

BY JANE DANIELS LEAR



THE LOWDOWN

BEST TIME TO GO Any time of year is good. In the summer, Brennan utilizes her outdoor wood-burning oven; winters in Winters are for cozying up around the big fireplace in her farmhouse kitchen.

TRY THIS AT HOME Brennan's method for cooking chard (page 124) changed my life. There's no fooling around with a ritualistic sautéing of the garlic or chopping the center ribs separately. It's brilliant.

PLANNING A TRIP Brennan forwards suggestions on where to stay and eat. Classes finish at about 3 P.M. Even though there is one (lovely) B&B in Winters, you might choose instead a motel in Davis, where there are more after-class diversions. (Some of the motels have pools, a sweet relief in the hot months.) The closest major airport is in Sacramento, but San Francisco is only about two hours away, so consider allowing for a few days in the city or roaming around Napa. —J.D.L.



GOURMET ADVENTURES: COOKING SCHOOLS

CALIFORNIA SWEET

The farm kitchen is bright and airy and smells faintly of thyme. Meyer lemon trees, heavy with fruit, brush against the windowpanes. Everywhere I turn, I see a still life. The oak table holds figs, apricots, and peaches that seem to glow from within. A pot of onions is caramelizing on the enamel-and-brass CornuFé stove. Even the stoneware bowl of vegetable trimmings, sitting by the sink and destined for the compost heap, has a certain unruly beauty.

I'm one of seven students spending a "Culinary Weekend" with Georgeanne Brennan at her home in Winters, in Northern California; as it turns out, most of us have previously attended Brennan's cooking school (on hold until the dollar strengthens) in Haute Provence. Although something about the dry, tawny landscape reminds us of that remote patch of France, Winters has a charm all its own. Once the main apricot town in Yolo County, just over the ridge from Napa Valley, it has diversified into walnuts, almonds, tomatoes, grapes, prune plums, wheat, and alfalfa. The weekly *Winters Express*, which features a page of news printed in Spanish, lists birth announcements on the front page under the heading "Future Subscribers," and many of them are descendants of immigrant families from southern Spain who settled in the area a century ago.

A cloudless Saturday morning at the nearby Davis Farmers Market, just a couple of blocks from the Davis campus of the University of California, cements the camaraderie that is a hallmark of Brennan's classes. After divvying up shopping lists (and fortifying ourselves with tamales from a handy market stall), we fan out to buy our ingredients from some of the best organic growers in the country. Full Belly Farm, Capay Fruits & Vegetables, and Good Humus are just a few of the purveyors there that have helped make Bay Area restaurants famous and have changed how many Americans think about food.

Brennan—who is the author, most recently, of *Gather*—has a gift for taking people as she finds them, and the calming effect that has on everyone around her means you're part of the household before you know it. Consequently, when she turns us loose in her vast garden, we all exhibit pride of ownership. It's impossible to go outside, in fact, without hurrying back with a treasure to share: a flower bud, a fragrant leaf, or an especially well-formed little eggplant. And despite having the tactical skills of a field marshal, she's one of the least-controlling cooking instructors I've ever met. ("Oh, there's no recipe for the tomato sauce," she says, slightly startled. "Just make one.")

Some hours later, we sprawl in wicker chairs under a massive 400-year-old black walnut tree. Bottles of pastis and rosé within arm's reach, we devour the pizzas we've cooked in the outdoor wood-fired oven; the star of the show was topped with figs, goat cheese, and prosciutto. We move on to a Zinfandel-Malbec blend made by Brennan's husband, Jim Schrupp; a soufflé-like zucchini gratin; and roast chicken with 40 cloves of garlic. Long cooking has always turned the pungent bulb into a rich, mellow mash, but it isn't until I lick the last smear of Brennan's juicy new-crop garlic off my fingers that I truly

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Aperitif time means priming pizzas for the oven and making *palmiers niçoise*; then aprons come off. Braised garden chard can't be beat.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 38 understand the transformative power of the dish.

The next day brings the same sort of revelation as we nibble savory *palmiers* (whisked out of the oven, a bit frantically, in the nick of time), drink shots of basil soup, then fill our plates with silky chard, flageolets, and a pork loin rib roast we'd stuffed with ground toasted fennel seeds, minced garlic, lemon zest, salt, pepper, and a thick, gray-green carpet of chopped rosemary. "Culturally, we're not used to such a heavy hand with herbs," explains Brennan. "We're too timid. But it's really amazing how cooking changes the flavors. It's time for those not versed in the über-rustic tradition to get over their fear." Dessert is nothing more than whole peaches, figs, and apricots rolled in olive oil, lavishly sprinkled with sugar, then roasted and served with a dab of crème fraîche. "There is no reason I can't rusticate like this in New York City," I think. Even if I don't have a black walnut tree. (530-795-3043; georgeannebrennan.com; "Provence in California Culinary Weekends," \$325, take place year-round)

BRAISED CHARD

Georgianne Brennan

SERVES 4

ACTIVE TIME: 10 MIN START TO FINISH: 35 MIN

What a hassle-free way of cooking chard: Georgianne Brennan simply folds the leaves, ribs and all, and quickly braises them. A shimmy in olive oil with garlic and pancetta turns the greens sumptuous.

1½ lb Swiss chard (about 2 bunches)

- 1 Tbsp extra-virgin olive oil**
- 2 Tbsp chopped pancetta**
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped**

► Stack chard, then trim off ends of stems. Fold stack in half or in thirds, then stuff into a 4½- to 5½-qt heavy pot just big enough to hold it. Fill pot one-third full with water, then cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, until chard stems can be easily pierced with a fork, 15 to 20 minutes. ► Drain chard, then rinse under cold water until cool. Squeeze out excess liquid, then coarsely chop. ► Return chard to pot along with oil, ¼ tsp salt, pancetta, and garlic. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until sizzling, 4 to 5 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature. 🍴