

# AS FRESH AS IT GETS

Everyday Recipes from the Tomato Fresh Food Café

CHRISTIAN GAUDREULT AND STAR SPILOS



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VANCOUVER

AS FRESH AS IT GETS

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## FOREWORD

by Diane Clement

It's hard to believe that in 1991 we opened the doors to the Tomato Fresh Food Café in Vancouver with my daughter Jennifer and partners Haik Gharibians and Jamie Norris. The neighborhood welcomed us with open arms, raving about our "fresh food concept." In 1995, we launched the first Tomato cookbook, *Diane Clement at the Tomato*. At the same time, we decided to seek a general manager for the restaurant. Christian lived in the neighborhood and he and his wife Star both were loyal "Tomato" fans; one morning, Christian walked in for his usual coffee and casually mentioned to Jennifer and me that he was interested in the position. The rest is history.

With his strong background in the food industry, and with the same vision, passion, and dedication as we had, Christian soon became a partner, as well as a friend. The restaurant soon expanded, taking over the grocery store next door, and grew from 45 seats to 100. In the spring of 2001, Jennifer and I felt it was time to pass on the "baton" to Christian. Talented Chef James Campbell, a Maritimer like me, now spearheads the strong Tomato kitchen team, and many of the dedicated staff that was with us when we left are still there, and key to the Tomato's continued success. What is rewarding to me is the fact that the Tomato Fresh Food Café is as popular as ever. Christian grew up learning his craft in his father's restaurant in Cap de la Madeleine, Quebec, and I know that his parents would be as proud of him as Jennifer and I are to see the Tomato Fresh Food Café mature to become one of Vancouver's best-loved restaurants. Congratulations, Christian and Star, on the birth of *As Fresh As It Gets*, the latest addition to the Tomato family.

## INTRODUCTION

*by Star Spilos*

It's the first of October, but the sun is shining. Christian and I wander the market in our T-shirts, even though the chill in the air, and the falling leaves—with their beautiful shades of red and gold—tell us that it won't be long before the cold, rainy weather sets in. We can look forward to only one more Saturday at the Trout Lake Farmer's Market in East Vancouver before the season is over. Going to this popular, well-organized market is one of the highlights of our week. We enjoy seeing the abundance of local farm fresh products, much of it organically grown; we also visit artisans selling pottery and jewelry, and stop by booths offering homemade chocolates and specialty cheeses. We wish these weekly trips to the market would never end, but now the weather is changing, the crops are not as plentiful, and the farmers are looking tired, so we try to make the most of our day.

As Christian and I do on every visit, we pick up Sieglinde potatoes from Doug and Jeanette Helmer of Helmer's Organic Farm in Pemberton, BC. Kevin and Annamarie Klippenstein, who own Klippers Organic Acres—growers of the heirloom tomatoes we receive—have a new apple called Mutsu (or Crispin) to show us. We stop to talk to Susan Davidson of Glorious Garnish and Seasonal Salad Company; just days earlier, she delivered the last twelve pounds of scarlet runner beans of the season to our restaurant. We chat about the difference between white turnips and yellow rutabaga, and buy some of her delicious arugula.

It's not uncommon to see chefs from several Vancouver restaurants at the market looking for special seasonal items for their menus. In fact, on this day we see several chefs who are simply there to answer questions from customers about how to use particular ingredients.

Christian and I find a great selection of squash today. We buy a huge, 40-pound Blue Hubbard variety, along with several others, from the Forstbauer Family Natural Food Farm. The squash will make a great display at the entrance to our restaurant. We end our day at the market by ordering artichokes for pick-up the following week, and purchasing some great breads and pastries from a talented baker, Christopher Brown of Rise Bakery. Now it's time to go home with all our purchases: local, fresh ingredients "from the farmer's fields to our table," as Christian likes to say.

