

Joy of Cooking

Bring yoga into
the kitchen to make
food that nourishes
body and soul.

by lavinia spalding • photography by sheri giblin



WALK THROUGH THE kitchen doors at The Expanding Light, Ananda Village's yoga and meditation retreat center outside Nevada City, California, and the first thing you might see is a circle of people chanting Om—blessing the room before they begin cooking. Stay awhile and you'll witness the gentle hum of activity as executive chef Premdas Ghirla, with the help of volunteers, assembles golden noodle stir-fry and nine-gem curry for the day's 65 guests here on retreat. On the stovetop behind a pot of lentils, framed photos of gurus rub shoulders with pepper mills and bottles of hot sauce, and around the room, mixers and cutting boards share counter space with burning incense and candles, deity statues, and soothing water fountains. The stove's overhead vent is adorned with affirmations like "Joy is within you" and "God's limit is nowhere." Someone turns on the boom box, and Ghirla and the volunteers happily chant as they chop cauliflower and cabbage.

Traditionally yoga retreat centers and ashrams like Ananda Village have been places to rejuvenate physically and spiritually. Within these centers is the kitchen, where volunteers and professional cooks come together to deliver beautiful meals throughout the day to nourish guests. But for chefs like Ghirla, good food requires more than top-notch ingredients and creative recipes—it's the compassion, intention, and energy of those in the kitchen that make a meal fulfilling. To cultivate these things, many ashram and retreat center cooks work in silence, pray throughout the entire service, and even pause to do a little asana as they chop, peel, and stir.

Think of it as spiritual cooking. Cultivating a selfless intention, committing to recognizing the Divine in those you're feeding, and cooking joyfully without expectation of recognition will improve your awareness—as well as your food. For the yogic cook, integrating mindfulness and love only deepens a cooking experience and, according to some, enhances the quality and flavor of the food itself.

In many ways, this approach to cooking can even feed your appetite for a connection with the Divine. "When we practice daily tasks like cooking or washing dishes while doing mantra, chanting, or focusing on the breath, then the whole task changes," says Narayani Levine, a volunteer cook at Shoshoni Yoga Retreat near Boulder, Colorado. "It becomes yoga. It is taking yoga into

continued on page 81

serve up some love

Yogi chefs share their favorite recipes, filled with great ingredients and a chance to bring yoga into your home kitchen.

Emerald Salad with Shiitakes and Red Onion

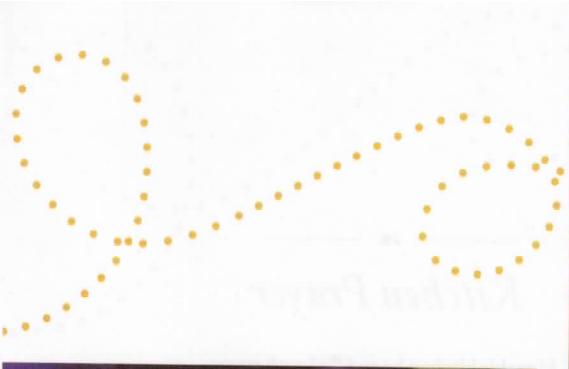
MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

The kitchen manager for Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Marcella Friel, makes this salad for up to 125 visitors—or for 6 guests at her home. For an extra burst of flavor and color, add fresh seasonal fruit, such as diced persimmons and pomegranate.

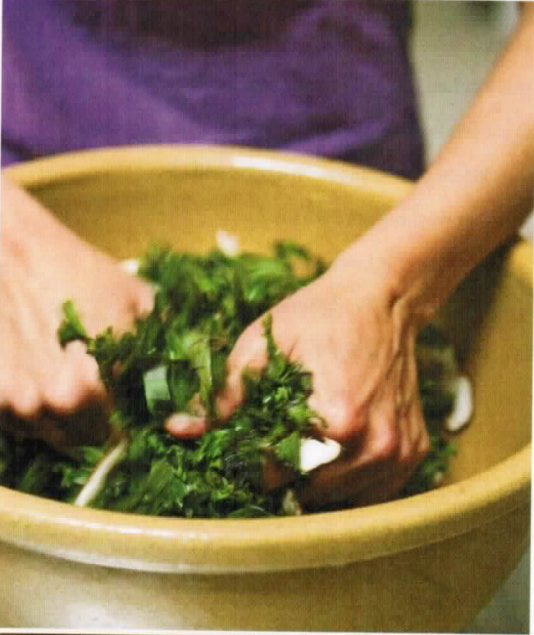
- ½ cup thinly sliced red onion
- 1 tablespoon raw apple cider vinegar
- 2 cups boiling water
- 1 large bunch kale, washed, stemmed, and sliced into ½-inch strips
- 2 cups thinly sliced fresh shiitake mushroom caps
- ¼ cup toasted walnut oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup raspberry vinegar

