amazing meal I'd ever had."

TODAY, LOVE APPLE FARMS AND MANRESA EXIST

in symbiosis. Kinch is Sandberg's sole customer, and she supplies the restaurant with 90 percent of its produce. Having a farm dedicated to his needs helps Kinch narrow the farm-to-table gap. But the chef insists that his relationship with Sandberg goes beyond locavore politics. "Love Apple isn't about touting organics or getting all your ingredients within a 50-mile radius," he says. "It's about giving people pleasure by putting the best possible product on the plate."

The farm also gives Kinch access to produce throughout its life cycle, encouraging the kind of seed-to-flower cooking (not just the fennel's bulb but its pollen, too) that has fertilized so many local menus of late. Sandberg grows malabar spinach; ficoïde glaciale, a slightly tart, crunchy ice plant; and an intensely flavored herb known as quilqiña (think of it as cilantro on steroids), among other obscure items that are now a little less obscure because of Kinch.

On the beautifully terraced 22-acre property tucked into the folds of the Santa Cruz Mountains, Sandberg and her crew employ biodynamic practices developed by Rudolf Steiner—burying cows' horns filled with dung and stags' bladders stuffed with yarrow in the ground as a means of enriching the soil, for example—that raise an eyebrow or two. But Kinch is a believer, at least in the results.

"Does the cow horn help? I don't know," he says. "What I do know is that all of these practices force you to pay attention to the most minute details. They require you to think about

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 70)



DAVID KINCH STEPS UP TO THE PLATE

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everything you're doing, which is a lot like what we strive for in the kitchen."

The farm's location, just off Highway 17, makes it an easy stop on Kinch's route between his restaurant and his home in Santa Cruz, which he shares with Pim Techamuanvivit, who writes the popular food blog Chez Pim. A cook in her own right, Techamuanvivit markets a line of homemade marmalades and jams and teaches cooking classes—macaroons and Thai curries are among her specialties—at Love Apple Farms. In their downtime, the two engage in diversions that you might expect from the pairing of a food geek and a vaunted chef. They forage for wild mushrooms. They light out onto Monterey Bay in Kinch's sailboat to harvest seawater, which they use to make their own salt.

Kinch is also an enthusiastic surfer, with a kickback bearing that extends into the kitchen. Unlike the chef-tyrant stereotype, he rarely raises his voice, and he never



On one of her first days in the kitchen, Kim Alter came to work prepared to use a ruler, as she had been trained, to measure the dimensions of a sunchoke brunoise. Kinch nudged her toward a less symmetrical chop. If a carrot fell haphazardly on a plate and Alter reached instinctively to reposition it, Kinch would wave her hand off, saying, "That's where it wants to be."

launches frying pans as a means of enforcing discipline. To call attention to a line cook's sloppiness, he might gently observe, "Your station looks like southern Lebanon."

He also runs his kitchen in a more democratic style than most cooks are used to. It's an approach he says he picked up from Barry Wine, who treated his employees at the Quilted Giraffe as his peers, mining them for their ideas and entrusting them with tasks that other chefs decline to delegate.

Many of Manresa's finest dishes have evolved through teamwork, including Kinch's Into the Vegetable Garden, which came about in part through Kim Alter's tinkering with some of the produce and Zack Freitas's fine-tuning of the edible "soil."

Alter, now the chef at Daniel Patterson's latest restaurant, Haven, in Jack London Square in Oakland, started working at Manresa in 2006, fresh off stints in type-A kitchens at Masa's, La Folie, and Restaurant Gary Danko. The contrast at Manresa came as something of a shock. On one of her first days there, Alter came to work prepared to use a ruler, as she'd been trained, to measure the dimensions of a sunchoke brunoise. Kinch nudged her toward a less symmetrical chop. If a carrot fell haphazardly on a plate and Alter reached instinctively to reposition it, Kinch would wave her hand off, saying, "That's where it wants to be."

Experimentation is expected. "David has never been afraid to make mistakes," says James Syhabout, who recalls

one in particular: a marriage of sea urchin and persimmon. “He gave me a taste of it, and it was absolutely disgusting,” Syhabout says. “We both looked at each other like, ‘OK, well, now we know.’”

That experimental spirit leads to far more hits than misses. On my most recent visit to Manresa, I was struck by a simple broccoli custard, crowded with vadouvan-dusted sunflower seeds. The seeds were left intact, not ground to a powder or puréed into a paste—looking much as they do in a supermarket bulk bin. I was hard-pressed to think of another Bay Area chef who could present this humble item in such bare-nakedness while elevating it to something so elegant and pure.

