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WINTER COMFORT FOOD • RAMONA VALLEY WINERIES

# Winter Comfort Food with Chef Ron Oliver

By Laura Jong

Marine Room Chef de Cuisine Ron Oliver has a quiet but fervent passion for food. He picked up his knack for cooking from his mother, watching her prepare family meals with ethnic ingredients inspired him to travel to other countries and learn global cooking techniques. Today, his main approach to cooking is market-driven.

“Don’t write a recipe and then find the ingredients. Find the ingredients first and make a recipe around it.” He loves local produce but likes to prepare it using global influences, like South American or Middle Eastern techniques and cooking styles.

Oliver points out that in the past, winter was about survival (and still is today, in many places). Before refrigeration, people would find ways to preserve the bounty of other seasons—making jams and chutneys, pickling, smoking, sun drying and salting. Now, we—luckily—get to enjoy these delicious methods out of luxury instead of necessity.

Oliver feels that one of the biggest challenges in San Diego is that the area never truly looks or feels like winter, so it’s important to be mindful of the season. This is especially true with the influx of fruits from different countries where it is summer—it can make us forget that these things are not in season here. Another challenge he faces is the selection, or lack thereof.

Given these challenges, Oliver is still greatly inspired by the winter season. Although we may not experience winter through the weather, Oliver believes you can still feel the seasons through food. People need to be warmed up in the winter—not only through the temperature of food but by warming their souls through comfort food. In fact, Oliver’s favorite winter comfort food is Beef and Beet Borscht because of his love for root vegetables.

Oliver’s favorite winter items are sweet potatoes (boniato potatoes), chestnuts, beets, winter savory and preserves.

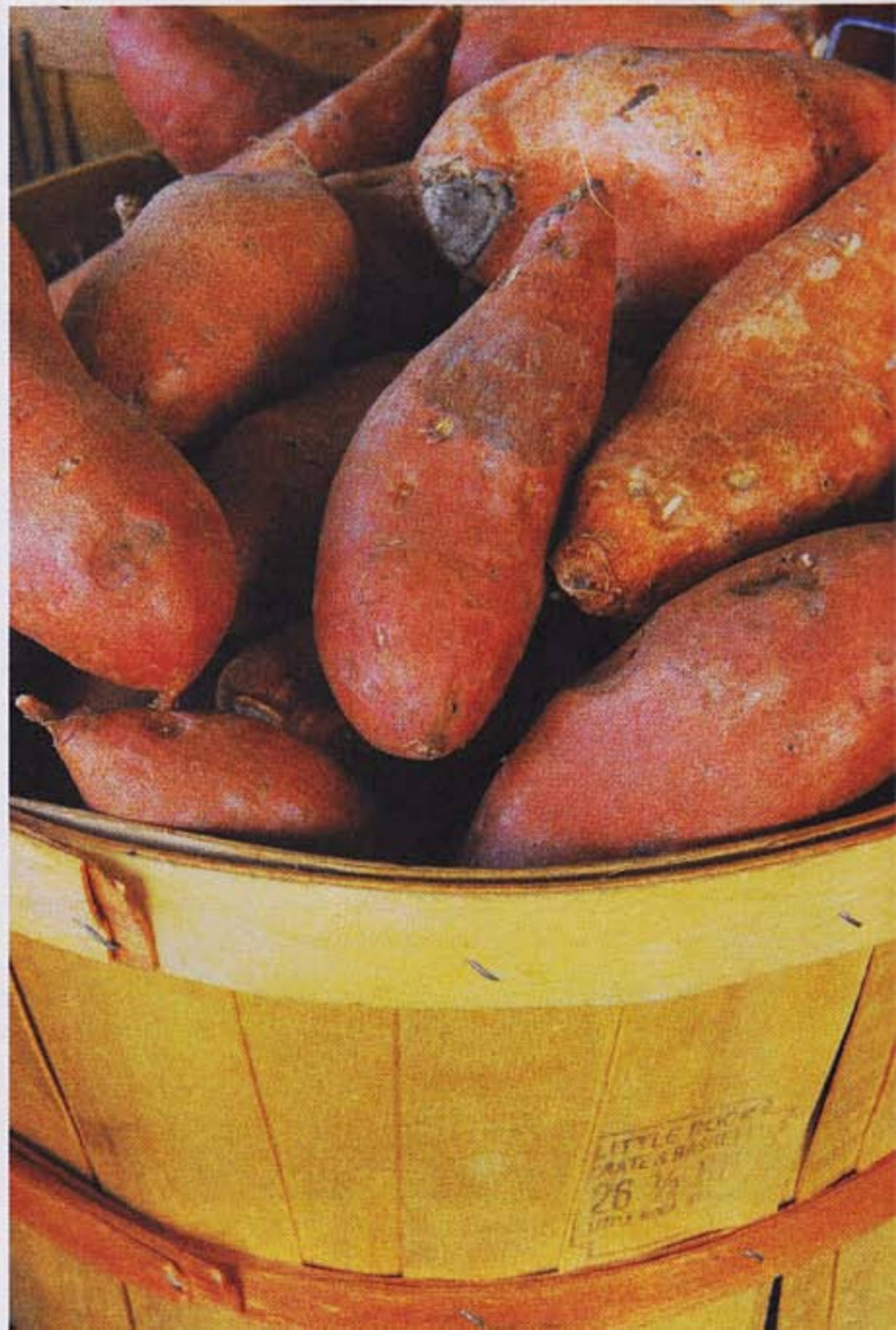
When selecting a good sweet potato, it is important that it feels heavy for its size. Pick ones that have an equal shape and size so they will cook uniformly. Ron recommends the same for beets, but be sure to look at how fresh the green tops are; throw young greens into salads or use larger greens for sautéing or in soups.

