

My San Francisco

# Homegrown

Award-winning chef, cookbook author, TV personality, and instructor Joanne Weir's lifetime love affair with food begins at home. By **Kimberley Lovato**

You could say Joanne Weir's career began with a tomato sandwich. It was summer in Northampton, Massachusetts, and her mother had plucked the plump red fruit from their garden. Six-year-old Weir watched her mom slice the tomatoes, place them on homemade bread slathered with just-whisked mayonnaise, and listened as her mother explained that sprinkling the tomatoes with salt would pull out their sweetness. "It is one of my first food memories," says Weir. "I've been curious about food ever since."

## Under the maple tree

Epic tomato sandwiches make sense in a family of cooks and farmers. While growing up, Weir visited her grandparents every Saturday on their 400-acre dairy farm in western Massachusetts. The farm once belonged to William Cullen Bryant, a poet and longtime editor of the *New York Evening Post*.

"My grandfather was a great cook, as was his mother, and he made these delicious chicken salad sandwiches," remembers Weir. "He butchered the chickens, made the biscuits and the mayo, and we ate under the maple tree."

For dessert, it was always hand-churned maple-walnut ice cream, made with milk from resident cows and sap from their shade provider. After lunch, Weir would sit on the porch with her mother and they'd play the same game.

"What's over there?" Weir would ask, pointing toward the Berkshire Hills.

The response was always the same: "California."

Little did Weir know then that the game was a prophetic one.

## California, here I come

Weir earned an art degree from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and during her time teaching fine art to high-school students, she tuned into National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. An interview with Chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, a bistro that had opened in Berkeley in 1971, was on. It was widely considered to be the birthplace of Californian cuisine.

"Alice talked about cooking with seasonal ingredients, about buying local, about heirloom and organic, and it resonated," says Weir. "These were things I knew my whole life. I grew up with them and lived them, but I had never really heard it put into words like that."

Soon after the broadcast, Weir traveled to San Francisco with her sister, and made a reservation for lunch at Chez Panisse. The meal convinced Weir that cooking was her true calling, and she promptly returned to Massachusetts and enrolled in a course with renowned French Chef Madeleine Kamman, from whom she earned a Master Chef Diploma. Her first job application was to Chez Panisse in 1985.

## A TV star is born

Weir spent five years learning from Waters and has gone on to become a household name. She has authored more than

a dozen cookbooks, opened a restaurant (Copita, in Sausalito, in 2012), earned several prestigious awards, and hosts acclaimed cooking shows, including *Joanne Weir Gets Fresh*, set in the kitchen of her San Francisco home, where she has lived since 1990.

A teacher at heart, Weir also hosts regular weekend classes in her kitchen. Surprisingly, it's mostly people from far-flung places like Italy and Australia who come to learn recipes and cooking techniques inspired by Weir's own culinary travels.

"Students are attracted to San Francisco because they have heard what a great food city it is," says Weir. "I teach, but also act as kind of a guide for them. They are surprised to hear about what a cornucopia San Francisco is in terms of available ingredients and farmers' markets. They want to know my favorite places to eat and travel locally."

San Francisco's proximity to places such as Carmel, Big Sur, and especially Napa Valley, just a little more than an hour away, intrigues her students, and are yet another reason Weir adores the



city, too. "As much as I love food, I love wine, and how great it is that we can just zip up there [Napa Valley] in a day," she says.

When she's not working, it's wandering San Francisco's eclectic neighborhoods that makes her feel most at home. The farmers' market on Sundays on Clement Street is a favorite spot, and Spice Ace in Lower Pacific Heights is where she's often found sniffing unusual ingredients to use on her next show. Dining out is practically a sport in San Francisco, and Weir says she loves to try the ever-opening new restaurants, such as Mister Jiu's, as much as old favorites like Kokkari and The Slanted Door, and, of course, Chez Panisse, just across the bay. Mostly, Weir says she likes the vibe that the city brings on a daily basis.

"People are just happier here in my opinion," she says. "They smile more, they are easygoing. San Francisco fits my personality. It's energized and outgoing. I can't imagine living anywhere else."

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