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## GREEN GROW THE ALMONDS, OH!

**TASTING NOTES** BEFORE THEY HARDEN INTO THE TAWNY SKINNED NUTS WE KNOW AND LOVE, ALMONDS ARE SOFT, GELATINOUS, AND TASTE LIKE SPRING ITSELF. MERYLE EVANS REPORTS.

"They explode in your mouth like a cushion of liquid," says **Laurent Manrique**, executive chef at **Aqua** in San Francisco, describing green almonds, the delicate, immature nut kernels that are rapidly expanding contemporary chefs' springtime vocabulary. For centuries, affording a seasonal pleasure in the Mediterranean and Middle East, where they're sold iced with a pinch of salt by street vendors, the nascent nuts first appeared on Manrique's radar when an Israeli line cook working in his kitchen brought some back from the local farmers' market. Split open, the soft, fuzzy pod revealed, at the center of the fibrous flesh, a gelatinous, grapelike sac, the embryonic precursor of the firm, fully formed nut that would ripen for harvest in about five months.

"So we started to eat them," Manrique recalls, "and they were so fantastic I suggested that we do a menu around green almonds." That was back in 2000 at **Campton Place**, but Manrique has remained captivated by the young almond's elusive herbal flavor, "as though you bit into a blade of grass," and its range of textures, from jelly-like in late April to creamy, soft, but slightly crunchy in May.

"They have a very sexy aspect," Manrique continues, "like a great caviar you roll on your tongue, with a feeling of freshness and green." He often pairs the almonds with fish—seared hamachi with almond salad and avocado, for example, or monkfish and fennel topped with green almond/green olive salad. "The salt of the almonds and olives brings great balance to the dish," he says. To accompany sautéed soft shell crabs, Manrique marinates tiny Cavaillon melon balls in Sauternes and adds almonds just before serving. At other times, the kernels have garnished a Sonoma duck breast and, tossed with olive oil, salt, and pepper, anointed foie gras and roasted figs.

Since California produces over half of the world's almonds, it's not surprising that other innovative West Coast chefs have discovered the versatile nutlets. In the Napa Valley, **Thomas Keller's** own trees supply almonds for dishes such as sautéed rabbit with a ragout of baby garlic, fava beans, chorizo, green almonds, and

extra-virgin olive oil at **The French Laundry**. Favas and other spring vegetables are natural partners for the young almonds. **Dennis Leary**, formerly of **Rubicon** in San Francisco, combines favas, peas, fiddlehead ferns, nettles, and morels with green almonds tossed in lemon juice, olive oil, and salt. He also pickles them to serve on a small tart composed of sweet onion, candied orange, black truffle, and brioche.

**David Myers**, chef/owner of **Sona** in Los Angeles, remembers his first "absolutely mind-blowing" green almond experience at **Pierre Gagnaire** in Paris—a dish of barely cooked clams, zucchini bits, and curry infused nuts. Myers' own tasting menu interpretation is a hot/cool first course: quickly blanched Santa Barbara prawns marinated in mustard vinaigrette and resting on a bed of spicy nasturtium leaves with a dollop of passion fruit puree, shaved baby artichokes tossed with oil and lemon, and a sprinkling of freshly sautéed almonds. "The almonds come in kind of covertly," he observes, "bringing the dish up another notch." Myers' wife and partner, **Michelle**, a Paris trained pastry chef who prepares desserts for both the restaurant and, across the street, her recently opened patisserie, **Boule**, likes to play up the Middle East connection, with fresh tangerine/mint salad and green almond ice milk.

Almonds are fruits, first cousins of peaches and plums, and pairing green almonds with their stone fruit relatives works well in both savory and sweet dishes. **Judy Rodgers**, chef/owner of San Francisco's **Zuni Café**, put the almonds front and center on the cover of her *Zuni Café Cookbook* and provides a recipe for a simple prosciutto, White Rose nectarine, and toasted almond appetizer. In Washington, D.C., **Jaleo's** chef/partner, **José Andrés**, tucks half a green almond into sweet Japanese baby

As a refreshing counterpoint to pan-roasted veal loin, Alain Ducasse sprinkles the accompanying dark tomato/veal jus with virginal almonds. Photo by Didier Loire from *Grand Livre de Cuisine—Alain Ducasse's Culinary Encyclopedia*.