It can be hard to find fresh chestnuts, but if you do, pinch them to make sure they feel very full inside and are unblemished. Puréed chestnuts work well, too. Fold them into mashed potatoes. Canned or whole frozen chestnuts can be braised with maple syrup, apple juice and butter. Cover with foil and bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour for an easy winter side dish.

It’s true, we may not have the young vegetables of spring or the fresh fruits of summer, but one thing that winter allows is to indulge in the foods that make us feel good. May this inspire you to slow down and spend more time in the kitchen this season!

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## WHIPPED BONIATO POTATOES

*Courtesy of Executive Chef Bernard Guillas, Chef de Cuisine Ron Oliver, From "Flying Pans: Two Chefs, One World"*

*This makes a great side dish! We like to serve this with venison.*

- 2 pounds boniato sweet potatoes
- 1/3 cup creme fraiche
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup
- 2 tablespoons dark rum
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- Sea salt, to taste
- 1/2 cup crushed hazelnuts
- 1 tablespoon hazelnut oil

Preheat oven to 450°. Wrap potatoes individually in foil. Bake until soft in center. Peel. Place pulp in mixing bowl. Mash until smooth. Fold in creme fraiche, maple syrup and rum. Season with cayenne and salt. Spread into oven-proof serving dish. Mix hazelnuts with hazelnut oil. Sprinkle over boniato. Bake until hot in center and hazelnuts are toasted.

## ROSE HIP JAM

*Courtesy of Chef de Cuisine Ron Oliver*

*I love to grow roses, not only for the beautiful flowers but for the hips that appear once the flowers fall. After the first frost of the season, it's time to pick the hips and make jam. (For those who may not experience signs of frost, rose hips can be picked when they are bright orange and plump.) The preparation can be labor-intensive, which is a great reason to gather your friends and family to help.*

Makes 1 quart jam

- 8 cups ripe rose hips
- 2 quarts organic apple juice
- 1/4 cup fresh squeezed lemon juice
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon grated ginger root
- 1 teaspoon rose water
- 1/4 teaspoon sea salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Using a sharp paring knife, remove the calix from the rose hips (these are the

fibrous hairs at one end of the hips.) Wash rose hips thoroughly. Transfer hips to large stainless steel sauce pot and cook over medium heat. Add apple juice and lemon juice. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Cook 35 minutes or until very soft, stirring often. Break down rose hips using a potato masher. Strain through a coarse sieve to remove seeds and skins. Strain through a fine sieve to remove remaining fibers. Return the rose hip purée to a clean pot over medium heat. Stir in sugar. Cook, stirring often, until mixture turns a rich amber color and thickens to a jam consistency. You will be able to see the bottom of the pot after your spoon passes through the mixture. Stir in ginger, rose water, salt and pepper. Cool completely. Transfer to sterilized re-sealable glass jars. Refrigerate.

## BORSCHT—BEEF AND BEET STEW WITH FRESH HERBS

*Courtesy of Chef de Cuisine Ron Oliver*

*Borscht is a wonderful soup or stew that takes on many different forms—hot, cold, puréed, textured, vegetarian or meat-based. Whatever the style, borscht is always reddish in color, sweet/sour in flavor, and should be highly aromatic with herbs and spices. This dish gets better each day, if you can keep it around.*

Serves 4

- 2 pounds beef chuck steaks
- 1/2 tablespoon caraway seeds
- 1 teaspoon ground dried ginger
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Sea salt
- Black pepper
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 4 large cloves garlic

- 1 white onion, diced
- 1 large beet, diced
- 1 rutabaga, diced
- 1 large white potato, diced
- Fresh parsley
- Fresh dill
- Sour cream

Season meat on both sides with caraway seeds, ginger, cinnamon, sea salt and pepper. Place large stainless steel pot over medium heat. Add oil. When hot, add chuck steaks, browning well on both sides. Add vinegar, sugar, white onion and garlic, followed by 5 cups of cold water. Bring water to a simmer, skimming the foam as it rises. Cover and simmer gently for 3 hours. Remove meat from the liquid. Skim excess fat from the liquid. Add beets, potatoes and rutabaga. Taste and re-season with more salt, pepper and any or all of the spices as necessary. Shred the meat and add it back to the stew. Simmer 30 more minutes. Ladle stew into bowls. Garnish with sour cream, fresh parsley and dill sprigs.