- 1** Place sliced onions in a small bowl with apple cider vinegar and boiling water. Let soak for 10 to 15 minutes. Rinse and squeeze out excess moisture.
- 2** Place kale and shiitakes in a large bowl. Drizzle oil and sprinkle salt over vegetables. Massage the mixture with your hands, kneading and squeezing until the kale turns deep green and wilts slightly, about 5 minutes. Set aside.
- 3** Add onions and raspberry vinegar to the kale-mushroom mix and toss. Adjust taste with oil and salt, and serve at room temperature.





Kitchen Paper

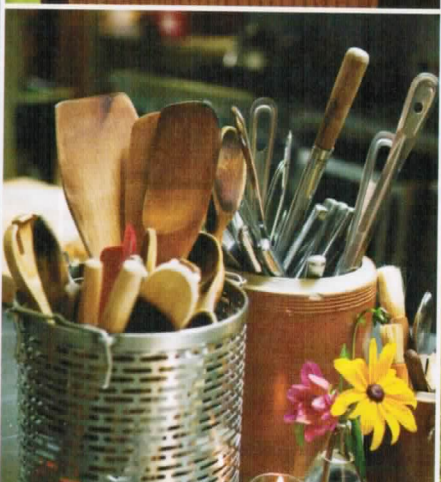


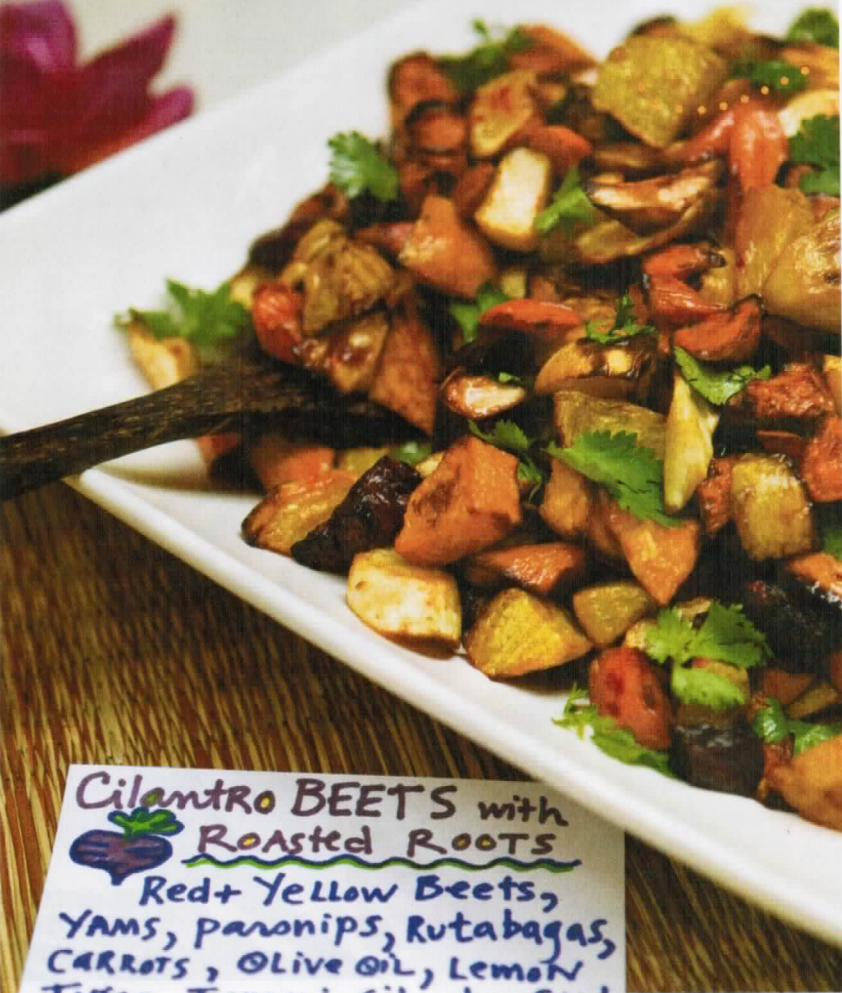
EMERALD Salad
KALE, Shiitakes, Red
ONION, Walnut, Olive
Oil, Balsamic Vinegar,
Cider Vinegar, Salt



