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# THE BLACKSMITH COOKS

For years, Angelo Garro's workshop has been a magnet for stars of the food world. Now, he's inviting everyone to the table.



*Almond*  
PESTO PASTA





Angelo Garro in his kitchen at Renaissance Forge, San Francisco.

# THE FIRST TIME

I visited Angelo Garro, for lunch at his Renaissance Forge in San Francisco, he'd left the door ajar for me. I'm not sure what I expected—probably not a grim urban kitchen, since the Forge is in a gritty alley near an auto body shop—but stepping over the threshold was like plunging into a dream. The room was dark and lairlike, stacked with twisted iron rods and thick sheets of metal. Enormous plastic trash cans full of fermenting grapes sat in the gloom, under a white bedsheet patched with duct tape, and the entire place smelled like a wine cave. A constellation of curious objects—a carousel pony, fencing foils, a bulky old accordion camera—hung overhead. Opera soared in the air.

Garro makes architectural wrought iron for a living, but his Renaissance Forge is an enchanted world for food connoisseurs. His dinner parties are legendary outpourings of generosity, with practically everything made from scratch, using ingredients he's hunted and gathered around the Bay Area. For decades, Garro has cooked mainly for people he knows—a circle that includes Alice Waters of Chez Panisse and director Francis Ford Coppola—but that's changing. This fall he'll start offering classes at the Forge, teaching students how to find food in nature and cook by the seasons, the way his family did in Sicily when he was a boy.

"Come in, come in!" shouted Garro, from somewhere at the lighted end of the place. I walked past a mass of inscrutable tools that looked positively postapocalyptic (two of them, I later learned, were forges capable of heating to 2,000°). Abruptly the roof ended, opening into a tiny courtyard with a barbecue still smelling of roasted meat and a fig tree growing up into the sky. The kitchen next to it was the most fantastic place of all, a tornado of cookware and equipment and produce—and, hanging from a skylight, a gigantic Murano glass chandelier. Lit by the sun, it was ethereal.

The creator of all this welcomed me in, politely disregarding what must have been my thunderstruck expression. Garro is in his mid-60s, roundish and slightly rumped. He looks like Jack Nicholson, only happier, and has a Sicilian lilt in his voice that 30 years in America have not erased. He has taken Waters eel-fishing, picked olives with cookbook author Peggy Knickerbocker, led mushrooming expeditions for NPR hosts The Kitchen

Sisters, and taught Michael Pollan how to kill and butcher a wild boar, an experience that Pollan unflinchingly described in his 2006 best seller *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (he called Garro "my forager Virgil"). Whenever Garro goes on an expedition, a few friends—or more—come with him. "I like to share knowledge," said Garro. "I'm not one of those guys who have too many secrets."

Then he raised a finger and both eyebrows. "Except for my salt." A pile of it—a speckled mix of sea salt, wild fennel, and other spices—rested in a bowl on the table. At the urging of friends, he put his Omnivore Salt, based on his grandmother's recipe, on Kickstarter a year ago. The promo video was narrated and edited by German filmmaker Werner Herzog—also a friend, part of the force field of the Forge. "Angelo is like a medieval man who makes his own wine and grappa, cures his own olives and meat, and makes salami," Herzog intones on the video with feverish intensity. "And a long time ago, he created his own spiced salt..." Garro asked for \$30,000 and ended up with more than \$141,000. "People started asking me for marketing advice," he told me, smiling in disbelief. (Now Omnivore Salt is in stores nationwide; he plans a spicy red pesto next.)

Garro had decided to cook a vegetarian lunch—surprising, given his legendary prowess with boar and eel. But vegetables are close to his heart too, he explained. Meat was scarce and expensive in Sicily when he was growing up. "Many days we had just vegetables." Today, we would have a tomato almond pesto from Trapani, on the western side of Sicily. "But I make mine a little richer and better. Actually, there are no new recipes. It's like painting. You are copying Michelangelo, but you put in a little of yourself too."

He cranked handmade fettuccine dough through a little pasta machine until thin and supple, and then passed it through the cutter. As the noodles ribboned down, he scooped them up and flung them on parchment with a flourish. "Like what's-his-name—Emeril. Bang!" Then he picked the leaves off the basil. "You know what? We're gonna measure." He stuffed leaves into a cup until he had three cups' worth. Later he changed it to two, then back to three, and ended up putting two entire bunches of basil into his beat-up blender. The tomatoes, so ripe they were splitting, went in skin and all. It smelled like a late-summer garden. "It's not an accident that I live by the seasons," Garro said. "It's an unconscious memory that connects me to fall, winter, and summer." In his Kitchen Sisters interview, he said that in Sicily, he could tell by the smell what time of year it was—orange season, persimmon season, olive season.

