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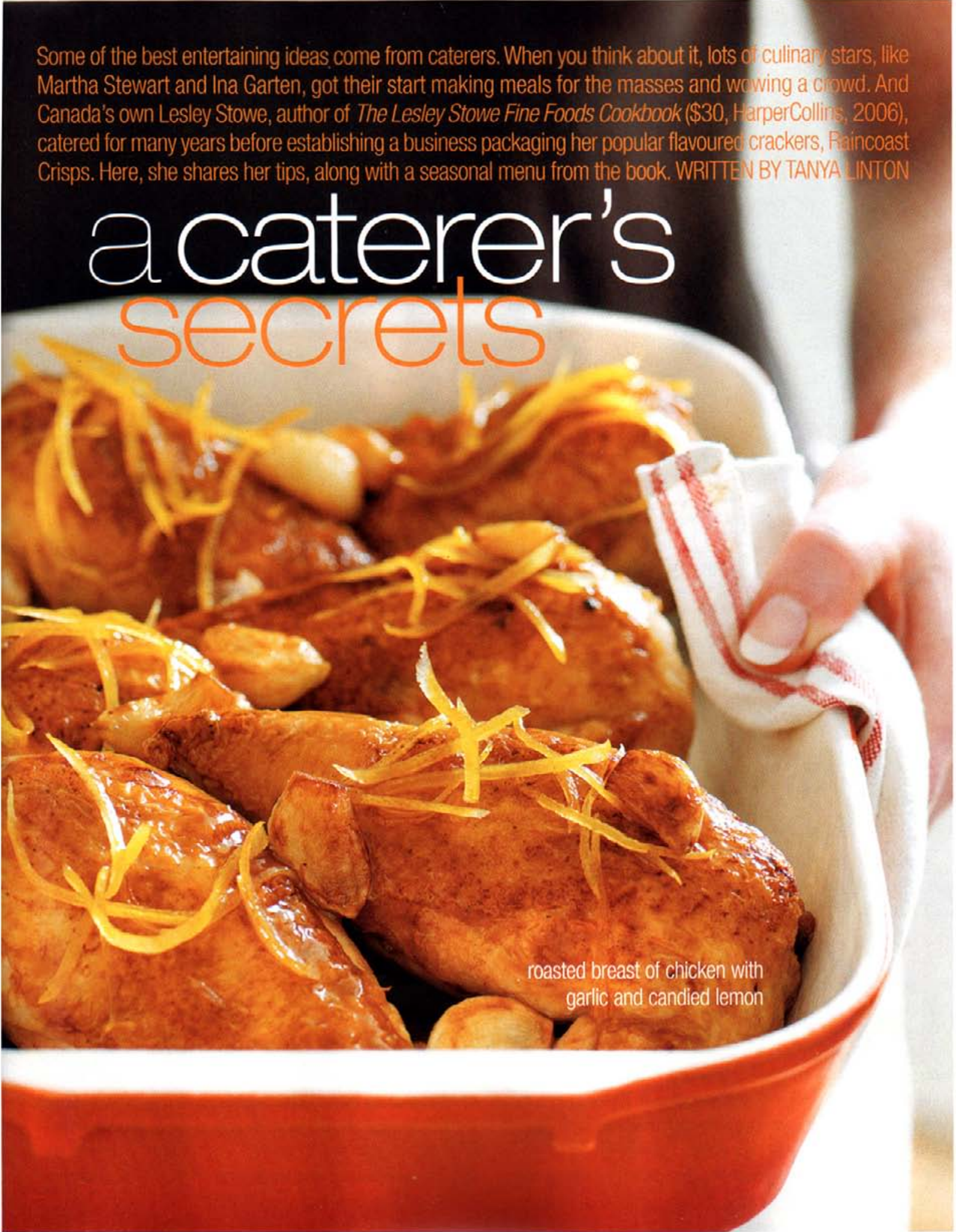
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Some of the best entertaining ideas come from caterers. When you think about it, lots of culinary stars, like Martha Stewart and Ina Garten, got their start making meals for the masses and wowing a crowd. And Canada's own Lesley Stowe, author of *The Lesley Stowe Fine Foods Cookbook* (\$30, HarperCollins, 2006), catered for many years before establishing a business packaging her popular flavoured crackers, Raincoast Crisps. Here, she shares her tips, along with a seasonal menu from the book. WRITTEN BY TANYA LINTON

