



**T**here's something in the air in Healdsburg, California. A rich, bacony scent wafts through the leafy town square, causing sleepy dogs to perk up and lazy afternoon strollers to suddenly realize they're hungry. The aroma intensifies across the Spanish-style plaza, past Victorian buildings, to a courtyard at the corner, where quite a crowd is gathered for this farm town of just 12,000.

The source of the mouthwatering smell turns out to be a glistening pig, slowly rotating on an outdoor spit. Around it are tables spread with pork-based street snacks—tamales, tiny BLTs, barbecue sandwiches—along with some 50 types of Pinot Noir from surrounding Sonoma County. Circulating at this “Pigs and Pinot” event is an eclectic group of guests in cowboy hats, tie-dyed peasant skirts, and big jewelry, all expertly swirling and spitting. Waiters slip in and out of the elegantly modern Hotel Healdsburg and its sister restaurant, Dry Creek Kitchen. At the center of it all is a big tall chef with a broad friendly face, an Orson Welles gleam in his eye, and “Charlie Palmer” embroidered on his whites.

No surprise there: Ever since Palmer swooped into town three years ago, this famous New York chef has been a major Healdsburg presence. Sure, he still has obligations in other parts of the country—with nine restaurants and 1,000 employees, Palmer is his own empire—but the man behind Manhattan's legendary Aureole can increasingly be found on the opposite coast. And as at home as he's always been amid sophisticated French-inspired American cuisine in swanky restaurants, Charlie Palmer seems even better suited to the world of softball games and small talk with local farmers.

What he's doing here today, in fact, is pretty much what he likes to do best: drink Pinot, grill pork, and shoot the breeze with his friends, many of whose children attend his four boys' school, for which this event is a benefit. For the chef, who grew up in tiny Smyrna, New York, moving here after a quarter century in Manhattan has been a bit like going back to his

roots. “Everyone thinks I'm a New Yorker,” he says, “but the town I grew up in makes Healdsburg look like a metropolis.”

The move has meant a huge change of scenery and pace for Palmer and his wife, Lisa (they sometimes complain about the “Sonoma coma”), but Healdsburg isn't just anywhere out in the sticks. First, there's the wine. Situated at the confluence of the Russian River, the Alexander Valley, and Dry Creek Valley, the town is within easy distance of 100 wineries and the epicenter of California Pinot Noir. “I'm a huge lover of Pinot and Burgundy,” Palmer says. That guy he's chatting with may be his boys' softball coach, but he's also Tom Rochioli, third-generation vintner and cult Pinot-maker. Then there's the food. With its Mediterranean climate, Healdsburg harvests a lavish variety of edibles. “Not many places have this incredible tree fruit, artisanal poultry, amazing cheese, and hundreds of producers of vegetables,” Palmer says. “Crabs caught in the morning in Bodega Bay get delivered to me by noon.” There's abundance everywhere: People stop by Dry Creek Kitchen (DCK) to trade chanterelles, blood oranges, or Meyer lemons from their gardens for a meal. Ron Love, a farmer who grows about 200 types of organic produce, is just up the road; if he's out, DCK chef Mike Ellis will just go pick what he needs for dinner. “In New York, you have to seek everything out, and here everything comes to you,” says Palmer.

More than his other restaurants, Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen is about a sense of place. “When you go to Tuscany, you drink Tuscan wines,” he says. “Here, it's all about Sonoma.” If Dry Creek peaches are in season—“so intensely ripe it's mind-boggling,” Palmer says—they're on the menu, in soups, salads, desserts. Whatever's grown locally makes its way into the dishes, including a wild boar Palmer shot for prosciutto. (“A little tough,” he admits.) His 700-bottle list features only Sonoma wines, and celebrations like this Pigs and Pinot event spotlight local winemakers and farmers. Palmer came here with the intention of putting Healdsburg on the culinary map, intending to rival Napa's French Laundry and Auberge du Soleil. Between his places and the recently opened and much-touted

