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Mann about the kitchen

Chef's blending of food and film aids Ojai schools benefit project

By Lisa McKinnon, lmckinnon@VenturaCountyStar.com March 31, 2004

One day he's in Atlanta, whipping up dishes on the set of the TBS Superstation show "Dinner & a Movie."

The next, he's back home in Ojai, watching as children at a local elementary school munch on freshly picked snap peas as though they were candy bars.

But no matter where he is, celebrity chef Claud Mann takes his food both very seriously and not so seriously at all.

On the one hand, he belongs to national organizations like Share Our Strength, an anti-hunger group that uses the energies of professional chefs to feed the homeless. On the other, he is known as the creator of recipes with groan-inducing names like "Can't Go to School, I Falafel," which was cooked up during a recent "Dinner & a Movie" airing of "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

The punny word play "helps get people in the mood to realize, 'Hey, I can have fun in the kitchen,' " he said.

On Saturday, Mann will lend some of that humor to another worthy cause when he acts as host for a dinner-and-a-movie fund-raiser for Food for Thought: The Ojai Healthy Schools Project. Now in its first year, the project was designed to improve students' diets and understanding of where food comes from while also helping create a reliable market for farmers' crops. At its core is a once-a-week Farm-to-School Salad Bar that features locally grown fruits and vegetables like kiwis, Satsuma tangerines and the aforementioned snap peas.

"When kids see a perfect nectarine or a blood orange, they respond," said Mann, who, as a Food for Thought steering committee member, likes to be present when the salad bar debuts at each new participating school. "It doesn't have to be fancy, just high quality and tasty."

Can you really win kids over with leafy greens and fruits with colorful

names? It would appear so.

When Meiners Oaks Elementary was added to the Ojai Unified School District-sanctioned program earlier this month, the turnout added up to "by far the most students eating lunch there ever," said Steve Fields, an Ojai farmer and co-leader of Food for Thought. "There were an extra 100 kids plus over 50 parents who joined the kids."

Similar Healthy Schools salad bars already have sprouted in nine of Ventura Unified School District's 17 elementary schools, and there are hopes of offering fruits and vegetables at all Ventura kindergarten through fifth-grade schools by this summer.

Such programs help children develop healthy eating habits even as they face a barrage of advertising promoting junk food, said Marty Fujita of Food for Thought.

Still on the waiting list in Ojai is San Antonio Elementary, the school attended by Mann's 10-year-old daughter, Eva. And that is where events like the Food for Thought benefit come in, he said.

"In Ojai in particular, it seems inconceivable that there wouldn't be a fresh orange available every day, for every kid," Mann added, referring to the area's many citrus groves. "But to do that takes time, people and money."

The fund-raiser dinner, a veritable smorgasbord of locally grown fruits and vegetables in dishes prepared by area chefs, will follow a late-afternoon screening at the Ojai Playhouse of "Made-Up," an independent film directed by Tony Shalhoub. The star of the current USA Network series "Monk" and the 1996 movie "Big Night" is scheduled to appear.

A discussion about favorite food-related movies -- and about Shalhoub's turn as a temperamental artiste of an Italian chef in "Big Night" in particular -- inspired organizers to approach the actor about participating in the benefit, Mann said.

Mann's own path to the blending of food and film began in Berkeley, where he grew up.

"My mother was one of those moms who tried cooking something different every week," he said. "She was always working on new things, like Laotian curry. We'd say, 'Mom, can't we have meatloaf like the other kids?' "

Mann was in his teens when the local-produce revolution came to Berkeley via the restaurant Chez Panisse, where menus include the names

of the small farms -- and sometimes of the specific farmers -- that supply it with organic beets and free-range pork.

He majored in music in college and today plays drums in concert with his wife, the singer Perla Batalla. But food was never far from Mann's mind.

"I liken it to the way an actor is when they go to the theater for the first time: they can't forget it," he said. "Even at 5 or 6 years old, I'd try to get a peek inside the kitchen whenever we went out to a restaurant."

By the time he decided to attend the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, Mann already had 10 years of restaurant experience under his chef's hat and was thinking of opening a place of his own.

But before going solo, Mann worked as executive chef at Palmilla Hotel in Los Cabos, Mexico, where he quickly implemented a locals-only approach to the vegetables used in the kitchen.

First, Mann worked out a contract with a nearby farmer to whom he gave seeds to grow herbs and lettuces. Next, he canceled the resort's standing order to have such items shipped in from far away.

"Instead of 20 salads, we had just three (on the menu) -- but they were the best salads you ever had because they were grown right there," Mann said. "Best of all, we became stewards of the local environment."

-- Star staff writer Erinn Hutkin contributed to this story.

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