



## NOTES FROM CHEF JOHN ASH

*Described as one of America's most talented chefs, inspirational cooking teachers, and a guiding force in California cuisine, John Ash is an adjunct instructor at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in the Napa Valley and consults with a number of clients including Del Monte Foods and Viking River Cruises. John is the founder of John Ash & Co. restaurant in Santa Rosa and on the National Board of Overseers of the Chefs Collaborative. He is a recipient of the International Association of Culinary Professionals Cookbook of the Year Award for his book From Earth to the Table and winner of the 2005 James Beard Foundation Award for Cooking One on One. Chef John Ash wrote the following in his Forward to The California Wine Country Diet.*

### California Wine Country Cuisine

What has become known as "California wine country cuisine" has two parts to it. First is a consciousness about where food comes from, with an intention to cook seasonally and locally. The other part is, of course, that it includes wine as a daily beverage! For me, wine is food—it is simply another flavor to enjoy with all the other flavors that are presented on the plate. My role in the evolution of California wine country cuisine was to take on the challenge of educating people—especially Americans, who are a little intimidated by wine—about wine and its role on the table, as well as to help them develop the habit of using ingredients that are locally grown and organic

California winemakers and chefs initially looked to Europe for inspiration and training. By the late 1970s we had gained enough experience and confidence that we no longer focused on trying to duplicate the wines and foods of Europe. We began to explore our own unique agricultural microclimates and the cuisines of the diverse cultures that had settled in California. In the chefs' recipes in *The California Wine Country Diet* you can see the strong influence of Latin American and Asian, as well as, Mediterranean cuisine.

### Changes in How We Look at Food

There is truly a revolution going on in the way we look at food. The proof of this revolution is evident in many ways, such as the setting of national standards for what constitutes a truly "organic" food and the move toward tougher and more comprehensive labeling of food, with important information such as the food's country of origin. Ten years ago Americans were not interested in these issues, but more and more they are beginning to recognize that wholesomeness and not just cost is important when selecting food. Of course, our continuing concern about health also plays an important role.

We struggle with contrary notions: on the one hand, we take the attitude in our busy lives that we simply need to fill up our stomachs like we fill up our gas tanks, as quickly and cheaply as possible, which is why we are addicted to fast foods. On the other hand, we have a deep respect for the atmosphere that is created when family or friends gather to eat, drawing together to share a nourishing, home-cooked meal.

My challenge as a chef, and the challenge of people like author Haven Logan, is to educate people about their relationship to food on a personal level, but also on a much larger scale. The foods you choose

affect not only your own health, but in a very real way they also affect the health of the nation, and even the globe. Your choices certainly have ramifications for the environment.

### Enjoying the Pleasures of Wine and Food

When it comes to enjoying food, we have nearly unlimited choices. But we tend to get trapped in trends, such as the recent low-carb trend. People are looking for a “silver bullet” in terms of eating well but also maintaining their health and, especially, watching their weight. They think wine and sumptuous food cannot be a daily part of their lives. But they can, as Dr. Logan teaches in this book. We can start eating healthily yet deliciously by choosing a broad range of foods. For instance, farmers’ markets have always been an essential part of wine country cuisine. Now there are farmers’ markets everywhere, from Wisconsin to Alabama.

The cliché that “we are what we eat” is true, and part of a healthy diet and satisfying culinary experience is to use the freshest ingredients you can, and preferably organic ones. Making this one, simple change can go a long way toward increasing your well being and satisfying your palate.

Unless your health is severely compromised, you can eat basically anything you want to if you do it in a balanced and natural way. I call this “mindful eating,” and it goes along with eating slowly and enjoying your food. Mindful eating is nothing more than paying attention to what you are eating and how you are eating it. Know what is in your food. Then enjoy every mouthful. In the wine country way of eating, you do not have to deny yourself pleasure to eat in a healthy way.