a caterer's secrets



roasted breast of chicken with
garlic and candied lemon



grilled asparagus salad with warm sourdough croutons and cilantro dressing

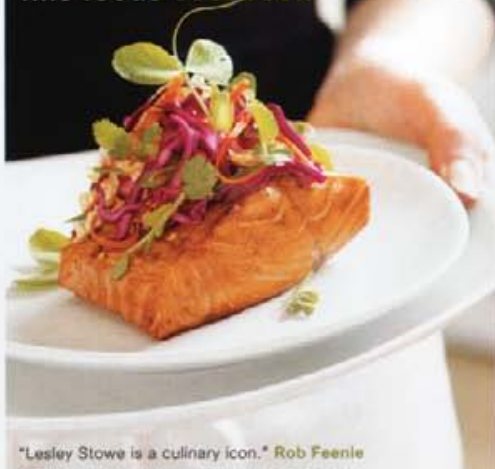
fine food, fine presentation

"Entertaining isn't just about the food," says Lesley Stowe. "Staying on top of presentation trends will always set you apart as a host." Here are a few of her tricks of the trade.

simple but surprising Try to come up with an idea that's a little out of the ordinary, like using fresh herbs as a centerpiece. And for flowers, a collection of mix-and-match jars works better than one mammoth bouquet blocking the view of your guests. For a touch of the unexpected, create a dishy tabletop display by using several different place settings. **fruit is your best decorating tool** For a fresh approach, fill square glass vases with one type of fruit, like cranberries, lemons or limes. And baby pears perched on top of a plate make a lovely place card holder. For each, set the pear on its bottom;

starting at top, cut a 1½-inch-long slit downward into one side, then slide in card. **think big** Oversize plates always make food look better. "I never use a salad plate for the first course because it drives me crazy to see the food falling off the plate," says Lesley. She suggests stocking up on main course plates and using them for every course. **imaginative & low budget** Often the best ideas come when you get creative with what you already have at hand. Make memorable tablescapes by using wrapping paper as table runners or arranging natural items like leaves, shells and chestnuts. ▷

the lesley stowe
fine foods **cookbook**



"Lesley Stowe is a culinary icon." Rob Feenie

the recipes

All recipes are adapted with permission from *The Lesley Stowe Fine Foods Cookbook* (\$30, HarperCollins, 2006).

SPICY SMOKED SALMON CORN CAKES WITH CRÈME FRAÎCHE

"Smoked salmon is a familiar treat on the West Coast, and we're always looking for new ways to serve it," says Lesley. The corn cake itself is neutral, a perfect vehicle for the toppings. For a starter, serve this on organic greens with a citrus vinaigrette; for hors d'oeuvres, simply make the corn cakes smaller, about the size of a toonie. **MAKES 8 SERVINGS**

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup yellow cornmeal
6 tbsp all-purpose flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp baking soda
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp sea salt
2 large eggs, lightly beaten
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup buttermilk
6 tbsp cream cheese, at room temperature
1 cup frozen corn kernels
4 tbsp minced fresh chives
4 jalapeño peppers, seeded and minced
4 oz smoked salmon, minced (about $\frac{1}{3}$ cup)
4 tbsp vegetable oil
Crème fraîche (recipe follows)
Chopped red onion and lemon slices

in conversation with a culinary icon

Lesley Stowe is a Parisian-trained chef who began her own catering company 22 years ago in Vancouver. Seeing a need for specialty food shops in the city, she opened Lesley Stowe Fine Foods, which offered products from around the world, as well as classes and tastings. So if there's anything to know about throwing a perfect party, this woman has the goods.

S@H: What lessons have you gleaned from your years as a caterer?

