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LET'S EAT .

From Big Sur's killer cliff-clinging eateries to Salinas' unparalleled produce, this blog aims to sniff out all things Monterey County can stomach, via picture and prose, curiosity and appetite, hand and mouth.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 28, 2010


## Pregnant With Promise: A Report from ALBA Breakout Fundraising Dinner



*Note: It's almost unfair to take a reporter with already superhuman observational abilities and enhance them. But that's what the birds and the bees did to Weekly Assistant Editor **Kera Abraham**.*

*As with many pregnant women, her bundle on board has made her senses sharper, tastes more textured, flavors more intense. So who could be better to scout a special*

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*food event at Monterey Peninsula Country Club last week, a heady and promising collaboration between the small organic farms of nonprofit Agricultural and Land-based Training Association and several local chefs.*

*Here's what she found out, paired with photos by **Hanif Panni**.*



In an evening that featured dishes as elaborate as small-stem strawberry-basil pavlova with cherry balsamic, the standout tastes were the simplest.

Like garbanzos as I've never known them.

**Jeffrey Anderson**, a chef and director of culinary innovation for **Safeway** (yes, Safeway), put the elbow grease into the fresh green roasted beauties enhanced by just a bit of olive oil and garlic sea salt.

Garbanzos are green in their natural state, Anderson told me; it's the freeze-drying that makes them the camel color we've come to expect from hummus.

Chickpeas in such a virgin state are hard to find, he said, serving up platters of them during the outdoor hors d'oeuvres round of ALBA's benefit dinner at Monterey Peninsula Country Club in Pebble Beach on Sunday, Aug. 22. The event, which came as ALBA nears its 10th anniversary, put its \$125-a-head benefits towards its work educating; leasing and partnering on microloans for small farmers in Salinas Valley; distributing organic produce; setting up local farmers markets and farm stands; and boosting food stamp/EBT programs at area farmers markets.

But back to the beans. They're on par with fava beans in the tedious peeling department.

But oh, how they popped on the tongue, the very essence of late-summer freshness. On a patio occupied by some mighty fine

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appetizers, it was the humble garbanzos that attracted the most enthusiastic gaggle of nibblers.



Followed by Anderson's scrumptious squash blossoms stuffed with goat cheese and toasted pistachios.



Not that the chilled tomato gazpacho consommé...



or line-caught Pacific tuna and avocado tartar in a black sesame cone didn't impress.





“One of the beautiful things about working with ALBA is, you have access to these ingredients that are hard to get anywhere else,” said **Dory Ford**, former top chef at the Aquarium and now the owner of **Aqua Terra Culinary**...



as he topped mini Dungeness crab cakes with shredded beet-and-fennel relish.

He was hitting on the core essence of ALBA’s inaugural event: All fruits, vegetables and meats were sourced from within a 40-mile radius. Many of them came from ALBA’s own small farmers, several of whom spoke during dinner.

The children of ALBA berry farmers **Lupe** and **Francisco Serrano** told of how going organic “united our family,” while waiters served up MPCC chef **Colin Moody**’s line-caught, fennel-dusted Pacific halibut with a mild, unexpected artichoke-chevre custard.

That the halibut and line-caught tuna are green-listed “Best Choices” on the *Aquarium’s* Seafood Watch card is no accident: The Aquarium is a strong ALBA supporter, table mate and Seafood Watch outreach manager **Sheila Bowman** explained.

ALBA farmers **Hector** and **Rosario Mora** took the mike as the second course rolled out: **Corral de Tierra Country Club** Executive Chef **William Bennett’s** pan-roasted chicken breast and leg confit, heirloom summer squash and roasted tomato in natural jus. The confit, with a salty, creamy mashed potato-like consistency, had me dreaming of Thanksgiving.



Third course was even more delightful: A **Potted Farmstead** beef stew, served in a glass canning jar, with fall-apart-tender beef chunks steeped in a local-tomato piperade. Comfort food at once gourmet and country-kitchen hearty.

Farmer **Eleazer Juarez** delivered the night’s poetry as the stew made its debut. “It’s hard to be a farmer,” he said, “but I love waking up in the morning and seeing the lettuces and talking to them, talking to the soil...”

The Emerson-esque prose had tablemate **Dudley**, a visitor up from Laguna Beach, buzzing with inspiration. “My favorite thing is listening to the farmers,” he said. “It’s as real as it gets.”

Just at the night’s culinary climax, Ford introduced dessert. He’d been asked to work with **TLC Ranch’s** local eggs, with their golden-yellow yolks; and ALBA’s “beautiful, tiny” raspberries, whose smallness, he said, was the mark of a truly local berry: “You

couldn't buy it at a grocery store if you wanted to."



The "golden raspberry egg" arrived in the center of a three-dessert platter, flanked by a chocolate terrine with salted caramel croquant and strawberry-basil pavlova with cherry balsamic.

An edible work of art: A tiny spoon allowed us to dip into the open-topped egg shell through layers of whipped cream and chilled, succulent custard, to the single golden raspberry nestled like a pearl at the bottom.

"Get down in the egg!" Dudley gushed. "There's somethin' goin' on in there!"




In respect to my gestating lil' one, I abstained on the five pours of local wines—except for one tantalizing sip of **Lone Oak Vineyards'** Lucienne Pinot Noir from Santa Lucia Highlands. It tasted like the late-summer sunlight dappling the dahlias and sunflowers in the MPCC courtyard.

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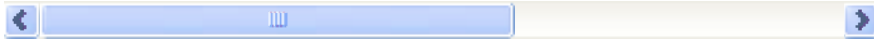
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