



# CALIFORNIA ETERNAL

ON A CATTLE RANCH IN THE SANTA YNEZ FOOTHILLS, A FAMILY HOLDS FAST TO THE LAND AND THE BOUNTY IT GIVES

BY GEORGIA FREEDMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY PENNY DE LOS SANTOS

At Rancho San Julián in Lompoc, California, the author partakes in a meal with the extended Poett family and friends.

THIS MEAL IS A HOMECOMING OF SORTS, even though my actual childhood home is 50 miles away. Here, sitting down to supper in the shade of a live oak tree in the grassy heart of the Central Coast, I feel as happy and grounded as a 33-year-old native Californian can be. Perched next to me on the wood bench is one of my oldest friends, Elizabeth Poett, a person I've played with and fought with and shared my greatest joys with and loved for so long that I could almost take her for granted. But I don't. When you've been away from a place like this for a

few years, as I have, you only cherish it more.

Elizabeth went to school with me, down the coast in Santa Barbara, but she grew up here, on the oak-dotted grasslands of Rancho San Julián, a 13,000-acre cattle ranch that has been in her dad's family for nine generations. She is a descendant of José de la Guerra, a commander of the Santa Barbara presidio, who was granted this land in 1837. Now she works full-time on the ranch just like her dad and many of her cousins, who share ownership under a family trust.

I did a lot of growing up here too, spending countless weekends with the Poetts during my school-age years. This is where I learned how to ride a horse, how to mend a fence, and how to scoop the flesh from a ripe avocado and turn it into guacamole.

Today I've made a big batch for old time's sake. This one is in proper California style: studded with chunks of tomato, flecked with cilantro leaves, and amped up with a ton of lime and salt. We eat it with fragrant corn tortillas made by the wife of one of the Mexican ranch hands who lives here full-time.

Elizabeth's parents, Jim and Marianne, are here, too, along with a handful of cousins and friends who live nearby. Jim was one of the first ranchers in this part of California to raise organic beef. Marianne is the founder and editor of a local newspaper. She is also an amazing cook, and though she's not a native Californian, she's one of those transplants who has taken so naturally

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to the kind of simple, direct cooking inspired by California's bounty that you'd think she was born here. For me, this meal is the true California cuisine.

Earlier today I helped Marianne and Elizabeth make enchiladas from a recipe that Marianne found in some journals where

tortillas, "you know it's from here." Then she dipped the tortillas in the sauce and rolled them around a filling of sautéed onions, olives, and crumbly cotija cheese. Just like I remember.

Now, as the shadow of the Santa Ynez foothills creeps across the clearing where we eat our picnic supper, I taste the enchiladas. Their smoky flavor takes me back to Saturday night dinners with Elizabeth and her family when I was 12 years old, after swimming in the creek or riding in the back of her dad's pickup and tossing hay to the cows. I've missed this food more than I knew.

The main course is a Central Coast classic: a juicy, tender beef tri-tip rubbed with salt, pepper, garlic, olive oil, and rosemary. Elizabeth grilled it slow over a hardwood fire she built in her dad's old grill, which has an ingenious suspended rigging system that allows you to raise and lower the grate during cooking, giving the cook control over just how close the meat gets to the fire. The wedge-shaped roast that comes to the table is sheathed in a savory char. Elizabeth slices it into thick steaks, rosy in the middle, and passes the plate around.

There is no part of the cow that can satisfy a Central Coaster like the mighty tri-tip, which is miraculously both lean and rich at the same time. Rancho San Julián sells a lot of tri-tips, among many other cuts of beef, at farmers' markets in Santa Barbara and Santa Monica, all of it from their herd of 500 pasture-raised cattle. With a whole generation having come of age knowing only the taste of corn-fed beef, grass-fed meat has finally made a comeback, Elizabeth tells me as I take a second helping of steak. "Older customers at the farmers' (continued on page 75)



**THIS IS WHERE I LEARNED HOW TO RIDE A HORSE, HOW TO MEND A FENCE, AND HOW TO SCOOP THE FLESH FROM A RIPE AVOCADO**

Jim's great-aunts and others collected family recipes over the years—Marianne has been translating them from the Spanish. The dish is brilliantly simple, and utterly of this place. The sauce is a smoky purée of local Anaheim and pasilla chiles, and instead of chicken or pork she adds olives, the canned, glossy-black, meaty kind I grew up eating. These California pantry staples, out of fashion elsewhere in the country, are a ubiquitous and beloved ingredient on the Central Coast. "If you see olives in a recipe for enchiladas or tamales," Marianne told me as she fried the



Above: Onion and olive enchiladas. Facing page: At Rancho San Julián, neighbor Chris Malloy transports a table for the Poetts' alfresco dinner with the help of his young son, Lucas.