Our home is our restaurant, the Tomato Fresh Food Café, located at the corner of 17th Avenue and Cambie Street in Vancouver. It first opened in August 1991, but its history goes back to 1947 when it was the site of a diner called the Rosebud Grill. In those days, Jersey Dairy, which produced most of the milk consumed in Vancouver, was located right next door. Families

living in the Cambie Corridor (as the area is still called) went to the dairy on warm summer days to get fabulous ice cream.

Some time in the late 1950s or early 1960s, the Rosebud Grill became the Sun Ray Grill. A small part of the front was partitioned off to create a barbershop, where Charlie, the barber, still works to this day. In 1991, the neighborhood, and the unique character of the 1940s building, attracted the attention of the founding partners of the Tomato Fresh Food Café: Diane Clement, Jennifer Clement, Jamie Norris, and Haik Gharbians. They maintained the restaurant's original booths and counter and created what became a neighborhood institution, where people could gather to share good conversation and healthy food; where young and old could sit next to each other and talk over a bowl of homemade soup.

Christian joined the Tomato in 1995 as a partner and general manager, and led the way to its expansion in 1997. When Dave's, the little grocery store next door, gave up its lease, the Tomato took the opportunity to "grow around the barber." The café grew into a "big" Tomato with 100 seats, a new bar, and a take-out service, Tomato To Go, located at the front of the restaurant. This also made room for a bakery, where the café's desserts and breads are made and sold. Over the years, there were other changes: Haik sadly passed away, then Jamie decided to leave to become a full-time writer. In May 2000, Diane retired to travel with her husband Doug, and their daughter Jennifer left to put more time into her acting career. That's when Christian and I became the proud sole owners.

Food and family have always played a major role in both our lives. Aime Gaudreault, Christian's father, was a chef in Cap de la Madeleine, Quebec. The entire Gaudreault clan—Christian's mother Germaine, and his five brothers and five sisters—worked in the family restaurant. One of the highlights of Aime's culinary life came in 1944, at the Château Frontenac hotel in Quebec City. The event was a meeting to plan D-Day; in attendance were Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. At the formal dinner, Aime served the head table. A photograph showing him with these world leaders still hangs in the gift shop at the hotel, and a copy of the menu remains a Gaudreault family treasure. Christian's mother was also a great cook; she instilled in Christian the importance of getting food from the farm to the table as soon as possible. The Gaudreaults' passion for food was truly part of the family's everyday lives at work and at home. For Christian, the social interaction that brings family and friends together around the dining table holds great importance, whether it is at home or at the Tomato.

The idea of putting fresh food on the table has always been in my family too. My family always had a garden; we planted vegetables, fruit, and herbs to be used in our cooking and we eagerly anticipated using these fresh ingredients in our meals. My mother often used the apples and raspberries from the backyard for our evening dessert. My father was the gardener of the family; every year he had a contest with the neighbors as to who could grow the biggest beefsteak tomato. All summer, they would inspect each other's gardens to see who was going to win, but the real prize was eating them! My sister (also

named Carell) shares the family passion for food; she lives in Delta, British Columbia and has continued the family tradition of keeping a wonderful garden, from which she gathers ingredients to make the most delicious dinners.

As a young adult, Christian began exploring the hospitality opportunities of Europe. He also spent time in Morocco, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, where he was amazed by the huge papayas, the rice patties that spread from the mountains down to the valley, and the mangos, which remain the best he's ever tasted. (He also got a bit role as a co-pilot in the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*.) Moving to Vancouver in the 1970s, Christian worked under famed chef and restaurateur Umberto Menghi. He was also the sales and marketing director of Yves Veggie Cuisine, and general manager of Caper's restaurants, before we became owners of the Tomato.