Kitchen Staff
Food prepared
with
Love
is the Best!
Thank you.
with gratitude

All photos shot on location at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California.





Cilantro BEETS with
ROASTED ROOTS
Red + Yellow Beets,
YAMS, parsnips, Rutabagas,
CARROTS, OLIVE OIL, Lemon
Tikka Masala

Kitchen Prayer

May this kitchen be so filled with peace
that all who eat food prepared here receive peace.

May this kitchen be so filled with happiness
that all who eat food prepared here receive happiness.

May this kitchen be so filled with good will
that working here is a joy.

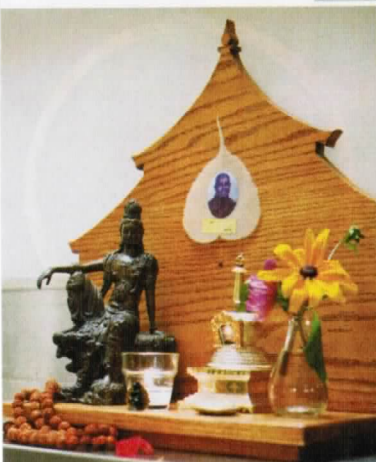
Bless this kitchen.

Bless all who work here.

Bless the food that is prepared here.

May this kitchen and the work done here be a blessing to all
who live.

*Written by John Robbins. Reprinted with permission from May All Be
Fed: A Diet for a New World, by John Robbins and
Gia Patton (Harper Perennial).*



continued from page 78

our daily lives, having a sense of serving something larger than our small selves.”

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Seva is a Sanskrit word referring to the practice of serving others with no expectation of reward or recognition. Practicing *seva* helps us see that every person is an aspect of God; therefore, any action benefiting others, no matter how menial, is a service to God. Considered from this perspective, any task—scrubbing pots or feeding your family—becomes a spiritual practice and a step toward attaining self-realization, the highest goal of a yogi.

At Shoshoni Yoga Retreat, cooks aim to make preparing and eating food part of their spiritual growth. Before each shift, for example, incense is offered and a bell is rung. While preparing meals, the members of the kitchen staff silently repeat a mantra or sing, and before serving the meal, the head cook offers a blessing in Sanskrit. “We meditate, but for half an hour or so. And what do we do the rest of the day? We work,” Levine explains. “So it’s important to use that work as part of our *sadbana*, or the spiritual life we’re trying to develop.”

Ghirla, of Ananda Village, didn’t always cook with *seva* in mind. For 30 years he managed kitchens at upscale restaurants in the Four Seasons and Fairmont hotels in various locations in California, and he directed the California Culinary Academy’s sommelier program.

Although Ghirla enjoyed his profession, he felt something was missing. In the early 1990s he began practicing yoga regularly and soon became an instructor. Eventually he quit the restaurant business and in 2000 moved to Expanding Light with his wife, Leslie. “My soul needed to be involved in giving and receiving,” he says. “I decided that whatever talent I had in life, I wanted to use it to serve, to make people happy. To be able to cook food for people on a spiritual quest makes my job fulfilling.”

SOUL FOOD

Kitchens are often the most-used, best-loved room in the house. That’s because they possess a gravitational pull that brings together friends and family, labor and laughter, sustenance and celebration. But their loveliness doesn’t always translate into blissful food prep.