He sprinkled in a bit of sugar to balance the acidity of the tomatoes, and then glugged in some olive oil. "You know, cooking is not rocket science. It's know-how. If you worry about it, it's not going to taste good." This hit home with me, a lifelong and overly trusting recipe-follower. He simmered the sauce with ground almonds, and as soon as it began to look creamy, tasted a little spoonful. "Delicious! I love it."

Garro is totally at ease and in charge in the kitchen. Even at other people's parties: Anya Fernald, the CEO of the sustainable meat company Belcampo, told me she was halfway through cooking dinner once for a group at the company's ranch near Mt. Shasta. "Angelo couldn't stand not cooking something," she said. "So he went out and shot a quail and roasted it over a fire for Viola, my 2-year-old. She just sat there at dinner and gnawed on that quail."

Knickerbocker says that whenever she invites him to dinner, he brings homemade pasta and heads right to her kitchen. "But it's always a really fun party, because I realize it's not all up to me."

And here we were, sitting down to lunch a little more than an hour after Garro started cooking, with a bottle of his own Pinot Noir and a lively salad of sliced fennel, shallots, and oranges on the table. The pasta was simple but resoundingly flavorful. "You know, you could put in sausages if you want, organic from Trader Joe." Garro was serious. Despite his chef friends, he doesn't spurn the places where ordinary cooks shop; Alemany Farmers' Market, where the produce is both excellent and reasonably priced, is his favorite. "It's the people's market." He spent just a few dollars on today's lunch.

**GARRO GREW UP** in and around Siracusa, the son of a citrus broker. His mother ran a small restaurant on the coast. His paternal grandmother had a garden "like Eden, with cherries, peaches, walnuts, persimmons, many varieties of table grapes. She had 600 olive trees and would make oil for the entire family." Fruit grew everywhere, and when he and his friends would go swimming in the Anapo River, they'd take juicy bites of peaches from the trees that grew along the banks.

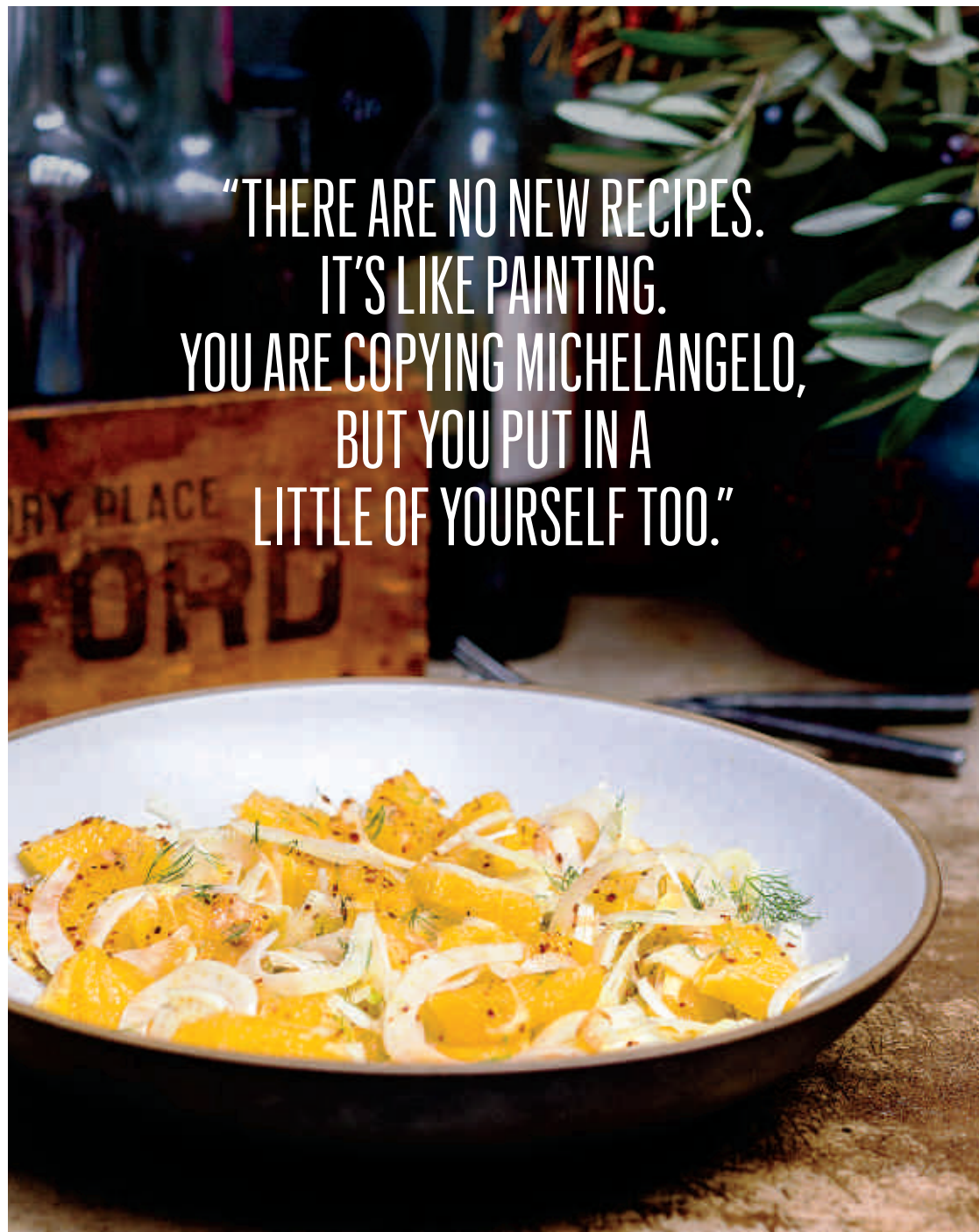
Disenchanted by Sicily, he left for Switzerland at 18 to apprentice to a master blacksmith. "If you were at all creative or had a sense of curiosity, you couldn't wait to get the hell out. It was too small and small-minded. When I saw clouds rushing across the sky, I dreamed about where they were going." Once he was in Switzerland, though, he literally hungered for his past. "I used to keep my mother on the phone for hours, asking about recipes. 'Hey Mamma, how do you cook the pasta vongole?' Then when I went home for vacation, I cooked with her and my grandma and paid attention. Before I knew it, I was very popular in Switzerland. My friends would say, 'We'll bring the wine and the guitar. You cook.'"