## The Details

### STAYING THERE

Palmer's 55-room **Hotel Healdsburg** (25 Matheson Street; 707-431-2800; [hotelhealdsburg.com](http://hotelhealdsburg.com); from \$275) overlooks the plaza and features a spa and a pool. If your taste runs to 18th-century French provincial antiques and bathrooms with acres of marble, the Relais & Châteaux **Les Mars Hôtel** (27 North Street; 877-431-1700; [lesmarshotel.com](http://lesmarshotel.com); from \$475) is for you. The **Duchamp Hotel** (421 Foss Street; 800-431-9341; [duchamphotel.com](http://duchamphotel.com); from \$325), with individual suites evocative of artists like Man Ray and Warhol, offers style of a different sort.

### EATING THERE

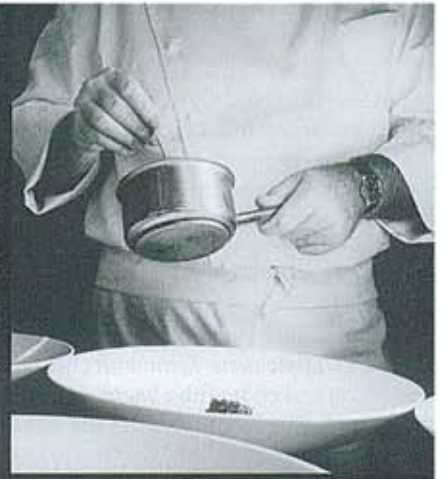
Palmer's **Dry Creek Kitchen** (317 Healdsburg Avenue; 707-431-0330) highlights local ingredients and wines.

Lindsey Shere, the longtime pastry chef at Chez Panisse, opened the **Downtown Bakery and Creamery** (308A Center Street; 707-431-2719) 20 years ago, and it's still packing them in for fantastic pastries, locally made cream and butter, and all sorts of cakes and cookies. Luxurious, locally sourced, and innovative, **Cyrus** (29 North Street; 707-433-3311) is the most ambitious restaurant in the region. **Bistro Ralph** (109 Plaza Street; 707-433-1380) continues to win raves for its down-to-earth, wine-friendly fare, and at tiny **Ravenette Cafe** (117 North Street; 707-431-1770), the seasonal dishes change every day.

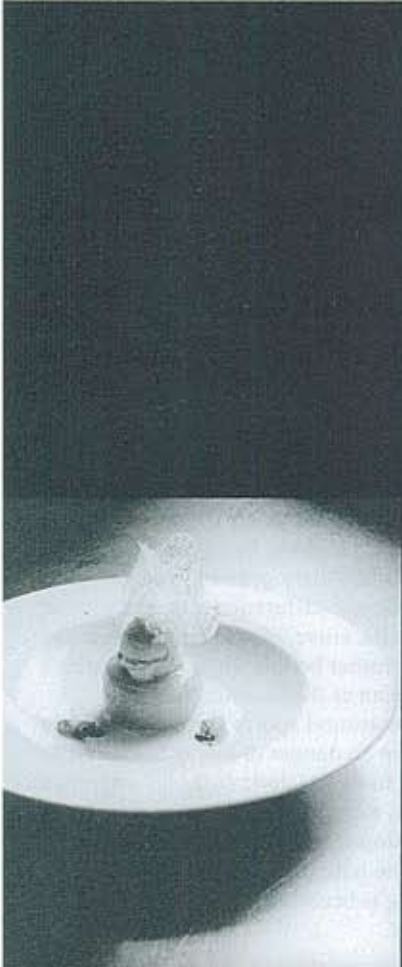
### BEING THERE

Among the upscale stalls at **Plaza Farms** (106 Matheson Street; 707-433-2345)

are **Bellwether Farms Artisan Creamery** (don't miss the extraordinary Crescenza); **DaVero**, featuring fabulous olive oils; and **Bovolo**, home to some truly memorable *salumi*. For a variety of wonderful finds, dip into the high-end French flea market that is **21 Arrondissement** (309 Healdsburg Avenue; 707-433-2166). **M Clothing** (381 Healdsburg Avenue; 707-431-8738) has trendy women's duds from all over the world; Lisa Palmer's **Lime Stone** (315 Healdsburg Avenue; 707-433-3080) stocks an eclectic collection of tableware, antiques, and furniture; **The Plaza Gourmet** (108 Matheson Street; 707-433-7116) offers a wide range of kitchen gadgets and fine cookware; and **Toyon Books** (104 Matheson Street; 707-433-9270) is home to an impressive selection of wine and cooking books.