Sometimes—when the perfectionist in you is stressing about pleasing guests or the tired parent you’ve become senses the increasing impatience of hungry little ones—all the love you’d hoped to infuse into your meal seems to vanish into a haze of anxiety. That, says Ghirla, is exactly when cooking with an intention of service can reconnect you with the underlying joy of the experience. Plus, it shows you the value of applying spiritual practice to everyday life.

“The kitchen’s a great place to achieve sainthood,” he says. “We call it practicing in the light of day. The real light of day comes when you’re under pressure and doing selfless service. Sometimes things get pretty intense in the kitchen, but that’s part of the path: learning to stay compassionate, centered, and loving while the food is boiling.”

The main thing you can do to practice selfless service in the kitchen, Ghirla says, is to remember that cooking isn’t about you, the cook. It’s about whomever you’re feeding. An important part

continued on page 128

Cilantro Beets with Roasted Roots

MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

This fall dish is easy to make and sure to please.

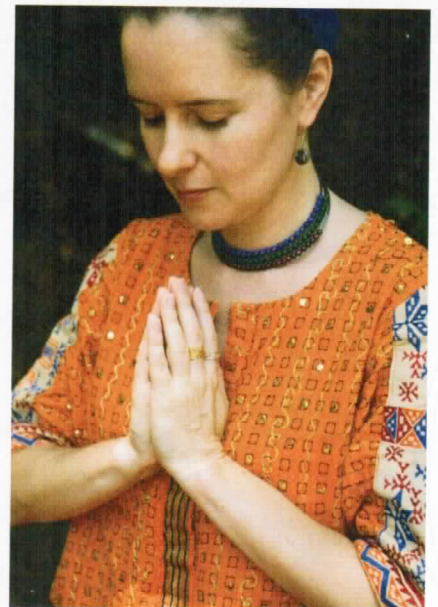
- 2 medium red beets, quartered
- 2 golden beets, quartered
- 2 yams, quartered
- 2 parsnips, quartered
- 2 turnips, quartered
- 2 carrots, quartered
- Salt to season
- 1½ tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1½ tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon tamari
- 1 tablespoon whole cilantro leaves, no stems

1 Preheat oven to 350°. Add beets, yams, parsnips, turnips, and carrots to a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

2 Season with salt and bake until outer skins are lightly crisped, about 45 to 60 minutes.

3 In a small bowl, combine olive oil, lemon juice, tamari, and cilantro. Pour over root mixture and serve warm.

Adapted with permission from Global Kitchen: Vegetarian Favorites from the Expanding Light Yoga Retreat, by Blanche Agassy McCord (Crystal Clarity Publishers).



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continued from page 81

of preparing food with selflessness and love is planning meals that will be physically supportive and nourishing, taking into account the foods your family or guests will respond to, the weather, and everyone's moods, energy, and activities. "Intuiting what to cook for the people you're serving is spiritual cooking at its best," Ghirla says.

Viewing the food, the people you're serving, and your self as channels for something higher gives you an opportunity to develop more confidence in cooking and to produce food that's delicious and spiritually charged.

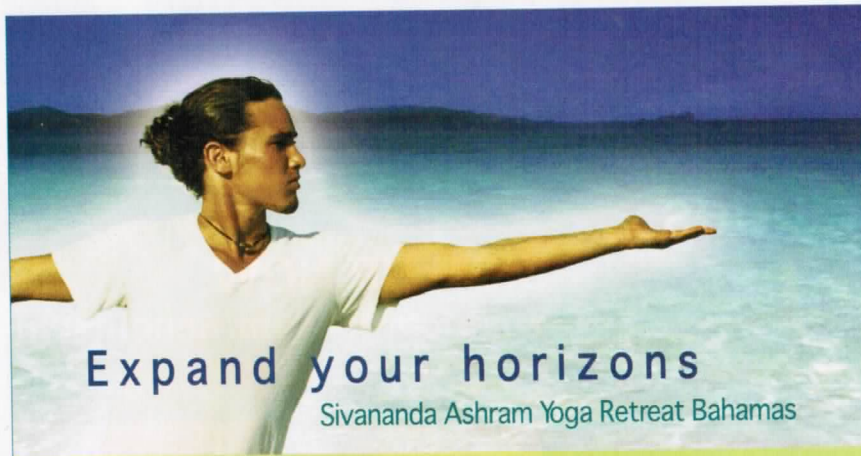
"The Hindu expression is *namaste*, or *namaskar*, which means 'the God in me recognizes and honors the God in you.' In our kitchen, and in other seva-based kitchens, it's understood at all times that the guest is God and that we are also God," Ghirla explains. "We are servants—we're serving God and others. So, everything we do in terms of food preparation is a spiritual practice."