Elizabeth Poett and her dog, Ella, ride in the back of her father's pickup truck in the La Cadena section of Rancho San Julián. Behind her is a ribbon of California's Highway 1.



Clockwise from top left: Stewed beans; beef brisket and picadillo-stuffed empanadas; grilled tri-tip tacos; poblano peppers, charred for tacos. Facing page: Apricot tarts with pistachios.



Above: Grilled romaine salad with blue cheese and bacon. Facing page: Elizabeth Poett and her father, Jim, share a laugh on the porch of her ranch-style house.

TODD COLEMAN

(continued from page 68) market tell me that our meat is what steak used to taste like when they were kids," she says.

In this part of California, you can't have tri-tip without beans. A lot of people insist on Santa Maria-style beans—named after the nearby town where tri-tip barbecues are a way of life, and typically made with a local variety of beans called piquitos, which are slow-cooked with tomatoes, onion, and all kinds of seasonings. Some cooks make a refried version of this; others, like Elizabeth, like to add bacon. But her cousin Julianna has made an ingenious updated version using kidney beans and pintos, as well as chickpeas, stewed to a caramel depth and brightened with bell peppers, fresh salsa, cilantro, and jalapeños. Fantastic. There's nothing particularly traditional about the dish, and in that sense it strikes me as particularly Californian.

The tri-tip is a handsome centerpiece, but what really blows me away is Marianne's empanadas. Made with fresh corn masa, they're flaky and delicate yet packed with strikingly bold flavors. It's not just the luscious shreds of long-roasted brisket, which alone would have been enough; it's the picadillo of sherry-soaked raisins, pine nuts, and olives, which delivers a briny-sweet balance in every bite. A dusting of powdered sugar on the golden pastry puts the empanadas just over the top. This is typical Poett family cooking: dishes made with incredible love and attention, presented in unpretentious packages.

Dessert is an apricot tart, brought over by the Poetts' neighbors, Chris and Carla Malloy, and made with fruit that grows on the ranch. The sun is well below the hills by the time we dig into it. Another of the cousins, Daniel Berman, pours me a little more of the Lompoc pinot noir he's brought from the Santa Barbara winery where he works. It's getting chilly, but Elizabeth and I linger at the table long after dessert, talking about our lives. After living in New York for a few years, she came back to San Julián in 2006 and got married a few years later, moving into one of the old ranch houses on the vast

property. I ask her what a typical day is like.

"Well," she replies, "tomorrow I have to deliver some marrow bones to a chef, feed a new bunch of steers extra hay and alfalfa so they'll start putting on weight, and sort some bulls from a group of heifers so the vet can get in there and see if the girls are pregnant." Elizabeth asks me about life back East. I tell her she's not missing much.

AT SIX THE NEXT MORNING, Elizabeth and I are bumping along a dirt road in her Chevy pickup through a valley dotted with more of those majestic California live oaks.



**ELIZABETH COOKS THE BURGERS IN A SEASONED CAST-IRON SKILLET SET OVER THE HOT FIRE SO THAT THEIR JUICES AREN'T LOST TO THE FLAMES**

In the near distance, black Angus cows graze with their calves. It's barely light, and a cool fog has rolled in from the Pacific overnight, obscuring the hills around us. We're on our way to the farmers' market, and the bed of the pickup is filled with coolers containing rib eyes, chuck roasts, skirt steaks, briskets, sirloins, ribs, and plenty of tri-tips. At the market, Elizabeth, willowy and blond, cuts a striking figure among the other farmers, who are mostly men. Business at the Rancho San Julián stand is more than brisk.

We're back at Elizabeth's house a few hours later, in time for a late lunch. We make tacos with some of the leftover tri-tip, chopped onion, and a couple of poblano

peppers that she has roasted over an open flame on her stove until they're blackened and blistered.

