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KITCHEN FIRE

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Olivier Said and Chef MikeC. open KITCHEN ON FIRE in Berkeley's Epicurious Garden

New culinary school for home chefs slices and dices the way cooking has been taught for decades

There's something new cooking in Berkeley's Gourmet Ghetto, and it's not another restaurant.

Author and restaurateur Olivier Said has partnered with well-known culinary instructor and caterer Chef MikeC. to launch **KITCHEN ON FIRE** – a cutting-edge new school designed to teach food lovers how to cook and entertain like a professional.

Built around their shared philosophy that learning should be fun, KITCHEN ON FIRE doesn't even look like a school. Rather, you'll think you just stepped into an upscale downtown San Francisco loft. At one end, floor to ceiling sliding doors open onto a balcony with a birds-eye view of bustling Shattuck Avenue.

The front half of the 2400-square foot space features a state-of-the-art kitchen where hands-on classes, demonstrations and lectures will be presented by a changing repertoire of executive chefs from top Bay Area restaurants, visiting culinary celebrities, food-related experts, and the owners themselves.

Among its unique offerings will also be culinary tours throughout the region, corporate team building workshops, in-home classes, classes for kids, and private instruction and other events. Ingredients will feature organic and natural products as much as possible.

A complete schedule will soon be posted at www.KitchenOnFire.com, where students can register online and gift certificates can be purchased.

KITCHEN ON FIRE occupies the entire second floor of the just-opened Epicurious Garden, located in the 1500 block of Shattuck Avenue. The area has become a world-renowned Mecca for foodies, since Alice Waters revolutionized contemporary cuisine through her landmark Chez Panisse Restaurant, just two doors down.

Across the street is the definitive Cheese Board, with its curded milk pleasures from around the world. Next door is the César Tapas Bar, one of the Bay Area's most popular watering holes – which Olivier Said helped build into local fame as a managing partner. Around the corner is the original Grégoire Restaurant, which has been at the forefront of re-inventing traditional takeout. There's also numerous fine wine shops and other specialty businesses ideal for discriminating tastes.

KITCHEN ON FIRE's gallery-like environment has been equipped with high-end KitchenAid built-ins and small appliances, Analon cookware, Furitechnics professional cutlery, and BonJour hand tools, among other accessories.

About Chef MikeC.

Chef MikeC. who has led over 1500 classes to date on every culinary topic imaginable. A graduate with honors from the California Culinary Academy, he joined Sur La Table's staff in early 2002, then spent the next two years helping manage and lead their Bay Area cooking schools. He also served as a frequent visiting instructor at their Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles and San Diego venues.

One of the leading authorities on knife skills, MikeC. serves with Rachel Ray as a national spokesperson for Furitechnics, based in Australia. An expert on home entertaining, he founded Party Lifestyles in 2003, and is the former co-owner of San Francisco-based catering company, Xfusion, which created the concept of turning private parties into exciting cooking events that guests could participate in. As well, he has led corporate team building cooking events for myriad companies, including GAP, Yahoo, Microsoft, Adobe, GE Capitol, and Charles Schwab.

About Olivier Said

Born and raised in France, Olivier Said is a 5th generation restaurateur who began working in his mother's Paris restaurant as a teenager. During the last eight years, he served as a managing partner at César – and at the same time co-authored two highly-successful books – *CÉSAR: Recipes from a Tapas Bar*, which was selected as one of the Top 10 Cookbooks of 2003 by *Food & Wine* magazine, and *THE BAR: A Spirited Guide to Cocktail Alchemy*, published last November. In the late 1980s, Said owned one of the most successful restaurant nightclubs in Paris, called Texas Coyote.

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KITCHEN FIRE

Chef MikeC.

Co-owner/Executive Chef

Few know as much about the art of teaching cooking as Chef MikeC., who has led over a thousand classes to date.

A graduate with honors from the elite California Culinary Academy, MikeC. joined Sur La Table's staff in early 2002, then spent the next two years as a resident instructor and manager of their in-store culinary program. He was also a traveling guest instructor who appeared frequently at their Portland, Los Angeles and San Diego venues.