RETREAT TO THE KITCHEN

Chances are, you're already aware that what you eat nourishes you on more than just the physical level; certain foods support mental clarity and spiritual practice. Retreat centers and yogic cooks tend to offer these foods—often vegetarian, lightly cooked, and with a minimum of pungent spices—as a matter of course. But these cooks also maintain that there's more to yogic cooking: that a chef's mindset correlates directly to the food's *prana* (life force), affecting its flavor, digestibility, and nutritional value.

Therefore, kitchen workers at retreat centers often cook in silence as they contemplate truth, beauty, and food—or, at the very least, refrain from engaging in gossip or negative thoughts. "If the cook is happy," Levine says, "focusing on spiritual practice and mantra, then the food is infused with *shakti* [spiritual power]."

Cooking with an intention of service, Shoshoni Retreat's Levine says, has helped her draw from her spiritual practice and put it into action. "I might have a wonderful experience in my yoga or meditation



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Butternut Squash and Roasted Garlic Spread

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

Served with warm pita bread alongside a salad of baby greens, this spread is a favorite among Shoshoni Yoga Retreat's guests.

- 4 cups water
- 2 cups butternut squash, peeled and cubed
- 3 tablespoons tahini
- 4 garlic cloves, roasted
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- ¼ cup parsley, chopped fine

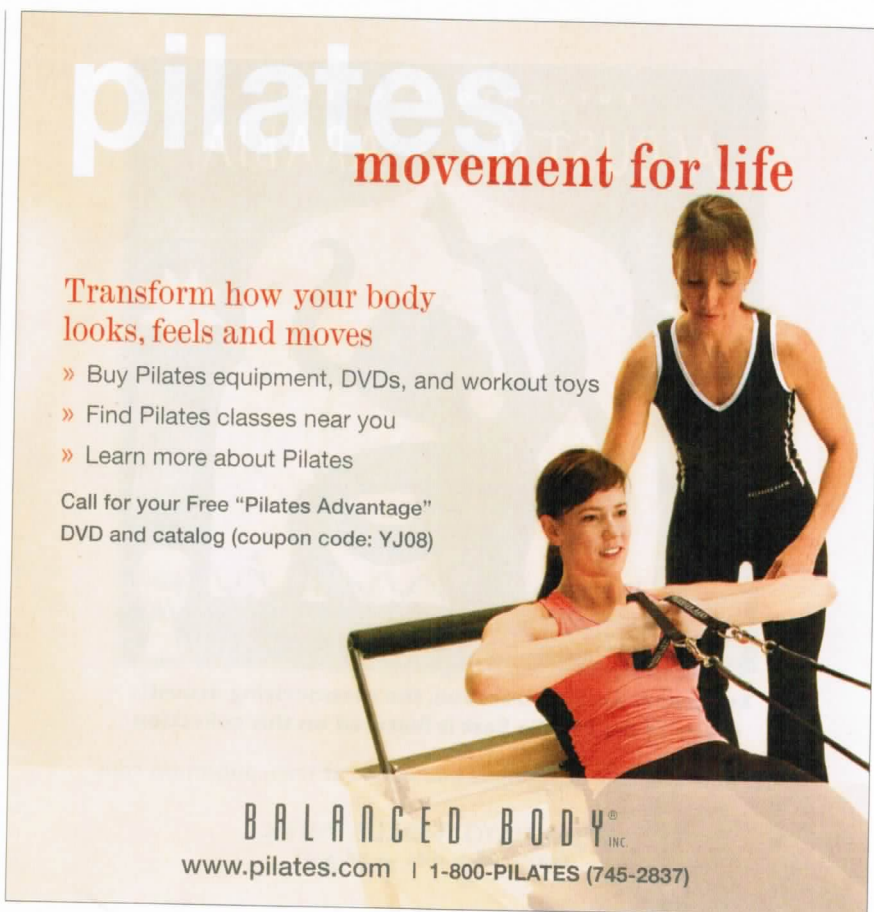
- 1 Place water in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Add the squash and cook uncovered for 20 minutes or until tender.
- 2 Transfer the squash to a food processor along with the tahini, roasted garlic, lemon juice, salt, and coriander. Blend until smooth.
- 3 Add parsley and pulse a few times to mix.
- 4 Serve with pita bread, crackers, or raw vegetables.

