Julia Usher

Though formally trained at the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts, Julia Usher's make-it-yourself approach and eclectic cake-decorating style came from her mother, a self-taught baker, herb gardener, and collector extraordinaire.

In 1995, while still in culinary school and planning her own wedding, Usher was disturbed by the plethora of bland white cakes and unimaginative cake designs on the market. She knew that by combining intense flavor and high style, a well-designed dessert could cast a magical mood. Barely down the aisle, she opened AzucArte, a boutique bakery specializing in such sweets.

After seven years, Julia has custom-made thousands of desserts for society weddings and other special events. Her attention to what’s in, on, and around her sweets has put her at the forefront of dessert design. Usher's desserts and cakes have appeared on the cover of Chocolatier and in the pages of Vera Wang on Weddings, Party Art and Design, and many other national bridal magazines. Usher co-authored an article on holiday cakes that appeared in Mary Engelbreit's Home Companion, and her desserts have also been featured at the James Beard House in New York City. She is a former president of the St. Louis Culinary Society.

My first recollections of my mom's obsession for fresh foods date back to third grade, when she and my dad moved with me and my two siblings to an old farmhouse in Guilford, Connecticut, built in 1798. My mom loved old things and history, perhaps as much as food, and was a stickler for authenticity. So naturally, she wanted our "new" old house on Long Hill Road to be just as it was in the eighteenth century! She quickly busied herself with re-creating the southside herb garden, filling it with herbs we rarely hear of today, and rebuilding and restocking the rundown chicken coop with a flock of Rhode Island Reds. She also put dad to work in the neglected blackberry brambles on the perimeter of the ten-acre property, and, in fairly short order, he had tamed them into a prosperous and regular summer crop. My siblings and I watched in wonder, not having any inkling as to how this commotion would ultimately affect our eating habits. The upshot of it all was that, while other Guilford kids munched on peanut butter and grape jelly sandwiches on white bread, we had imaginative lunchbox alternatives like chicken salad laden with lovage and local orchard apples; homemade anadama bread smothered in apple-rose geranium jelly; and blackberry-rhubarb crumble doused with orange mint-infused cream.
apple-rose geranium sorbet

recipes

Apple-Rose Geranium Sorbet
Scallop, Fennel and Orange Risotto
scallop, fennel and orange risotto

I was first turned on to risotto during my CSCA years, after a lecture from a visiting chef-turned-author, Rosario del Nero. I was entranced by his delightfully illustrated book, but more so by the ease with which he transformed arborio rice into a diverse array of dishes by overlaying ever-so-slight twists on the basic foundation. I was amazed that something so tasty could be so simple.

Since my day-to-day work as a pastry chef is incredibly exacting, especially when I'm fussing with wedding cakes, I try not to complicate my cooking during off-hours. I love one-pot meals like this one that are straightforward and incorporate so many of my favorite flavors.

serves 12

6 tablespoons (3/4 stick) unsalted butter
1/2 cup finely chopped yellow onion
3/4 cup finely chopped fresh fennel
2 cups uncooked arborio rice, about 1 pound
2 tablespoons fennel seeds
1 1/2 cups freshly squeezed orange juice
1 1/2 cups dry white wine
5 cups fish stock or bottled clam juice, or as needed
1 1/2 pounds fresh scallops
1 tablespoon minced orange zest
3 tablespoons freshly grated Parmesan cheese
salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
chiffonade of fresh basil and grated Parmesan cheese, for garnish

Melt the butter in a large stockpot over medium-low heat. Add the onion and fennel and sauté until tender and translucent, about 5 to 10 minutes. Add the rice and fennel seeds. Sauté, stirring constantly, until the rice is translucent around the edges and the fennel seeds are lightly toasted, about 2 to 3 minutes; stir with a wooden spoon, as it is unlikely to break the rice kernels and cause them to absorb the liquid too quickly.

Increase the heat to medium and add the orange juice. Cook until the juice is absorbed, stirring regularly to prevent the rice from sticking. Add the wine and cook until it is absorbed. Add the fish stock 1 cup at a time and cook until the liquid is absorbed after each addition, stirring regularly; the cooking process will take 35 to 40 minutes and may require more or less fish stock, depending on the cooking speed and rice.

Cut extra-large scallops into smaller pieces to ensure even cooking. Add the scallops to the rice in the last 5 to 10 minutes of cooking time. Reduce the heat to low and cook until the scallops are just cooked through and the rice is al dente. Remove from the heat and stir in the orange zest and 3 tablespoons Parmesan cheese. Taste for saltiness, since the fish stock or clam juice can vary considerably in salt content, before seasoning with salt and pepper. Garnish with the chiffonade of basil and additional Parmesan cheese.