After lunch I help Elizabeth and her husband, Austin Campbell, who works on a ranch not far away, get the house and yard ready for tonight's dinner, a birthday celebration for Daniel. Jim and Marianne will be coming down from their house, a few miles away, along with other relatives. With some delicate maneuvering, we manage to carry Elizabeth's dining room table out onto the wood porch, which has rosebushes growing all around it. Austin loads the grill barrel with wood.

"Tonight we'll keep it simple and make burgers," says Elizabeth. That kind of statement can be deceptive in the Poett family. The just-ground patties are magnificent chuck from the San Julián herd—as richly marbled as that of any corn-fed animal. Elizabeth cooks them not over the grill grate directly but in an old seasoned cast-iron skillet set over the hot fire so that their fat and juices aren't lost to the flames. And, as I'm reminded at dinner, burgers around here serve double duty as a luscious platform for an extravagant tower of fresh produce, from grilled yellow onions to crunchy lettuce leaves to thick-sliced garnet-red tomatoes.

Just as everyone is showing up, Elizabeth tosses ribbons of summer squash on the grill and then improvises a salad: heads of romaine cut in half and laid on the fire until they're singed around the edges. Drizzled with olive oil and balsamic vinegar and strewn with crumbled bacon and blue cheese, they make an unfussy but stunning side dish.

Given the freshest meat and produce in the world, I think to myself, no restaurant could put forth a meal as guilelessly beautiful as this. At the end of the night, Elizabeth and I are once again the last ones to retire, sitting close to each other at the end of the long table, which is now mostly bare, except for a few flickering candles. We reminisce, and also talk about the future. I tell her I hate the thought of leaving, and I promise her that, next time, I won't stay away for so long. 🍴

### Apricot Tarts with Pistachios

SERVES 8

Lightly sweetened apricots are baked quickly in a simple shortbread crust for these rustic tarts (pictured on page 72), which are garnished with vibrant green pistachios and fleur de sel. Other stone fruits, like plums and peaches, will work just as well.

- 2 cups flour
- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- ¼ tsp. baking powder
- 1 cup sugar
- 8 tbsp. unsalted butter, softened
- 2 tsp. vanilla extract
- ¼ tsp. almond extract
- 6 medium apricots, halved, pitted, and cut into 8 wedges each
- Finely chopped pistachios, to garnish
- Fleur de sel, to taste (optional)

**1** Heat oven to 350°. Whisk together flour, ¼ tsp. salt, and baking powder in a bowl; set aside. Combine ½ cup sugar, butter, and 1 tsp. vanilla in a bowl, and beat on medium-high speed of a hand mixer until pale and fluffy, about 4 minutes. Add dry ingredients and 3 tbsp. ice-cold water, and beat until just combined; transfer dough to a work surface, and form into a ball. Halve dough, and press each half into the bottom and sides of an 8" tart pan with removable bottom; refrigerate for 30 minutes. Prick bottom of dough with a fork; cover bottom with a sheet of parchment paper; fill with dried beans. Bake until crust is set, about 20 minutes. Remove paper and beans; bake until crust is light brown, about 15 minutes. Let cool.

**2** Combine remaining salt, sugar, and vanilla along with almond extract and apricots in a bowl, and toss until evenly combined. Decoratively arrange apricot wedges in each tart shell, and pour any juices left in bowl over tarts; bake until crust is golden brown and apricots are slightly caramelized, about 1 hour. Let cool completely, and then sprinkle with pistachios and fleur de sel, if you like.

### Beef Brisket and Picadillo-Styled Empanadas

MAKES ABOUT 2 DOZEN

Tender, braised beef brisket is combined with raisins, sherry, pine

nuts, and spicy chile powder in the fragrant filling for these sugar-dusted, savory-sweet empanadas (pictured on page 73).

- 4 cups flour
- 6 tbsp. unsalted butter, cubed
- 1½ tsp. kosher salt, plus more to taste
- ½ cup olive oil
- 1 lb. beef brisket
- 5 cloves garlic, smashed
- 2 medium carrots, halved crosswise
- 2 large white onions, 1 quartered and 1 minced
- 3 tbsp. chile powder
- 1½ tsp. finely chopped oregano leaves
- 2 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 cup raisins
- ½ cup sliced pitted canned black olives
- ½ cup dry sherry
- ¼ cup sugar
- ¼ cup pine nuts
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- Canola oil, for frying

**1** Make the dough: Combine flour, butter, and salt in a large bowl, and using your fingers, rub butter into flour until pea-size crumbles form. Add 1½ cups warm water and stir until dough forms. Knead in the bowl until smooth, about 4 minutes. Wrap in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 1 hour.