The boy in his hood: Looking down the road that leads to Palmer's home; in charge at Dry Creek Kitchen; downtime with wife, Lisa, and their four sons; the restaurant's roasted apple ring galette with sea salt-caramel ice cream.



Les Mars Hôtel and Cyrus restaurant, which locals believe Palmer made possible, he already appears to be doing just that.

The wine-and-pork tasting tonight is a prelude to a five-course pairing meal, the likes of which are common in nearby Napa but have been—at least until Palmer's arrival—rare in these parts. There are pork terrines and pigs' feet, monkfish wrapped in pork belly (served with 1997 and 1998 Williams Selyem Pinots), a duo of pork cheeks and Hobbs bacon-wrapped tenderloin (2003 Rochioli Pinots), and a dessert course that starts with apple *tarte Tatin* with chestnut ice cream and candied bacon and ends with a bacon chocolate truffle. Hog heaven, indeed. The event itself is the appetizer for another of Palmer's grand plans. "My vision is to have this Pork and Pinot festival take over the town for two to three days." (This year's celebration takes place on January 24 and 25.)

The following day, dressed in work boots and a denim shirt, Palmer drives his Chevy truck up a winding road in the hills outside town, fords a flooded gully, and crosses a rickety wooden bridge on the way up to Iron Horse Vineyards. Plum trees and daffodils are blooming, and the hills, crisscrossed with vines, are emerald green from recent rains. He stops the truck at the crest of the hill and sweeps his hand across the vista. "This is the most beautiful place on earth," he says. Joy Sterling, whose family owns the winery, greets us with glasses of Iron Horse sparkling wine and a big hug for Palmer, whom she's known for more than a decade. "We're like cousins," she says.

Sterling takes us to check on Palmer's hand-riddled Aureole Cuvée sparkling wine, then up a muddy path to the big Victorian house for lunch with her parents. Over the meal, the Sterlings tell the story of how Palmer and Lisa—a former professional dancer—announced they were getting engaged right there at their dining room table, the day before they eloped to Hawaii. Charlie had succeeded in marrying Lisa (who was on her way to live in Paris with another boyfriend) on one condition. "We made a deal," Lisa says. "I'd marry him if, in ten years, we'd move to a place in the country."

Over those years, they searched in upstate New York and elsewhere out east, but kept coming back to visit Joy at the winery, wandering around the nearby town of Healdsburg. After having four boys in quick succession, they were more than ready to move from their 1,400-square-foot apartment.

'Four or five years ago,' says longtime Sonoma resident Daryl Groom, 'you didn't eat in Healdsburg. Charlie Palmer brought a new level of culinary expertise to the town.'

"New York is tough for parents," Palmer says. "Kids can't even go to the park alone. Here we just turn them loose."

Since they moved, the Palmers have befriended some of the oldest winemaking families in the valley. That evening, Pete Seghesio invites Palmer and some others over for a tasting. Between courses of an Italian meal, they sample two blind flights of eight 2003 California Pinots. In their flannel shirts and jeans, the tasters are a who's who of Sonoma Pinot-makers—Seghesio, Rochioli, Lee Martinelli, Don Wallace of Dry Creek Vineyard. They silently rate the wines, then compare notes. "Coconut and dill." "Too much raw meat." "I get bacon and cheese rind." "The whole wine seems contrived." Palmer booms, "It's off the list!" and everyone laughs. The exercise pits Russian River wines against Willamette Valley, and when the labels are revealed, the winemakers are pleased; as one puts it, "Russian River kicked ass!"