LS: I think about the big picture, from the menu and cooking to the plating and presentation. If I could give one piece of advice about hosting a dinner party, it's to think of it as a complete night. Don't focus too much on any one detail. Make it memorable from the time your guests walk through the front door.

S@H: What are some entertaining guidelines you'd offer hosts?

LS: Do what you're comfortable doing. If you've never tried a dish before, cooking it for eight friends is probably not the best time to give it a go. Also, because the kitchen has become the "new" living room and people mingle while you cook, stick to something that's easy, even under pressure. And offset the menu with some prepared foods, like appetizers or desserts. Don't feel you have to do everything from start to finish.

S@H: What's your personal entertaining philosophy?

LS: My philosophy is to simplify and prep as much as possible in advance. I always cook simply but with a twist. For example, instead of making traditional shepherd's pie, try it with duck or lobster, or replace the peas and carrots in your chicken pot pie recipe with wild mushrooms. Starters should set the tone for the evening but not upstage everything else. I like to serve new takes on vegetables or an inventive sauce. And I'm big on dessert – I plan meals backwards to ensure guests will have room for dessert. I don't believe in stressing out about any of it. A store-bought sorbet will do as long as it's of the best quality; snazz it up with fruit coulis and berries, and serve mini-cookies alongside.

S@H: What are a couple of the best caterer's secrets to use at home?

LS: Sauces make the dish. Not only do they add flavour, but a splash or drizzle on the plates makes the presentation special, too. Also, if one component of your meal is complicated to make, then plan side dishes that are simple. Don't forget that a menu can be as straightforward as a salad and a main. Even something as easy as using unique serving dishes and scattering fresh petals on the table will elevate the evening. ▷

- spicy smoked salmon corn cakes with crème fraîche •
- grilled asparagus salad with warm sourdough croutons and cilantro dressing •
- roasted breast of chicken with garlic and candied lemon •
- death by chocolate with raspberry splash •

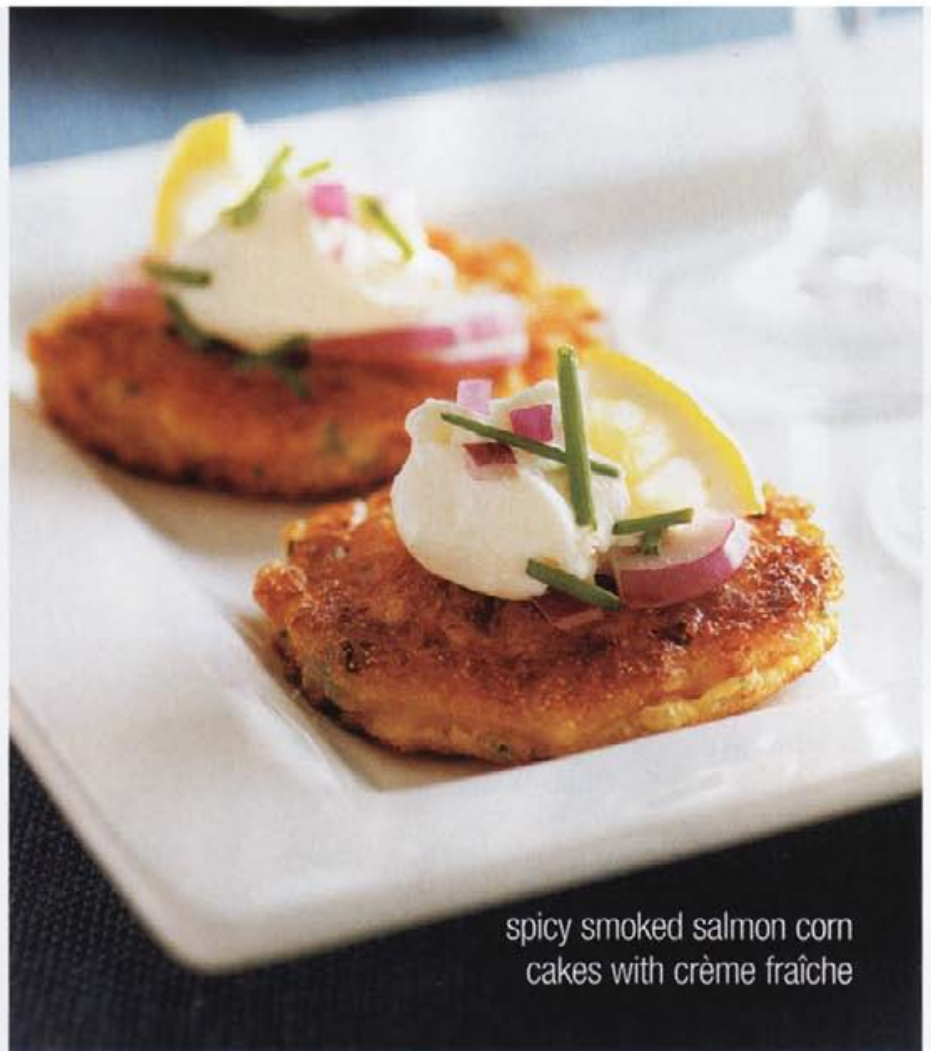
In small bowl, whisk together cornmeal, flour, baking soda and salt. In another bowl, whisk together eggs, buttermilk and cream cheese. Coarsely chop half of the corn kernels and stir into buttermilk mixture along with remaining corn, chives, jalapeño peppers and salmon. Fold into cornmeal mixture, stirring just until combined.