**2** Meanwhile, heat ¼ cup olive oil in a 6-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Season beef with salt and pepper, and add to pan; cook, turning once, until browned on both sides, about 8 minutes. Add garlic, carrots, quartered onion, and 6 cups water; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and cook until beef is very tender, about 2½ hours.

**3** Remove from heat, and let beef sit in saucepan until cool enough to handle, about 30 minutes. Transfer beef to a cutting board, and reserve 1 cup cooking liquid; discard remaining liquid and vegetables or reserve for another use. Shred meat into thin strands, and then finely chop; set aside.

**4** Wipe the saucepan dry, then heat remaining olive oil over medium-high heat; add minced onion, and cook, stirring, until golden brown, about 12 minutes. Add chile powder, oregano, and cumin, and cook for 1 minute. Add reserved beef and cooking liquid along with

raisins, olives, sherry, sugar, and pine nuts; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium, and cook, stirring occasionally, until raisins are plump and meat has absorbed most of the liquid, about 20 minutes; set aside to cool.

**5** Divide dough into 24 balls, and place on a work surface; using a small rolling pin or the heel of your hand, flatten each ball into a 5" disk, brush edges with water, and place 2 tbsp. filling in the center. Fold disks in half to form half-moons, and seal edges together using the tines of a fork. Refrigerate empanadas for at least 1 hour, or up to overnight.

**6** Pour oil to a depth of 2" in a 6-qt. saucepan, and heat over medium-high heat until a deep-fry thermometer reads 350°. Working in batches, fry empanadas until browned and crisp, about 6 minutes. Transfer to paper towels to drain before serving.

### Grilled Romaine Salad with Blue Cheese and Bacon

SERVES 4-6

Fresh heads of romaine lettuce are split down the middle, grilled until charred and smoky, and then topped with blue cheese and bacon for this satisfying salad (pictured on page 74).

- 6 strips bacon
- 2 tbsp. olive oil
- 2 tbsp. balsamic vinegar
- 2 tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 5 heads romaine lettuce, halved lengthwise, rinsed and dried
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 4 oz. blue cheese, crumbled

**1** Heat bacon in a 12" skillet over medium heat, and cook, turning once, until crisp and fat is rendered, about 10 minutes. Transfer bacon to a plate, reserving 2 tbsp. drippings, and let cool; crumble and set aside. Transfer reserved drippings to a bowl, and add oil, vinegar, and Worcestershire; whisk until smooth, and set dressing aside.

**2** Build a medium-hot fire in a charcoal grill, or heat a gas grill to medium-high. (Alternatively, heat a cast-iron grill pan over medium-high heat.) Working in batches, if necessary, place romaine halves cut-side down on grill, and cook, turning once, until charred and

slightly wilted, about 4 minutes.

**3** Transfer lettuce cut-side up to a serving platter, and season with salt and pepper; drizzle with dressing, and sprinkle with reserved bacon and blue cheese.

### Grilled Tri-Tip Tacos

SERVES 4-6

The beef cut of choice for California barbecue and grilling, tri-tip steak (also called Newport, Santa Maria, or triangle steak) comes from the lean bottom sirloin. Here it's sliced and seasoned with rosemary, chiles, garlic, and cumin in a tender filling for tacos (pictured on page 73).

- 2 lb. whole tri-tip steak
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ½ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup rosemary leaves
- 6 cloves garlic, mashed into a paste
- 2 large poblano chiles
- 1 large yellow onion, roughly chopped
- 1 tsp. dark chile powder
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- Warm corn tortillas, for serving
- Tomato salsa, for serving (optional)

**1** Season steak with salt and pepper, and rub with 3 tbsp. olive oil, rosemary, and garlic; wrap tightly in plastic wrap, and refrigerate at least 6 hours or up to overnight.

**2** Heat broiler to high. Place chiles on a foil-lined baking sheet, and broil, turning as needed, until blackened all over, about 20 minutes. Transfer to a bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and let sit until cooled, about 30 minutes. Remove stems, skins, and seeds; roughly chop, and set aside.