With his frequent trips to New York and Las Vegas—"I love the electricity!" he says—Palmer is in no danger of succumbing to the Sonoma coma. But it's fair to say that his workdays in Healdsburg are considerably more relaxed than those he had back in New York. After early-morning calls, he takes his kids to school, then makes some business rounds. He's only in the restaurant a couple of nights a week. "I have a pretty great life," he says, grinning, on the way to a meeting at the fabled Rochioli vineyard, where Tom Rochioli takes us on a tour and uncorks a few Pinots on a deck overlooking the swollen Russian River. At Geyser Peak Winery, longtime Sonoma resident Daryl Groom, the senior vice president of production and winemaking at Beam Wine Estates, mentions how much Palmer has changed the community. "Four or five years ago, you didn't eat in Healdsburg. He brought a new level of culinary expertise to the town."

After lunch at a sushi bar, Palmer drives up another muddy road to his home, a modern villa with the bones of a Provençal château, perched atop a hill and surrounded by new vines, olive trees, gardens, and a football field for the kids. Every room in the house opens onto a terrace, the outdoor kitchen, or the pool. "I love New York," says Lisa, "but here we can breathe."

"New York can eat you alive," Palmer agrees. "I spent twenty-four years there and never got home before one in the morning, and usually three. Here I go to bed at ten." Over the year he took to get settled, the chef reorganized his company so he would be less involved in financial decisions, and he's given his chefs a lot more autonomy. "It's been hard to learn to delegate," he says. "It's easier for me to go in and leave a trail of flames and broken egos."

Though he travels frequently, Palmer now spends long stretches at home. "The key is to balance my life so I don't have to leave Sonoma much," he says. Here, he spends more time with his kids and gets his hands dirty growing vegetables in his terraced garden. "The biggest difference is that he's home for dinner now, sautéing at the stove," says Lisa. "He's at the point in his life where he'd rather be known as the dad who's always at his kids' games than as the famous chef."

He may schedule his life around sports since the move to Healdsburg, but Palmer is in no danger of losing his status as the famous chef. The small town has done nothing to dampen the big plans (among them, a chain of specialty foods stores and a luxury hotel and condominium complex in Las Vegas). What actually appears to be happening is that with Charlie Palmer in town, Healdsburg is becoming the most famous little spot in the wine country.

## TARTE TATIN

Adapted from Charlie Palmer

SERVES 10

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MIN START TO FINISH: 1¼ HR

*Palmer wanders out behind the Dry Creek Kitchen to pick the apples for this tart. He generally goes for a combination of Macouns, Pippins, and/or Gravensteins, but we used easy-to-find Golden Delicious and were very pleased with the results. Palmer likes to serve this French classic warm, with a scoop of chestnut ice cream and crisp strips of candied bacon alongside. The three elements make for a textural symphony, but this caramelized beauty is also fantastic paired with a humble scoop of store-bought vanilla—or even by itself.*

- 1 puff pastry sheet (from a 17¼-oz package), thawed
- 5 medium Macoun, Pippin, Gravenstein, or Golden Delicious apples (2¾ lb)
- 1 cup sugar
- ¼ cup water
- 1½ tablespoons cider vinegar
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces

**SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:** a pastry brush; a round 12-inch platter with a lip

**ACCOMPANIMENTS:** chestnut ice cream and candied bacon (recipes follow)

- Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 375°F.
- Roll out pastry on a lightly floured surface with a lightly floured rolling pin into an 11-inch square. Trim off corners of pastry with a sharp knife to form an 11-inch round, then transfer to a baking sheet and prick all over with a fork. Chill until ready to use.
- Peel and core apples and cut each into 6 wedges.
- Stir together sugar and water with a fork in an ovenproof 12-inch heavy skillet, then cook over moderate heat, stirring occasionally and washing down any sugar crystals on side of skillet with pastry brush dipped in cold water, until sugar is melted and pale golden, 5 to 6 minutes. Continue cooking, without stirring, swirling skillet, until melted into a deep amber caramel, about 1 minute more. Remove from heat and whisk in vinegar and butter until incorporated (use caution; mixture will bubble and steam vigorously).
- Arrange apple wedges, a cut side down, side by side, overlapping slightly, in caramel in skillet in even concentric circles and cook over moderately low heat, undisturbed, until apples are tender and caramel is thickened, 15 to 20 minutes. Drape pastry round over apples, tucking it around them.
- Transfer skillet to oven and bake tart until pastry is golden brown, about 30 minutes.
- Cool tart in skillet on a rack 15 minutes. Invert platter over skillet, and using pot holders to hold platter and skillet firmly together, invert tart onto platter. Replace any apples that may stick to skillet and pour any caramel remaining in skillet over apples. Serve warm, with scoops of chestnut ice cream and candied bacon.

## CHESTNUT ICE CREAM

Adapted from Charlie Palmer

MAKES ABOUT 1 QUART

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN START TO FINISH: 4 HR (INCLUDES FREEZING)

*This ice cream doesn't hit you over the head with the flavor of chestnuts. Mellow and creamy, it's great on its own—though when*

*we're not having it with the tarte Tatin (recipe precedes), we like to serve it with a delicate butter cookie.*

- ½ vanilla bean
- 2 cups heavy cream
- ½ cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
- 3 tablespoons canned unsweetened chestnut purée (1½ oz; see Shopping List, page 123)
- 4 large egg yolks

**SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:** an instant-read thermometer; an ice cream maker

- Halve vanilla bean lengthwise and scrape seeds using tip of a sharp knife into a 1½- to 2-quart heavy saucepan. Add pod, cream, sugar, and chestnut purée and bring to a simmer, whisking until chestnut purée is broken up and sugar is dissolved. Remove from heat and cover pan. Let stand 15 minutes.
- Whisk together yolks in a medium bowl, then add warm cream mixture in a slow, steady stream, whisking constantly. Pour egg mixture back into saucepan and cook over moderately low heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until custard is thick enough to coat back of spoon and registers 170°F on thermometer. Pour custard through a fine-mesh sieve into a clean metal bowl, discarding vanilla pod and forcing chestnut purée through sieve. Set bowl in a larger bowl of ice and cold water and let stand, stirring occasionally, until cold, 15 to 20 minutes.
- Freeze custard in ice cream maker until soft-frozen, 20 to 25 minutes, then transfer to an airtight container and put in freezer to harden, about 3 hours.

**COOKS' NOTE:** Ice cream can be made 3 days ahead.

## CANDIED BACON

Adapted from Charlie Palmer

MAKES 10 SLICES

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MIN START TO FINISH: 30 MIN

*Be sure to use Demerara sugar for this addictive little garnish; we tried turbinado but didn't get the same results.*

- ½ lb bacon slices (10 slices)
- ½ cup Demerara sugar (see Shopping List, page 123)

**SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:** brown paper such as a grocery bag or butcher paper (see cooks' note, below)

- Cook bacon in 2 batches in a 12-inch heavy skillet over moderate heat, turning over once, until bacon is lightly browned on edges but still flexible, 5 to 6 minutes total per batch. Transfer bacon as cooked to paper towels to drain.
  - Pour off fat from skillet and arrange bacon in skillet in 1 layer. Sprinkle Demerara sugar over bacon and cook over low heat, turning occasionally with tongs, until sugar is dissolved, caramelized (sugar melts very slowly and burns easily; reduce heat if necessary after sugar begins to caramelize), and coats bacon, 8 to 10 minutes. (Bacon will be dark and look lacquered.) Transfer bacon with tongs to brown paper to cool.
- COOKS' NOTES:** Don't be tempted to transfer bacon to paper towels to drain—the sugar will make the bacon stick to them.
- Bacon can be made 1 day ahead and kept in an airtight container at room temperature, but it will become less crisp.
  - Before cleaning skillet, add a few inches of water to it, then add tongs and boil to dissolve hardened sugar from pan and tongs.