



SHERRY VILLANUEVA OF ACME HOSPITALITY



MARNI AND DOUG MARGERUM OF MARGERUM WINE COMPANY



DAISY AND GREG RYAN OF BELL'S



JILL RUSSELL OF CAMBRIA WINES

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

A LOOK AT HOW THE CULINARY SCENE IN THE SANTA BARBARA REGION HAS EVOLVED SINCE JULIA'S TIME THERE

Julia Child was so closely associated with Paris that some folks forget she was a California girl. Her life began in Pasadena and ended peacefully in Montecito in Santa Barbara County, a lush part of the state, not unlike her beloved Provence, where she could enjoy the climate, the farmers' markets, and the conviviality of those who called it home. The food and beverage scene she came upon was refreshingly low-key and the chefs, restaurateurs, emerging winemakers, and farmers who were part of it were happy to welcome a legend like Julia.

Santa Barbara might be making news today as the adopted home of a certain famous couple (hello, Meghan and Harry), but the region is also making waves of a culinary kind, drawing up-and-coming talent like Chef Daisy Ryan of Bell's in Los Alamos and winemaker Jill Russell of Cambria Wines in Santa Maria. Meanwhile, local places with deep roots are enjoying a resurgence as Los Angeles day trippers seek special experiences outside the city limits. "It's the sense of space and place and beauty that makes the region so special," said Kathleen Cochran, a hospitality veteran and general manager of the Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort in Solvang, California.

"Santa Barbara is constantly changing and evolving," added Marni Margerum of Margerum Wine Company and an advisory committee member for the Santa Barbara Culinary Experience, the SBCE. Hosted in conjunction with The Julia Child Foundation for Gastronomy and the Culinary Arts, the food-and-wine-focused event traditionally takes place over a three-day weekend; however, in 2021, it will comprise a series of three events over the course of the year, both virtual and in-person. Each event will be coupled to week-long community-wide special offerings supporting the region's hospitality and tourism recovery. This dovetails with the SBCE's founding purpose: to celebrate and share all that Julia loved about Santa Barbara's plentiful culinary, artisanal, and winemaking talent as well as its agricultural bounty.

While Marni didn't get to meet Julia, her husband Doug did when he was the proprietor of a Julia favorite, Wine Cask. Julia was a regular for New Year's Eve dinners and loved the selection of Loire Valley wines. Doug eventually sold the spot and launched Margerum to focus on winemaking. Locals and tourists in love with the regional wine movement can stop by the Margerum tasting room, which Marni designed, and enjoy wine flights on the outdoor patio plus cheese and charcuterie boards, smoked duck salad, cauliflower crust pizza, and other bites from their menu.

For Daisy and Greg Ryan of the buzzy Los Alamos spot Bell's, opening a restaurant in the region was a homecoming of sorts, as Daisy grew up in the Santa Ynez Valley. When the couple was deciding what cuisine to focus on, they briefly thought about Italian, but realized the area might appreciate something different. "We started talking about French food," said Daisy, who studied at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. "I had that base of traditional French cooking and we started thinking about what Thomas Keller did with Bouchon in Yountville." So bistro food was the answer, but with a twist they called "Franch" French plus ranch, a nod to the landscape that surrounds them. Menu highlights include their must-have sea urchin mille crêpe and a classic steak tartare, made with an egg from the local Motley Crew Ranch, and served with fries.

The proximity to nearby farmers is important to the couple as they cherish the relationships they've formed with the growers and producers. "Every once in a while, when Greg and I are driving to work, I catch myself looking out the window and think, 'Damn, we are just so lucky.'"

Bell's has become a hangout for wine and food pros who live in the area, like Jill Russell of Cambria Wines. "People asked me, 'Why are you moving to this little town?' It's a beautiful food scene and a lot of industry folks have made their homes here," said the winemaker. "It's a great community and there's this energy that's happening in the region." A few of Jill's favorite places? Full of Life Flatbread for seasonal pizzas, Babi's Beer Emporium for, you guessed it, beer and cider, Bob's Well Bread Bakery for croissants, and Pico at the Los Alamos General Store for outdoor dining.

And then, of course, there's the famous wine. A California native, Jill worked as a server at a winery in high school and fell in love with the "vineyard scene," as she called it. She studied winemaking at California Polytechnic State University, aka Cal Poly, in San Luis Obispo, and today has her dream job at Cambria, the winery led by Barbara Banke of Jackson Family Wines. (The vineyards are named for Barbara's two daughters, Katherine and Julia.) "As we're in the Santa Maria Valley, we're all about chardonnay and pinot noir," said Jill. For those who want to try Katherine's Vineyard Chardonnay and Julia's Vineyard Pinot Noir, or even some of the Clone Pinot Noirs or Signature Collection wines, Cambria Estate is open for tasting by reservation only.