Recipe adapted with permission from Yoga Kitchen: Vegetarian Recipes from the Shoshoni Yoga Retreat, by Faith Stone and Rachael Guidry (Book Publishing Company).

practice, and then I go into the kitchen, chanting along with a CD, doing something as routine as chopping a carrot," she says. "Suddenly my heart bursts open, and I'm full of love and bliss, and I can feel all the love and bliss go right into that carrot."

And in order for a cook to stir good feelings into the pot, she must feel healthy and relaxed. And just as love and selflessness transform food, so body awareness transforms the cook. Some kitchen directors encourage this by making space for asana practice before or during cooking.

At Gray Bear Yoga Retreat in Hohenwald, Tennessee, for instance, the kitchen



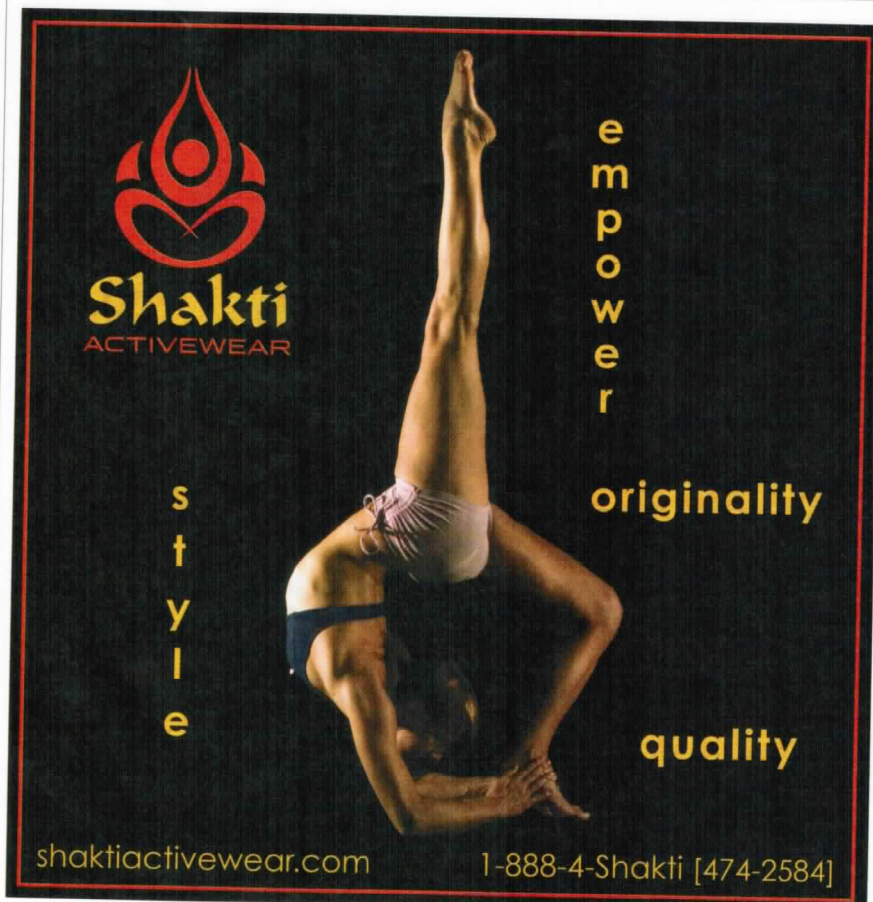
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floor is heated, there's enough room to spread a mat, and yoga props are kept nearby. "We often do partner poses in the kitchen," says Gray Bear's director and co-founder, Adam Schumaker. "It makes all the difference in the world because when your body is relaxed, you can put love and attention into your work." At Esalen Institute, the iconic alternative educational center in Big Sur, California, the kitchen staff conduct "check-ins" during each shift after they bless the food. They note how their wrists feel after an hour of chopping onions, observe any emotions and thoughts that come up while cooking, and make sure to give their feet a rest after standing over a stove for a long time. In this way, cooking becomes an awareness practice, says Matt Glazer, Esalen's kitchen manager.