The secret to his teaching technique? "I break things down into real world terms," he says. "I always explain the science behind everything. If you understand the *why* and something goes wrong, you know what it is. You can adapt, you can make things work – if you understand it. Those are the times when I see those twinkles in people's eyes. When they truly understand it, they're like, *wow, that was cool!*"

Regarded as an authority on home entertaining, MikeC. founded Party Lifestyle in 2003, and is the former co-owner of Xfusion – one of the originators of the concept of turning private parties into exciting cooking events that guests participate in.

He also has also led countless corporate team building cooking events for myriad companies, including GAP, Yahoo, Microsoft, Adobe, GE Capitol, and Charles Schwab.

Even though he hailed from a long line of scientists and engineers, it's not surprising that MikeC. chose the culinary arts. After all, how many kids were preparing full meals by the first grade.

Raised in Rochester, NY, he spent every Sunday afternoon with his family, who glued themselves to the TV set from mid-morning until evening, watching back-to-back cooking featuring such celebrated chefs as Julia Child, Graham Kerr ("The Galloping Gourmet"), and Martin Yan ("Yan Can Cook").

"Mom and Dad got us into the kitchen as soon as we could stand on a stool," he recalls. "I was taught all the basics by the time I could see over the kitchen counter. We had to have at least cooked a meal by the time we were five or six."

Growing up, while other boys worshipped sports stars, MikeC. most admired Chef Martin Yan. "He was my big inspiration. I screamed I would work with that guy one day. He was the one who taught me one of the biggest rules that I live by – *it has to be fun and it has to be funny,*

because that's how you capture their attention." Indeed, almost two decades later, MikeC. would finally work with Yan at Sur La Table.

MikeC.'s father, a biochemistry professor ("and quite the nutty professor in the garden and kitchen," his son laughs), was in charge of the family garden. "It was all organic, from the way he did his mulching and composting to what kind of nutrients were right for certain crops and how to rotate them. He also created his own cross-breeds and hybrids – such as chocolate jalapeno peppers – and made his own wine and beer."

MikeC.'s mother and grandmother were the Martha Stewart's of their generation. Whatever the occasion – from holidays and birthdays to neighborhood gatherings and Tupperware parties – they were "always doing all the food and setting up the buffets. *We always had a proper buffet at home,*" he says with a chuckle.

By the time he was a teenager, MikeC. had mastered "a nice repertoire of dishes. Towards the end of high school it occurred to me that my upbringing was pretty unique. Many of my friends hardly sat down to dinner with their families, let alone learned how to cook or entertain."

By the time, he was a junior in high school, he had decided on a career in dentistry. But when graduation rolled around, MikeC. decided to table college for a while and began working in a local natural foods store. Over the next three years, he became the bulk foods and sports nutrition manager – at the same time becoming an expert on organic and natural products.

In 2000, MikeC. started his first catering business, then moved across country to San Francisco a year later to study in the elite California Culinary Academy's Le Cordon Bleu Culinary Arts program. For the next year, he put in 80-hour weeks while working under some of the most respected names in the industry.

It was a major turning point in his career. "When you learn food in a restaurant, you learn only the cuisine that chef serves. You don't learn the *how's* and *why's*. That was the cool thing about culinary school – it was intense as hell, but you learn how to cook *everything*. It was definitely an amazing experience. It also helped me to understand how to translate this to other people," he says.

Following graduation, MikeC. landed a position as the coordinator for Sur La Table's Bay Area cooking schools, hired and trained by Chef Richard Chapman, now an executive chef in Kansas City. Within months, he was given full responsibility for the program – including teaching classes and scheduling and assisting celebrity chefs visiting the region.

At the same time, MikeC. co-founded Xfusion Personal Chef Services – which became an overnight sensation as a catering company with a twist. "We discovered right away that everybody wants to be in the kitchen. The guests would ask, *What are you doing? What are you making?* At first, we tried kicking them out. By our second job, we caught on that this is a good thing: *let's bring them in, and start teaching them what we're doing.*"

Xfusion also became a trail blazer in helping clients plan the ultimate event – from parties to fundraisers and corporate gatherings – from picking a theme to designing the invitations, environment and menu.

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KITCHEN FIRE

Olivier Said

Co-Owner

During the last eight years, Olivier Said has become one of the East Bay's most popular culinary personalities, as a managing partner in Berkeley's acclaimed **César** Tapas Bar. At the same time, he co-authored two highly-successful books – **CÉSAR: Recipes from a Tapas Bar**, which was selected as one of the Top 10 Cookbooks of 2003 by *Food & Wine* magazine, and **THE BAR: A Spirited Guide to Cocktail Alchemy**, published last November.

