

WEB EXCLUSIVE:

Strong Magic

Foraging for the freshest fare inspires a perfect seaside spread

by Lora Zarubin / *photographs by* Lloyd Ziff

If you are Craig Strong, executive chef at Studio at Montage Laguna Beach, hosting a dinner cooked over an open fire on the beach should be nothing short of transcendent. “I don’t think there is anything better than cooking a meal over an open fire by the ocean,” he says.

The menu he’s planning is deceptive in its simplicity: It will start with grilled spiny lobster brushed with garlic, rosemary and olive oil. The balance of the meal, he decides, will be inspired by the ingredients he sees at the market. The devil is in the details of foraging.

Seeking perfect ingredients is part of the journey, literally. Sourcing the meal begins on the first day of spiny lobster season off the coast of Santa Barbara aboard the *Ocean Pearl*. Strong, his wife, Lissa, fisherman Steve Escobar, Escobar’s crew and I are on a fishing expedition. As the first cages are lifted out of the ocean, I’m reminded that no matter how skilled and experienced a cook you are, nothing is more inspiring than the raw ingredients.

Watching Strong and Escobar on the boat is seeing a friendship in the making. In between pulling up the nets and cages full of wriggling crustaceans, Strong says that as a chef, it’s important for him to build relationships with his vendors. “It gives me so much more respect for what I do, meeting these guys,” he says. The fishing trip inspires Strong; he decides that for the meal he is planning, we will visit suppliers up and down the coast to procure as many of the ingredients as possible.

Fishing is hard work, and the sight of the squirming seafood is a keen appetite stimulant. So as we head back from our foray, no one complains when Strong pulls out a propane cook-top and begins to heat a pot of water to prepare some of the day’s catch. Escobar and his crew add octopus, rock crab and spot prawns to the feast. Strong squeezes lime juice and slices the tender octopus, while Steve, armed with a hammer, cracks the shells of the crabs and hands out chunks of the tender meat. “You can’t get fresher than this,” Escobar says, and boy, is he right.

The day after the fishing expedition, Strong heads to Rancho Santa Fe to visit the Chino family, which owns the Vegetable Shop, probably the best farm stand in California. The Chinos have been selling produce from their business, the source of top-drawer produce for some of the state's best restaurants, since 1969. When we visit, spread before us are baskets of colorful cherry tomatoes, some the size of blueberries; an array of colorful radishes; and the delicate stemmed strawberries for which the Chinos are famous. These berries are so flavorful, it's like tasting strawberry jam in every bite.

In front of the stand is a wagon with a gorgeous arrangement of different varieties of squash that looks remarkably like a Vermeer still life. Strong loads up his baskets with tomatoes, chard, peppers and an array of lettuces and herbs.

Next we meet up with Sarah Bowman, a forager for West Central Produce, who sells a phenomenal selection of vegetables to Studio and many other restaurants. She takes Craig to Polito Farm to meet Mary Polito and pick up some of her ruby grapefruits.

Polito walks us through her orchards, located in Valley Field, to where the Star Ruby grapefruits are growing. She tells us the reason grapefruits got their name was because they hung in clusters like grapes. On Bowman's suggestion, we try the Valencia oranges, which she considers the best in California. We fill our bags with grapefruits and oranges and head back to Laguna to begin to prep our meal.

Strong and sous chef Scotty Livingston spend the day preparing all the food in the kitchens of his restaurant, then everything at the beach gets into full swing. Scotty carries pots of salt water to the grill for the lobsters. Strong starts by grilling the Tokyo *negi* onions from Chino Farm for the *calçots* (Spanish-style grilled spring onions), charring them perfectly and then wrapping them up in newspapers to get them to the perfect texture.

Guests arrive with contributions: coolers of wines, a large pot filled with soup to warm up; and giant loaves of fresh-baked bread. Strong surveys the scene, in charge but completely relaxed, flashing his signature smile.

A bite of sliced serrano ham on freshly sliced, grilled bread transports me to Barcelona. The hard outer crust and soft center of the bread are saturated with olive oil and tomato, with just the faintest taste of garlic in the finish. Everyone starts off with a perfectly chilled glass of white L'Aventure Estate Roussanne, which Strong's friend Stephan Asseo of L'Aventure Winery has sent over for the party. (Alas, Asseo is in the middle of a crush and can't join us.)

Asseo produces artisanal wines inspired by the Rhône style, and in addition to the Estate

Roussanne, he sends his Côte-à-Côte, a red wine blended with the classic Northern Rhone varietals. Strong's friend Troy Smith and the sommelier at Studio have chosen a 2008 Don Olegario Albariño, a wonderful crisp white wine that will go brilliantly with Strong's meal.

Once the meal is ready, none of us can wait to taste the lobster. To prepare the spiny crustaceans, Strong first boils them in seawater, then splits them and rubs the meat with olive oil, followed by a quick turn on the grill. The toothsome result is topped with *vadouvan*, a spice made with low-heat fried shallots, onion, garlic and a blend of Strong's own curry spices from Le Sanctuaire, a one-stop destination for the most esoteric ingredients.

Lobster and curry make a great marriage. The meat is succulent and flavorful, more lobstery than the Maine lobster I'm so familiar with. Strong passes bowls of a magnificent and incredibly hearty chorizo *albóndigas* soup. Complementing the lobster perfectly are the *calçots* and the salad with grapefruit and succulent spot prawns tossed in vinaigrette. Perfect —just perfect.

Finally, Strong grills up his s'mores: pink marshmallows infused with Grand Marnier melting out of ginger cookies that are not only really, really delicious but also fun to eat.

After the last s'more is polished off, we sit by the fire listening to Strong tell tales of his fishing trip. What started as an extended foraging shopathon turned into an odyssey of sorts. The past few days have changed and inspired him. He says he can't wait to get back to the restaurant and try out some new dishes and share his experience with his cooks. Strong's ah-ha moment was realizing that no matter his skills, experience is an ingredient that brings out his best work.