In large nonstick skillet, heat oil over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. In batches, drop batter by 2 tbsp measures into skillet, spreading slightly to form 3- to 4-inch cakes. Cook until golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Transfer to heatproof platter and keep warm. Serve with crème fraîche, red onion and lemon slices.

Crème Fraîche

1 cup heavy cream (preferably not ultra-pasteurized)
1 tbsp buttermilk or natural organic plain yogurt

In saucepan over very low heat, combine heavy cream and buttermilk; warm, stirring constantly, just until mixture reaches body temperature. Pour into metal or glass bowl; cover with plastic wrap and place in warm



spicy smoked salmon corn cakes with crème fraîche

lesley's top 10

When it comes to throwing a party, Lesley Stowe swears by these rules and tips.

- 1 Cheating the odd course is totally fine.** A store-bought dessert nicely plated can be just as exciting as a homemade one.
- 2 Keep coulis and sauces on hand in the freezer or fridge.** A drizzle of raspberry coulis or chocolate sauce can make any dessert – from sorbets to tarts – more interesting.
- 3 Always have cookie dough in the freezer.** Nothing is more of a treat, even after an elegant dinner, than freshly baked cookies.
- 4 Truffle oil is a fantastic finish.** Drizzled on green beans with a sprinkle of fleur de sel, it elevates a side dish from basic to beautiful.
- 5 Don't stuff guests full of hors d'oeuvres.** Olives and warm almonds will suffice.
- 6 Enjoy cheese as a final course, not an appetizer.** Cheese should be served as a finale, along with fruit, nuts and a baguette; if nibbled before dinner, guests will get too full.
- 7 Prepare pizza dough and freeze it.** A thin pizza crust can be the blank canvas for many an inspired dinner.
- 8 Even a delicious homemade soup makes a special meal.** Simply include a salad and crusty bread.
- 9 Brownies aren't just snacks.** Cut into diamonds, they become an elegant dessert.
- 10 Fresh is always best.** A sprinkling of fresh herbs doubles as a flavour enhancer and is a quick way to dress up a plate.

spot. Let thicken for 24 to 48 hours. It should look like yogurt. Refrigerate until ready to use (it will thicken more in the refrigerator).

