



Donna Benjamin and Chef Al Chase of the Institute for Culinary Awakening.

Quickest Way to the Heart

Changing the world one belly at a time.

By Bobbie Willis

I am sitting in the dining area of the Institute for Culinary Awakening's (ICA) home office, situated in the university-area home of proprietor Chef Al Chase and partner/ICA Marketing Director Donna Benjamin. Placed before me is a slice of Pecan Walnut Maple Breakfast Cake. I take a bite and am delighted by the warmth of it, as well as by the rich, nutty sweetness of the streusel and the ten-

derness of the cake. Both Chef Al and Donna nod and smile — they knew I would love it. And they knew I might have been a little skeptical, because everything out of ICA — including this cake as delicious as a traditional butter-and-eggs-based cake — is made only from organic, vegan-friendly, plant-based ingredients. “The assumption is often that vegan equals bland and boring,” says Chef Al.

‘It was a transformative, heady experience — was it the altitude or the endorphins from all that chocolate?’ — Joan Zacharias

This little interaction is not uncommon for Chef Al. He takes great pleasure in introducing people to the sensory and sensual pleasures of organic, vegan gourmet cuisine. “To serve people with this kind of food is a way to show you care,” to show love and affection, to go straight to a person’s heart.

Chef Al has been around food all his life, having grown up in New York working in his father’s deli. By 1979, he had trained as a chef at the Culinary Institute of America. His introduction to the world of organic, plant-based cuisine came in the mid-1980s, when he became a vegetarian. “I guess you could say I ‘got the call.’” He noticed within his own family health problems such as diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure, and says, “I realized the impact of the standard American diet.”

By 1990, Chef Al had refined his diet even further from vegetarianism to veganism. He says, “Going vegan opened up many options” to work with ancient ingredients and techniques used all over the world to create delicious, nutritious food. “I like to take classical recipes,” he explains, “take out the non-vegan ingredients, and use plant-based items to recreate those dishes.” Chef Al may use vegetables to provide, say, the moistness for a cake or bread dish, and a high-quality coconut oil or milk for fat and flavor. He also encourages clients and students to experiment with natural sweeteners such as Rapidura, grade B maple syrup, or even Medjool dates (which can provide both moistness and sweet flavor).

After training at the CIA, Chef Al made his way west, working nearly a decade in Seattle, then moving to Santa Fe, N.M. By this time, he had given up the traditional chef’s role in restaurants and bistros to focus on education and training. It was in Santa Fe in 2000 that he met Donna, and the two have since worked together to spread the vegan message through ICA. They moved here to Eugene last fall, taken with this area’s refreshing “progressive, mellow, friendly” vibe. They’ve also been impressed with the availability of fresh, organic ingredients through Farmer’s Market, and the tight-knit veggie food community here in Eugene.

ICA offers a range of educational cooking programs: There are half-, two-, and three-day Healthy Gourmet Cooking Workshops to five- and 12-Day Advanced Vegan Culinary Arts Trainings. These programs are practical for those wanting to improve personal wellness or for the professional looking into career development. ICA also provides chef-to-chef consultations: three- to seven-day on-site trainings for food professionals who want to expand their skills in the preparation of gourmet vegan cuisine. “More chefs want to have more options,” Chef Al says. ICA also does more traditional dining options such as gourmet vegan catering, serving everything from rustic to fancy fare for guests numbering as few as two to as many as 300. For very spe-

cial occasions (like Valentine’s Day, hint, hint), ICA offers “Flutes & Roots,” a three- to four-course gourmet dinner in your home, accompanied by Native American flute playing by Donna.

Chef Al can provide a “personal chef” service, where he will menu plan, shop, cook, clean and provide a menu and heating instructions for clients who want to pick up meals once a week or have ICA deliver for an extra charge. Through the Kitchen & Pantry Transformation program, ICA can help organize your kitchen and pantry and teach you how to stock and shop for organic produce and pantry items. (This can also include sup-



Creamy Carrot Soup with Mint

Yields 6 cups

- 1 T. coconut oil (preferably Omega Nutrition)
- 4 c. (approx. 1 lbs.) carrots, diced medium
- 2 c. yellow onion, diced small
- 1 T. (approx. 4 cloves) garlic peeled, sliced
- 6 c. water
- 1/2 t. sea salt
- pinch Cayenne pepper
- 2 T. fresh mint, plus 6 leaves for garnish
- 1/4 c. parsley, plus 1/4 c. for garnish chopped
- 1/2 c. rolled oats

Heat heavy-bottomed soup pot for 1 minute; add oil and heat 1 more minute. Add onions, sauté 5 minutes until soft; add carrots and toss well. Cook 10 more minutes. Add garlic, salt and pepper; cook 2 minutes. Add water and bring to boil. Reduce heat and simmer 30 minutes. Add mint, parsley and oats; cook 10 minutes. Puree mixture until smooth and re-heat for service or refrigerate. Garnish with reserved mint and parsley.

Recipe © 1998, Chef Al Chase