Born and raised in France, Said literally grew up in the business – the descendant of at least five generations of restaurateurs in France, dating back to the early 1800s.

As a child, he often heard stories about his great-grandfather's country inn, the Hotel Restaurant Des Chasseurs in central France, founded by his great-great-grandfather around the turn of the 19th century. His great-grandmother ran the cafe/boucherie (butcher shop) next door. Besides its regular menu, the hotel specialized in preparing the wild game that weekend hunters brought in to dine on.

Though never formally schooled in the culinary arts, Said was introduced into the profession at an early age. After a two-month journey throughout Europe with a classmate, he began working as a dishwasher in the kitchen of his mother's successful Paris restaurant, Les Halles, at the age of 15. Before long, he was also preparing desserts and appetizers.

At the age of 18, he enrolled in a flight school in the south of France and spent the next two years working a grueling schedule of double shifts, seven days a week, in a pizzeria to pay for lessons.

Upon obtaining his pilot's license, Said headed to the U.S., landing in Los Angeles, where he worked for two of the city's top restaurants, among other stints.

The first was Ken Frank's LaToque Restaurant, a popular celebrity hang-out that was one of the first in the country to feature California nouvelle cuisine.

Even though Said had never mixed drinks professionally and barely spoke English, Frank made him the bartender. Said had just one week to learn the essentials on how to make everything from gimlets, whiskey sours and margaritas to Mai Tais and Hurricanes. "That's basically what people were drinking then, the classics. They were also discovering wine," he says.

Several years later he became a bartender at the L.A. jazz club, the Nucleus Nuance, then spent a year as a waiter at Le Dome, where he regularly waited on Hollywood icons like Elizabeth Taylor, Elton John and California's now governor when he was just the "Terminator."

In 1987, Said returned to Paris and opened his first restaurant, Texas Coyote. It was such a success that he had to move the operation to bigger quarters to house its three bars and late night club.

In 1994, after several years trying to fight the city's then-corrupt legal system, he was forced to close it. Left with nothing, he went to work for a friend in a Taqueria stand for \$40 a day until he could earn the \$800 necessary to return to the U.S.

"It was interesting to go from owning two well-known restaurants in Paris to a taco stand cook," he reflects with a laugh. "The hardest part was when a old client would recognize me and ask what are you going to do next. I had to tell them they shouldn't worry, I have a plan. I just didn't know what it was!"

Once back in Los Angeles, he got a call from his old friend, Richard Mazzera, the former manager at LaToque who had gone on to become the business manager at Chez Panisse for 13 years.

Mazzera invited Said to become a partner in an innovative new tapas bar – to be called César – that he was starting with two other Chez Panisse alumni. Said leaped at the chance and headed up to Berkeley. To his surprise, the place had yet to be built. Indeed, he would spend the next four months helping convert a former dry cleaning shop into the Meditterrean-style tapas bar that would become one of the Bay Area's celebrated restaurants.

Located next door to Alice Waters' culinary landmark, the tiny 60-seat restaurant was an instant hit with both Berkeley foodies and food critics who loved its truly unique Spanish-style menu and world-class wine-and-spirits list. The *San Francisco Food Lover's Guide* hailed it as "one of the greatest bars in the world in terms of quality of spirits, selection, and mixology." Among other accolades, it was voted one of the best restaurants in the Bay Area by the *San Francisco Chronicle* for five years in a row, and featured in such national publications, as *Gourmet* magazine.

In September 2003, CÉSAR: RECIPES FROM A TAPAS BAR was published, written by Said and James Mellgren with César chef Maggie Pond. Among other accolades, it was named one of the Top 10 Cookbooks of the year by *Food & Wine* magazine. The popular cookbook features more than 50 tapas recipes and 50 mixed drinks (including the restaurant's signature cocktails, the Lucky 13, the Marius, and the Three-Citrus Margarita).

Always on a quest to perfect the César experience for its legion of devout fans, Said began working on a definitive handbook for its bartenders and waiters to help answer customers'

questions about the over 500 liquors from around the world served by the bar. The result was the just-published book, THE BAR, co-written by Said and James Mellgren. Both books were released by Ten Speed Press.

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