GRILLED ASPARAGUS SALAD WITH WARM SOURDOUGH CROUTONS AND CILANTRO DRESSING

"Asparagus is the sophisticated, sexy member of the vegetable family, adding allure to any meal," says Lesley. Grilling the spears increases the visual interest of this dish, but you could also blanch them in boiling water for a minute or two. Be sure to cook them enough to take away the crunch; they should be just crisp. Mixed with a zesty Caesar-esque dressing and topped with homemade croutons and Parmesan shavings, they make an extraordinary side dish. **MAKES 6 SERVINGS**

6 thick slices sourdough bread, crusts removed
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 lb jumbo asparagus spears
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
4 oz Parmesan cheese, shaved
3 tbsp chopped fresh chives

Cilantro Dressing

2 tsp cumin seeds

¼ cup orange juice concentrate

1 cup fresh cilantro leaves

½ cup grape seed or vegetable oil

1 tbsp fresh lemon juice

1 tbsp mayonnaise

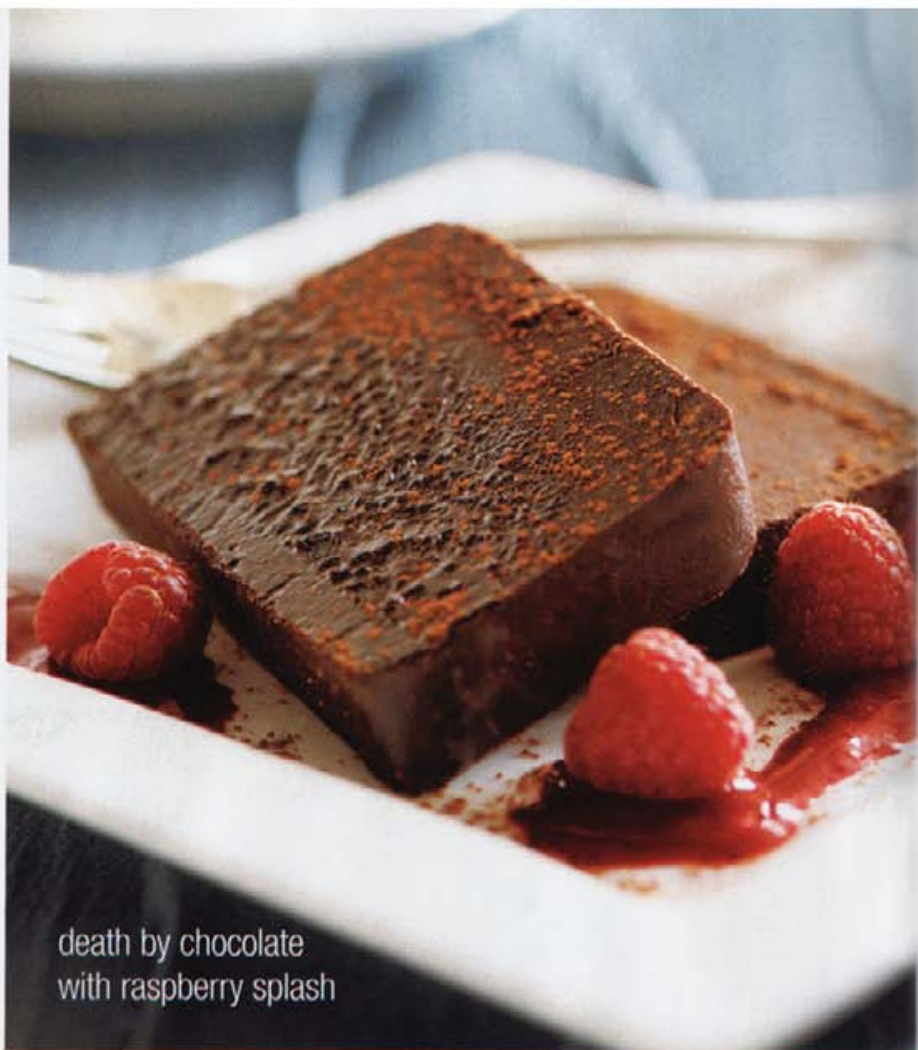
Sea salt and cayenne pepper

Preheat barbecue or broiler to medium-high. Brush both sides of sourdough bread slices with ¼ cup of the oil and grill or broil until golden brown. Cut slices into 1½-inch cubes and set aside.