While returning from one trip home, Garro was stopped at the border. His papers weren't in order, it seemed, and he ended up in the Italian army (service was mandatory then). There he met a fellow soldier, a professor of philosophy and religion. "He changed my life," said Garro. "I was a high-school dropout with no guidance... He made lists for me of the Italian and French classics, and that was how I began to educate myself."

Garro still devours opera, film, painting, and literature, and all kinds of artists have come to eat at the Forge. "It's a salon," says Davia Nelson, one of the Kitchen



Opposite from top left: Garro cranks out fresh pasta dough; the start of pesto; his drill press; Fennel, Shallot, and Orange Salad; his orange-peel "pilot goggles"; mosto cotto.



FIGS IN  
MOSTO  
COTTO  
*with*  
FRESH  
RICOTTA



Sisters. “You meet film directors there, opera singers, dancers, composers.”

It was time for dessert: sautéed figs and ricotta. Garro decided he’d make the cheese from scratch, right then and there. “Why not? It’s so easy!” Milk, half-and-half, and salt went in the pot. As it heated up, he remembered how he and his father, out hunting, would come across shepherds making ricotta over wood fires. “We would ask for scoops, and they would give them to us. Once I asked for five.”

As soon as the milk seethed in the pot, he squeezed in lemon juice. Instantly it separated into fluffy curds and watery whey. He lifted the curds out into a bowl, and *ecco*, there it was: ricotta. “So now, as a ritual, we have to drink the whey.” He’d done this with his father on those hunting trips. I was skeptical but took a sip. The salty, slightly milky broth was delicious, and I had to admire the thrift of it.

While it was still warm, Garro spooned the ricotta over fat purple figs that he’d sautéed in butter with his *mosto cotto* (wine-grape syrup) and a splash of homemade balsamic vinegar. “Oh, my God,” he cried. “I love my figs!”

**ALL DAY LONG** at the Forge, the doorbell rings, and so does the phone (actually, it trumpets the opening of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the opera based on the novel by his friend Amy Tan). People just want to be with Garro. During the monthlong World Cup, he had his projector screen down and friends filling up the front room watching soccer while he cooked pasta for them. How many friends? I asked. “Oh, I don’t know, around 40.” Every day.

After *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* was published, Garro was besieged with requests to cook and go hunting. It was too much, mainly because he couldn’t get to know everyone, which for him is the whole point of food and life. “You can’t have 1 million friends. You can only have about 100 that you stay close to.”

After the army and working for the smith in Switzerland, Garro followed a woman he’d met there to Toronto; then he married a San Franciscan, and they moved here in 1983. He found work at the Forge, which had been a blacksmith shop for at least a century, and soon bought it. His brother-in-law—Prairie Prince, the drummer for The Tubes—began introducing him to people, including Knickerbocker, who seems to know or be separated by one degree from everyone interesting in the city.