**3** Build a medium-hot fire in a charcoal grill, or heat a gas grill to medium. (Alternatively, heat a cast-iron grill pan over medium-high heat.) Remove steak from marinade, and transfer to grill; cook fat-side down, flipping once, until charred and cooked to desired doneness, about 50 minutes for medium. Transfer steak to a cutting board, and let rest for 15 minutes.

**4** Meanwhile, heat remaining oil in a 12" skillet over medium-high heat; add onion, and cook, stirring, until soft, about 10 minutes. Stir in reserved chiles along with chile

powder, cumin, and salt and pepper; remove from the heat.

**5** Thinly slice meat against the grain, and then roughly chop; combine with onion and chile mixture in a serving bowl, and serve with tortillas and salsa, if you like.

### Onion and Olive Enchiladas

SERVES 8

Anaheim and pasilla chiles combine in a puréed sauce for these Cal-Mex-style enchiladas (pictured on page 69), filled with cotija cheese and black olives.

- 10 dried Anaheim or New Mexican chiles, stemmed
- 6 dried pasilla chiles, stemmed
- 4 cloves garlic
- ½ cup olive oil
- 5 tbsp. flour
- 2 tbsp. cider vinegar
- 2 tsp. dried oregano
- 2 large yellow onions, thinly sliced
- 10 6" flour tortillas
- 12 oz. cotija cheese
- 1 6-oz. can large pitted black olives, drained and roughly chopped

**1** Heat oven to 350°. Place chiles in a large bowl, and cover with boiling water; let sit until chiles are soft, about 20 minutes. Drain, reserving 2½ cups soaking liquid, and then remove stems and seeds from chiles; transfer chiles to a blender along with reserved soaking liquid and garlic; purée until smooth, and set aside.

**2** Heat 5 tbsp. oil in a 4-qt. saucepan over medium heat; add flour, and cook, whisking constantly, until mixture is a light caramel color, about 3 minutes. Add chile purée, vinegar, and oregano, and season with salt. Bring to a boil, and cook, stirring, until thickened, about 5 minutes; set chile sauce aside. Heat remaining oil in a 12" skillet over medium-high heat. Add onions, and cook, stirring, until golden brown, about 25 minutes.

**3** To assemble, spread ¼ cup chile sauce in the bottom of a 9" x 13" baking dish. Dip one tortilla at a time into sauce, and then place on a plate; sprinkle with ½ cup cooked onions, ¼ cup cotija, and 1 tbsp. olives. Roll up tightly, and place in the baking dish, seam-side down;

repeat with remaining tortillas, and more sauce, cheese, and olives.

**4** Pour remaining sauce over enchiladas, and sprinkle with remaining cheese and olives; bake until heated through and cheese is just melted, about 40 minutes.

### Stewed Beans

SERVES 10-12

Lompoc, California, home cook Juliana Fabio includes kidney beans, pinto beans, and chickpeas in this tomato-based side dish (pictured on page 73), a riff on the Santa Maria-style beans traditionally served alongside tri-tip steak on California's Central Coast.

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 8 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 yellow onion, chopped
- 1 medium red bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- 1 large jalapeño, stemmed, seeded, and finely chopped
- 3 tbsp. tomato paste
- 1 tbsp. dried thyme
- 1 tbsp. dried oregano
- 1 tbsp. chile powder
- 1½ tsp. paprika
- 1 cup dried kidney beans,

soaked overnight and drained

- 1 cup dried pinto beans, soaked overnight and drained
- 1 cup dried chickpeas, soaked overnight and drained
- 1 15-oz. can whole, peeled tomatoes in juice, crushed by hand
- 1 bunch cilantro, stemmed and roughly chopped
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

**1** Heat oil in an 8-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Add garlic, onion, pepper, and jalapeño, and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft, 12-15 minutes. Add paste, thyme, oregano, chile powder, and paprika, and cook, stirring, until lightly caramelized, about 3 minutes. Add all beans and 7 cups water, and bring to a boil; reduce heat to medium-low, and cook, covered partially, until beans are very tender, about 1 hour.

**2** Uncover, stir in tomatoes, and cook, stirring, until tomatoes break down, about 30 minutes. Stir in cilantro, and season with salt and pepper before serving.