Meanwhile, back in Santa Barbara proper, there is the restaurant empire run by Sherry Villanueva, managing partner and owner of Acme Hospitality and another Santa Barbara Culinary Experience advisory committee member. Sherry was ready for a change after years spent working on worldwide trend research for Target, so she pivoted to hospitality when the opportunity presented itself. "My passion lies in the connection that people have over food," said Sherry.

Today, she oversees more than half a dozen establishments, including popular places such as The Lark and La Paloma Café. "I love being in Santa Barbara, and being part of the food community. It's just an incredible group of people and producers and hospitality professionals."

As with Chef Daisy, Sherry loves the proximity to amazing farms, ranches, and wineries. "We have access to local products that are truly world renowned," she said. "Santa Barbara has incredible natural resources." She points to some of the locally-influenced dishes at three of her establishments: The Santa Maria tri-tip at La Paloma Café, the local seafood paella at Loquita, and the sea bass with seasonal vegetables at The Lark.

Sherry never got to meet Julia Child during the icon's Santa Barbara days, but she believes many of Julia's lessons continue to hold sway over the region. "Julia loved food and she loved people and she did both unabashedly," said Sherry. "It's one of the reasons Santa Barbara and her audience from around the world fell in love with her."

For more on the Santa Barbara Culinary Experience, visit sbce.events

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MY JULIA ROAD TRIP

EXPLORING THE FOOD SCENE IN HER
BELOVED SANTA BARBARA AND BEYOND

by Donna Yen

illustrations by Nancy Pappas

Recently, I set off for Santa Barbara County to visit some of Julia Child's favorite food spots and check out some newer places in the region. Since her time there, a number of new culinary talents have been redefining the food scene, and it's no wonder! These coastal towns where they're putting down roots are near some of the best produce in the country and the richest sources of seafood around. I have no doubt Julia would be enjoying all of these spots if she were here with us today.

LA SUPER-RICA TAQUERIA

It's hard to miss Julia's favorite Mexican restaurant, between the permanent line out the door and its vivid aquamarine-painted front. Isidoro González is the owner and you'll still find him taking orders at the counter. Curious what Julia Child's go-to order was? I asked Isidoro and he replied, "She ordered one of everything on the menu." There are 20 items on their menu, but if you can't hang like Julia, you won't go wrong with an order of their Super-Rica especial and their chile con queso. Everything comes with warm homemade tortillas.

SANTA BARBARA FARMERS' MARKET

If you've ever wondered what the fuss over California produce is all about, this is the place to be. Every Saturday, farmers from near and far come to downtown Santa Barbara to sell their diverse seasonal harvests. In winter months, you'll find citrus varieties you've never heard of, from Ojai Pixies to Kishu mandarins. Spring and summer yield zebra heirlooms, bacon avocados, and, of course, California strawberries. Julia would come here to buy her groceries for the week and loved chatting with the local vendors and farmers. Can't make the Saturday market? Check sbfarmersmarket.org for the other weekly markets in the area.

MCCONNELL'S FINE ICE CREAMS

After visiting the farmers' market, Julia was known to frequent McConnell's for its luscious ice cream. Founded in 1949 and known for its flavors inspired by local ingredients, McConnell's is now on its third generation of family ownership with husband and wife Michael Palmer and Eva Ein leading the charge. My favorite flavor, Eureka Lemon & Marionberries, is a must, but keep an eye out for their limited releases like Santa Barbara Strawberry and Honey Cornbread Cookies.

SANTA BARBARA SHELLFISH COMPANY

This unassuming restaurant on Stearns Wharf serves up seafood in its purest form. From scallop ceviche and abalone to lobster pasta and steamed local crab, you'll find a little bit of everything—except your typical fish and chips. And if it's the right season, fresh live uni! What used to be a buying station where Julia would get her shellfish is now an outpost for some of the best seafood in town, and maybe the whole state.

BELL'S

Located in the quaint town of Los Alamos, this French-inspired restaurant is making quite a stir. Greg and Chef Daisy Ryan are serving up French food at its California finest on their breezy outdoor patio. Everything on their menu is sourced from nearby, like their gem lettuce from Santa Ynez's Finley Farms and the sea urchin on their mille crêpe caught by renowned local diver Stephanie Mutz. Their food is executed with thought and care, but Bell's still gives off a chill California vibe. Julia would be proud to see how her beloved French cuisine has been updated for 2021.

LOQUITA

After a sun-filled day at Stearns Wharf, stop by Loquita for amazing cocktails and tasty tapas. Since the climate in Santa Barbara County mirrors that of Spain, the local produce, meats, and seafood are perfect for these dishes. Chef Nikolas Ramirez serves up wonderful Spanish flavors in his croqueta de pollo, tortilla Española, pulpo, and seafood paella. Don't forget to try one of their house special gin and tonics and some churros for dessert.