Toss asparagus with remaining oil, and salt and pepper to taste. Place on grill and cook until slightly blackened and char marks appear, about 4 minutes. Let cool.

Cilantro Dressing: Toast cumin seeds in dry heavy skillet over medium heat for 4 minutes. Grind seeds with mortar and pestle or in spice mill. In blender or food processor, purée orange juice concentrate and cilantro until smooth. Add oil, lemon juice and cumin; mix well. Add mayonnaise; mix well. Season to taste with salt and cayenne.

Pile asparagus on serving plate with all



death by chocolate
with raspberry splash

tips at one end. Drizzle with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the Cilantro Dressing and garnish with Parmesan cheese shavings, sourdough croutons and chives. Season to taste with pepper. Serve remaining dressing on the side.

ROASTED BREAST OF CHICKEN WITH GARLIC AND CANDIED LEMON

If you're looking for a sophisticated little chicken dish to serve guests, this is it. What sets it apart from the average roasted chicken recipe is the flavourful stock and the twist of candied lemon. "The key is to make a deeply coloured, deeply flavoured chicken stock," says Lesley. "There's a lot of garlic in this dish, but it's cooked long enough to make it soft and sweet – a perfect contrast to the candied lemon zest." **MAKES 6 SERVINGS**

4 lemons
3 tbsp granulated sugar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil
2 heads garlic, separated into cloves and peeled
6 single free-range chicken breasts
2 cups rich dark chicken stock
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper

Using vegetable peeler, remove peel, but not white pith, from lemons. Cut into thin strips and place in saucepan along with sugar and water. Bring to simmer and cook until peel is translucent, 10 to 15 minutes. Strain and let cool. Juice lemons; set aside.

Preheat oven to 425°F.

In heavy ovenproof sauté pan, heat oil over medium heat; add garlic cloves and chicken breasts. Brown chicken on both sides. Add stock and lemon juice. Bring to boil over high heat.

Transfer pan to oven and roast for about 15 minutes or until chicken is golden and juices run clear when pierced. Reserving sauce in pan, transfer chicken to warm platter and cover with foil to keep warm.

Reduce sauce until it coats back of spoon, 20 to 30 minutes. Add candied lemon. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Spoon sauce over chicken breasts to serve.

DEATH BY CHOCOLATE WITH RASPBERRY SPLASH

This was Lesley's signature dish for many years. "I saw a real need for a company that could provide top-quality desserts to high-end restaurants that didn't have their own pastry chefs," says Lesley. She came up with this decadent creation for Bishop's in Vancouver. "Of course, in hindsight we should have trademarked the name," she says. According to Lesley, at one time this was Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's favourite dessert. It makes a lot, but it freezes well. If you wish, dress it up with fresh raspberries or even a medley of sectioned citrus fruit (grapefruit or blood oranges), then top it off with another drizzle of the Raspberry Splash. **MAKES 16 SERVINGS**

15 oz best-quality bittersweet chocolate
(like Valrhona or Callebaut)

1 cup heavy cream
4 tbsp butter
4 egg yolks
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup icing sugar
6 tbsp Cointreau or Grand Marnier
Cocoa powder

Raspberry Splash

10 oz frozen raspberries
3 tbsp berry sugar
1 tsp fresh lemon juice

Line 9- by 5-inch loaf pan with parchment paper; set aside.

Chop chocolate into small pieces and place in top of double boiler; add cream and butter. Melt over medium heat, stirring until completely smooth. Remove from heat and let cool for 1 minute, continuing to stir.

Whisk egg yolks into chocolate mixture. Sift in icing sugar, whisking constantly. Whisk in Cointreau until smooth. Pour into prepared loaf pan. Refrigerate for at least 8 hours to set or overnight.

Raspberry Splash: In food processor, purée raspberries, berry sugar and lemon juice. Pass sauce through sieve to remove seeds.

Unmould cake, removing paper. Dust top with cocoa powder. Drizzle large spoonful of Raspberry Splash on each plate. Using hot, wet knife, slice cake and place on plates. ○