The deceptive simplicity of the dish also called to mind something Kinch had told me in the course of one of our phone interviews. (Because of my need to remain an anonymous restaurant critic, I have never met the chef face-to-face.) His idea of great cooking, Kinch said, “is when you keep removing things from the plate until there’s nothing left you can remove.”

CHARLIE PARKER WAS JUST 19 WHEN HE TURNED UP AT Manresa in 2004, but he knew instantly that it was a different kind of restaurant. “Everything about it felt revolutionary,” Parker says. “I’d eaten at the French Laundry, where everything was prepared absolutely perfectly but still seemed like an outgrowth of the French canon. This was something else. Everything was prepared with incredible attention to detail, but at the same time there was this incredible sense of play.”

Zack Freitas, who recently took on the job of chef de cuisine at Zaré at Fly Trap, came to Manresa after working at wd-50, the famously forward-reaching Manhattan restaurant where Wylie Dufresne employs such creations as popcorn pudding and fried mayonnaise. He encountered in Kinch a chef who knew all the technical tricks but refused to use them just to show he could.

“There is no showboating,” Freitas says. “Everything is about bringing out the essence of ingredients. Is there a simple name for that? I’m not sure.”

Ask Kinch to classify himself, and he, too, fumbles for an answer. He’ll tell you what he likes: roasting food in salt; seaweed; old ceramic cookware; cooking proteins on the bone. He’s not big on sous-vide, at least not with meat and fish. (The consistent results it offers, he says, are “not enough of a trade-off for the loss of textural integrity of each given product.”) He’s not entirely opposed to postmodern techniques—he occasionally employs hydrocolloids and modified starches—but, he says, “if you can see them, then we’ve gone too far.” Taken as a whole, he finds the molecular gastronomy trend misguided. “Chefs imitating what Ferran Adrià did at elBulli made creativity their supreme value,” he says. “Big mistake. That’s why the movement is dying a slow death. Taste and the experience of the guest are the things that matter most.”

LIKE MANY CHEFS WHO CAME UP THROUGH MANRESA, James Syhabout describes himself as one of Kinch’s “kids.” Kinch returns the favor by embracing staff like family. “The unwritten deal I make with anyone who works for me is that

they give it their all and I teach them whatever I can, and when it's time for them to move on, they do so with my blessing and my undying support," Kinch says. "That to me is where the greatest satisfaction lies—when someone leaves Manresa and goes on to do something wonderful of their own."

Yet where most restaurants burn through young cooks like so much kindling, Manresa's employees tend to linger. John Paul Carmona, Kinch's former chef de cuisine and now his pastry chef, is a five-year Manresa veteran. Syhabou spent four years as Kinch's right-hand man, and then, after taking on the top job at PlumpJack Café, he returned to Manresa to serve as chef de cuisine before leaving to open Commis.

In this, Manresa's 10th year, Kinch has no desire to shift to something new. His restaurant is his idea laboratory, and every day it delivers something different. Sometimes change arrives as a hiccup, sometimes as heartbreak. Last year, Kinch's business partner, Michael Kean, the front-of-the-house man who choreographed Manresa's balletic service, died after a prolonged illness. "We are still devastated," Kinch says. "We can never replace him. But we have to go on."

What has also changed is Manresa's standing in the food world. Where the restaurant once enjoyed the status of a cult rock band with a following in Europe—beloved by cognoscenti, but overlooked by the mainstream—it's now something of a national darling. It has received two Michelin stars every year since 2006, when the San Francisco edition of the guide was launched. In 2010, Kinch won the James Beard Foundation's Best Chefs in America award for the Pacific region.

Yet the lure of the bright lights is mostly lost on Kinch. On the side, he has been working on a cookbook, "to codify my recipes and philosophies." And every now and then, he gives a fleeting thought to opening a second restaurant, something casual and kid-friendly. But otherwise, he says, he's perfectly happy at his out-of-the-way outpost, removed from the currents that propel so many chefs to launch a chain of bistros or marinara sauces or to play a steady role on reality TV.

"There was probably a point in my career when I dreamed of being seen as a 'great American chef,'" Kinch says. "But I'm older now, and one of the things that comes with being around as long as I have is the recognition of what really matters—and that's the pleasure of the customer. That's what a restaurant is all about. All the other stuff? What people are saying? I really couldn't give a shit about it anymore." ■

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