

by Ron_James

THE CHEF

Govind Armstrong, executive chef and co-owner of the ultra hot Table 8 restaurants in Los Angeles and Miami, recalls in the introduction to his new cookbook, "Small Bites Big Nights" (Clarkson Potter, \$30), his entry into the food world when he was barely a teenager:

GOVIND ARMSTRONG - Chef Govind Armstrong, 34, spent three years at Spago learning from some of the best and now most famous chefs in the country. After that he worked at several of America's great dining spots, and has now teamed up with actor Harrison Ford's son, Ben Ford, to open the hot new Table 8 in Hollywood. CNS Photo.

SANTA BARBARA SPOT PRAWNS - Santa Barbara Spot Prawns are sauted in the pan and deglazed with Pernod. Sweet little cherry tomatoes and a hint of lemon make the simple dish sunny and bright. CNS Photo. It was 1981 and Thelma Armstrong was throwing a surprise party for her friend Barbara Andrews in her Encino, Calif., home. Andrews, who worked at a new Los Angeles restaurant, was blown away by the hors d'oeuvres coming out of the kitchen. "I've got to meet the caterer," she exclaimed. Armstrong led her into the kitchen. There, in the middle of a colossal mess, stood a scrawny 13-year-old wearing a tall paper chef's hat and an oversized apron, and wielding a giant kitchen knife.

"Meet my son Govind," pronounced Armstrong proudly.

After Andrews stopped laughing, she sat down with the very young chef. "Barbara and I spent a long time talking that evening," Armstrong writes. "She told me about the new restaurant where she worked - and about a chef named Wolfgang Puck. At this point, the only Wolf I had ever heard of was Wolfman Jack, but something told me it was not the same person so I kept my mouth shut."

The restaurant was Spago, and when Andrews told Puck about the young chef, he replied, "Bring me the kid!" The next weekend, a frightened Armstrong, wearing his Sunday best, appeared.

"I'll never forget walking through the back door," he writes. "It was a total madhouse with people running around, giant carcasses of lamb on the butcher's block, mixers that were taller than I was, boxes bursting with produce stacked from floor to ceiling, people peeling, chopping, stirring, yelling and laughing. My eyes bulged out of my head."

Armstrong showed Puck a book of his recipes, clippings and photos of things he had cooked:

"I didn't really know who he was, but I knew he was The Man ... I was completely intimidated, physically shaking and my voice cracked when I tried to answer why I was 'into' cooking."

His answers impressed Puck, who had begun his career in his early teens. He offered Armstrong an apprenticeship.

Armstrong spent three years at Spago learning from some of the best - and now most famous - chefs in America. He furthered his career working at several of America's great dining spots, and worked for Puck again at Postrio in San Francisco. At 34, Armstrong teamed up with actor Harrison Ford's son, Ben Ford, to open Table 8 in Hollywood.

THE DISH

Armstrong calls Santa Barbara Spot Prawns in Pernod a "one dish wonder." It's a wonderfully simple yet elegant dish for spring and summer dining.

"This can be a lifesaver for entertaining," the chef writes in the cooking notes. "The secret? Have all your ingredients at hand and ready to go. For this appetizer, the preparation is minimal but the flavors are sunny and bright with sweet little cherry tomatoes and a hit of lemon.

"It's so simple: Saute the shrimp in the pan and deglaze with Pernod. By doing so, you release all the delicious caramelized bits stuck in the pan - a great beginning for any finishing sauce."

Don't let the bits in the pan overcook or burn before you deglaze the pan or else the sauce will taste bitter and burnt.

Pernod, an anise-flavored liqueur, should be used sparingly, Armstrong writes: "The subtle licorice notes, gently heated with a pinch of crushed red chili, play off the plump sweet prawns, the tart cherry tomatoes, and the deep flavored-acid rush of the savory-sweet preserved lemon," he writes.

Santa Barbara spot prawns are probably scarce in most parts of the country. You can substitute any North American saltwater shrimp. Visit your local seafood market to get the best fresh or frozen prawns or shrimp available in your area.

THE WINE

In "Small Bites Big Nights," Armstrong pairs this lively seafood dish with a 2004 Ferrari-Carano Fume Blanc (\$17). The 2006 available now is an equal match. Its zesty flavors and aromas stand up well to the liquorish flavors of the Pernod and acidity of the lemon and tomatoes. The wine has the classic sauvignon blanc varietal characteristics of gooseberries, mangos and other tropical fruit along with a bit of grassiness mellowed by partial aging in older French oak.

Ferrari-Carano was founded in 1985 by Don and Rhonda Carano and has vineyards scattered around the Napa-Sonoma region. The winery also produces a wide range of other varietals including zinfandel, chardonnays, syrahs and pinot noirs.

SANTA BARBARA SPOT PRAWNS IN PERNOD

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

8 large fresh prawns, preferably Santa Barbara spot prawns, cleaned, peeled and deveined

4 cloves garlic, smashed

1/4 cup Pernod

1/4 cup fish or vegetable stock

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, diced

1 tablespoon lemon zest

Squeeze of lemon

Pinch of crushed red chili

Sea salt and cracked black pepper, to taste

2 pints sweet cherry tomatoes, blanched, shocked and peeled (see note)

1 teaspoon chopped fennel fronds (optional)

Yields 8 appetizer servings.

Heat large, heavy-bottomed saute pan over medium-high heat. Add olive oil and at the first sight of smoke, carefully add prawns. Sear prawns on 1 side for 30 seconds. Turn prawns, add garlic and saute until golden.

Add Pernod and flame off all the alcohol; this will happen very quickly. Add fish stock and reduce to 1/2, about 2 minutes. Add butter and lemon zest, and turn off heat. Swirl pan until all butter is incorporated into a sauce.

Finish with a squeeze of lemon, the crushed red chili, and salt and pepper. Toss in tomatoes at the last moment, and garnish with fennel fronds, if using. Serve immediately.

Note: To blanch and peel tomatoes, first cut an X in the end opposite the stem, then immerse in boiling water 10 to 15 seconds. Transfer to a bowl of ice and cold water, then peel.

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Ron James welcomes comments and suggestions. E-mail him at ronjames@perfectpairings.us. Listen to his "Gourmet Club" radio show and see archives of previous columns at www.perfectpairings.us. © Copley News Service

Food and Wine: Prawns and fume blanc hit the spot by Ron_James