



Edible Profile

Erika Heinemann

by Krista Harris

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL GARDNER

From growing up in Santa Barbara to attending culinary school in San Francisco, training under Thomas Keller of French Laundry fame and now returning to Santa Barbara, Erika Heinemann brings her savvy way with wine and food back home.

Sometimes it's necessary to interview someone at Renaud's Patisserie with a cup of cappuccino and an almond croissant. This was one of those times. I was meeting Erika Heinemann, a new chef in town. Or rather a returning chef, and I knew we would have a lot to talk about. And as I listened to her story amidst the pleasant clatter of the tiny shop, I felt that she and I were very much at home.

Like many raised in Santa Barbara, she left home to get a taste of the outside world—in her case the Bay Area, to go to college. But after a degree in broadcast journalism and some travel in Europe, she realized that if she won the lottery the first thing she'd want to do would be to go to culinary school. So, rather than wait for that, she decided quite sensibly to test the waters by working at the Montecito Café. And then she headed off to the San Francisco Culinary Institute.

"I loved being a student," Erika says. "I sat in the front row, asked tons of questions and volunteered for anything." And after she graduated, she was determined to get one of the coveted spots at Thomas Keller's famous restaurant, French Laundry in Napa Valley. She succeeded, and thrived under Keller's tutelage.

Erika realized that pairing wine and food was a passion of hers, and she took an executive chef position at Duckhorn Winery and later started her own business, Savvy Wine Food, so that she could offer her services to other wineries.

Then the lure of Santa Barbara and her extended family here drew her back. Also, she felt the time was right to do what she had been doing in Napa here in Santa Barbara. The food was here, the wine was here, but no one was really providing what she could. In addition to her incredible skill as a chef for private parties or winemaker dinners, Erika acts as a consultant to wineries—developing wine and food pairings, menu consultation and prepared food.

Erika recently created a sophisticated seven-course meal for a private party that was arranged by Meryll Brown Events. The menu reads like an epicurean fantasy with dishes like Foie Gras Tochon, Fresh Fig and Lemon-Thyme Gastrique, Toasted Brioche; Wild Alaskan Sockeye Salmon in Fig Leaves with Nasturtium Butter; Five-Spice Braised Beef Short Rib with Napa Cabbage-Orzo Stew, Roquefort Trifle with French Butter Pear Relish; Cardamom Spice Cake with Orange Blossom Cream and Fleur de Sel Caramels, served with exquisite chocolates from Sweet Nuit.

Erika looks at Santa Barbara these days with a renewed sense of inspiration and enthusiasm. "I'm rediscovering Santa Barbara," Erika says. "The farmers markets are better than ever. Even in Napa, which has a great farmers market, it isn't year-round."

This winter we'll probably find her at the farmers market picking out all the wonderful root vegetables and winter greens. This time of year she favors braising techniques with a variety of flavors and spices that can offer lots of pairing opportunities with wine. I think this is where Erika brings something unique to the table. As a chef who has worked extensively with wineries, Erika is as much about wine as she is about food. And in Santa Barbara, that is a very winning combination. [e](#)

Find out more about Erika at savvywinefood.com

Krista Harris is the editor and publisher of *Edible Santa Barbara*.

Above from left: Rock Shrimp Lollipops with Spicy Almond Sauce; Foie Gras Tochon, Fresh Fig and Lemon-Thyme Syrup, Toasted Brioche; Wild Alaskan Sockeye Salmon in Fig Leaves with Nasturtium Butter; Roquefort Trifle with French Butter Pear Relish; Cardamom Spice Cake with Orange Blossom Cream.



Erika Heinemann at work.