Try adding awareness to the next recipe you follow. As you prepare your meal, dedicate the act of cooking to your spiritual growth. Consciously imbue the food with love, purity, generosity, and positive energy. Cook with all the vitality and tenderness you'd employ if you were feeding your yoga teacher or an ill relative. Do a check-in as you cook, too. How does your neck feel? Where is your mind? Try silently repeating a mantra, chanting aloud, or meditating. As you dine, savor each bite, closely observing its flavor. Afterward, note how you feel, physically and emotionally. Be honest with yourself—you may not taste the difference, but do you feel it?

EXPECT LESS, GET MORE

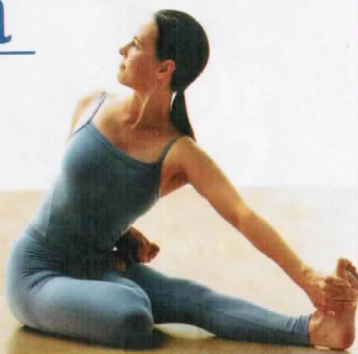
Too often, the goal in cooking is less about nourishing people and more about making an impact on them. This kind of motivation only provokes anxiety and defeats the purpose of spiritual cooking. Rather than shoot for culinary brilliance with every turn of a whisk, yogic cooks have humble aspirations: to serve, to feed, and to nourish. That's it.

"One phrase we keep in the kitchen," Gray Bear Yoga's Schumaker explains, "is 'Show up, pay attention, and let go of the outcome.' It's OK if you burn the sweet potatoes—we'll figure something out." Letting go of any attachment to a dish's

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outcome may require a shift in consciousness, as you focus more on the person you're feeding and abandon authorship over the process. And you might just find it liberating. By regarding the act of cooking as an offering of love (rather than a display of culinary prowess), you can stop clinging to the outcome. And herein lies the essence of seva practice: As you serve, ego and attachment fall away, making room for peace and happiness.

SECRET INGREDIENT

Case in point: Graham Miles, a volunteer at the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual community in Morayshire, Scotland, has always struggled with perfectionism. But working in the Findhorn community kitchen helped him become more flexible. "Producing a meal and serving at a set time has challenged this need to be perfect," Miles says. "Indeed, it has made perfection even more obviously unattainable. And gradually I have learned not to be attached to the result, to forgive myself for the inevitable errors, and to let each day go, whether I have received praise or criticism. I'm freer than I have ever been before."

Clearly, cultivating a sense of selfless service while at work in the kitchen offers a cook the chance to tap into something higher. Executive chef Deb Howard, who first joined the kitchen staff at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health (now in Stockbridge, Massachusetts) 20 years ago, has experienced this. "I ask myself," she says, "Why do I still have that same wave of joy flow [through] me as I walk into the Kripalu kitchen? What are all those guests tasting in this food that causes them to write letters of appreciation and praise—letters that mention not only taste but something else, a something else they claim contributes to the transformation they have experienced here? What is it that has remained constant and infinite as the external ebbs and flows through many manifestations?" It's love, Howard says. "The main ingredient has always been and continues to be love. And isn't that what we are really hungry for anyway?" ■

Lavinia Spalding co-wrote With a Measure of Grace. She lives in San Francisco.

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