I worked at Kelly Douglas & Company, a wholesaler grocer, for sixteen years. Dad worked for the same company his entire working life, forty-three years—and my mother did as well for a time, doing food demos. In 1996, Les Dames d'Escoffier awarded me a scholarship to further my culinary expertise in pastry at the Culinary Institute of America-Napa Valley. Previous to this honor, I studied at the Dubrulle French Culinary School in Vancouver, and assisted chef Ann Willan on her PBS television series



*John Switzer of Glen Valley Organic Farm Co-operative, with Christian and Star.*



*Look and Cook.* (This would later lead to a job assisting with the preparation of the food used onscreen for the Robin Williams movie *Jumanji*.) My first job after completing school was at Sweet Obsession Cakes and Pastries, where the owners reinforced my belief that only the best ingredients should be used and that shortcuts did not necessarily produce quality goods. Yet early in my career I wanted my own business, so I started my own company Starbake, selling biscotti to various cafés in the city.

For the past ten years, I have worked at David Thompson Secondary School in Vancouver, instructing and supervising students in food handling and the preparation of baked goods. Since 1997, I also have been involved with the bakery at the Tomato, where we produce the pastries, desserts, and most of the breads we serve and sell.

Owning a restaurant is not a job; it is a passion. It is the love of food, people, and the challenges we face each day. There's a terrific amount of detail that goes into running a restaurant, from sourcing product to maintaining equipment to hiring staff. It takes lots of energy, dedication, and determination. The restaurant is forever changing—whether it is exciting new ingredients to use, or the menus that change with each new season. Our neighborhood evolves and changes too: some favorite merchants nearby close, but new ones open; familiar customers move away, but new regulars abound. A restaurant becomes part of the surrounding community; as we support them, they support us.

The Tomato is a warm, simple room with lots of energy. It's a neighborhood restaurant where people come to enjoy wonderful meals, whether they relax alone with a cup of coffee, or share a laugh with family and friends. The staff always looks forward to seeing the regular customers as well as welcoming first-timers. And we are long-time supporters of our local farmers, sourcing out organic produce whenever possible and using seasonal ingredients.

There's a reason for this. Over the years, food has changed because we now know more about what's good for us. Customers no longer want their food laden with heavy sauces, and they know the importance of eating lots of vegetables and fruit. Food must be creative yet simple and good for you. At the Tomato, we use some of the best local food suppliers around.

Christian and Chef James always attend the "Chefs to the Field," an annual fundraiser held at the Glen Valley Organic Farm every August. This event draws many food lovers and chefs out of their kitchens and into the garden to experience the full cycle of food. Each attending chef creates a dish using what is at its peak in the garden at the time of the event. They then compete for the Green Cuisine Culinary Award, a contest in which they prepare a dish with one ingredient of their choice and one surprise protein. Proceeds from this event help the Glen Valley Organic Farm and Fraser Common Farm, where the Glorious Salads are cultivated. The goal of these farms is to protect and steward land by keeping it out of the speculative real estate market and allowing organic farmers to have affordable access through lease arrangements.

It's this sense of responsibility and connection to the earth that we try to bring to the Tomato. On a typical weekend in late summer, Christian and I often show up at the restaurant with produce fresh from the farmer's market—potatoes, peppers, corn,

heirloom tomatoes. Chef James Campbell has to be flexible when we arrive with produce that's just been picked from the field; he adjusts the evening meal to accommodate seasonal produce. In a restaurant, the kitchen is an intense environment where speed and timing are crucial. It is vital that everyone in the kitchen works harmoniously together and Chef James has the kind of leadership to motivate the staff to produce their best work. We all share the same vision for the Tomato, and continue to learn and grow together to ensure that customers always leave with smiles on their faces. This passion for food, our passion for life, and our commitment to our staff and our customers make for a successful and special restaurant.

Which brings us to *As Fresh As It Gets*. This book is about the Tomato Fresh Food Café, but it's also about the two of us, our discovery of the world of food, and the contribution of our family, friends, and community to who we are today. Writing it has been hard work but also a lot of fun. We hope it gets your culinary juices flowing, and introduces you to the importance of fresh, local, socially responsible food, from the farmer's fields to your dinner table.