Then on his birthday, in 1987, his wife asked, “What would you like to do today?” He said, “Catch eels under

the bridge!” He met up on the north side of the Golden Gate with friends and *their* friends, one of whom happened to be Waters. “I didn’t know who she was, but she was very charming.” He wrapped the eels in foil with some chanterelles he had foraged and a little balsamic vinegar, and grilled them on a hibachi. “Alice said, ‘This is my dream—from the water to the plate.’ She invited me to her house for dinner, and that was the beginning of our friendship. And because of Alice, the chefs thought I had some secret or something.”

Pretty much ever since then, Garro has cooked the Feast of the Seven Fishes, the traditional Italian Christmas Eve dinner, with Waters and others (he and his wife are now divorced). “Only with Angelo, it’s more like 11 or 12 fishes,” says Nelson, a regular. “He has a lot of gusto,” says Waters, when I ask what he’s like to cook with. “He attacks the food. I remember him just ripping the skins off the eels and hanging them on the fence in my backyard to save for a belt for my daughter, Fanny. And he certainly knows how to make food taste good.”

Garro has no desire to open a restaurant, although he’s been asked several times. It’s too stressful, he says, and unsatisfying. “It’s not true. It’s all make-believe.” For him, cooking must connect to friends or it’s meaningless. And he dismisses his growing fame. “I just do the same things I’ve always done.”

So what does he think of the current craze for foraging and hunting? “Not long ago, I passed a parking lot in San Francisco where there was some kind of, what do you call it, pop-up,” he says. “Someone had brought a feral boar to roast, from Texas. It was a phenomenon! All these Google kids lined up around the block, like sheep. I think it is a need to socialize.”

Which he doesn’t disagree with; for him, hunting and foraging are best when they’re communal. “Angelo takes a lot of young cooks into the wild, and his enthusiasm is so infectious, it changes them,” says Paul Bertolli, who makes cured meats under his Fra’ Mani label. “For a cook used to dealing with ‘product,’ to find the food and take it all the way to the plate is transformative.”

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—ALICE WATERS

“Angelo has always had a whole lineup of people willing to work, to be part of whatever he’s doing,” says Cal Zecca Ferris, one of his oldest friends. It could be hunting or bottling wine or curing olives. “I think it comes back to the fact that everything Angelo does is authentic. There’s no trying to be, wanting to be, or pretending to be. He just *is*.”

Right before I left, I asked Garro if I could see his curing room, a nook behind the main forge area. Dozens of prosciutti and salami hung in a dedicated fridge there, and when he opened the door, a spicy, meaty fragrance wafted out. A flotilla of barrels and boxed-up bottles of his wine surrounded the fridge. “Take one,” he urged. “I only have 600!” I went home with two bottles, Garro’s handwritten labels scrawled right on the glass. —>



# ALMOND PESTO PASTA

SERVES 4 TO 6 (MAKES ENOUGH PESTO FOR A SECOND BATCH) / 45 MINUTES

Besides his own fresh fettuccine or macaroni, Garro likes to serve this pesto with springy, curly Twins or Ringlets pasta from Baia Pasta, an Oakland company. (Its co-owner, Renato Sardo, learned to make pasta from Garro.) If you have Garro's Omnivore Salt, use it instead of the salt, pepper, and chile flakes.

4 very ripe red medium-size tomatoes, such as Early Girl

4 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled  
½ tsp. sugar

6 oz. very fresh basil leaves (about 4 cups loosely packed); save a few leaves for garnish

About ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 tsp. salt

½ tsp. each pepper and red chile flakes

1½ cups freshly grated parmigiano-reggiano cheese, plus more for serving

⅔ cup raw, skin-on almonds

1 lb. fresh or dried pasta (for Garro's fresh fettuccine recipe, go to [myrecipes.com](http://myrecipes.com))

1. Bring a pot of generously salted water to boil. Meanwhile, core and quarter tomatoes. Add to blender along with garlic, sugar, and about half the basil, and blend just until coarsely puréed. Add 1 tbsp. oil if needed to loosen it up.
2. Add remaining basil, ½ cup oil, the salt, pepper, chile flakes, and 1½ cups cheese to blender and pulse to coarsely purée the basil.
3. Grind almonds in a clean coffee or spice grinder until they're about the texture of coarse cornmeal.
4. Boil pasta until just tender, 2 to 3 minutes for fresh and about 15 for dried. Meanwhile, pour half the sauce into a medium frying pan and bring to a simmer over low heat. Whisk almonds into sauce and let simmer gently until creamy-

looking, about 2 minutes. If it doesn't look creamy, add 1 to 2 tbsp. water. Remove from heat.

5. Pour remaining sauce into frying pan (swirl a bit of water into sauce clinging to sides of blender and add that too).
6. Drain pasta, reserving ½ cup pasta water. Put pasta back in pot and stir sauce into pasta. Reheat over low heat, stirring occasionally and adding pasta water if it looks too thick, until pasta absorbs sauce slightly, about 4 minutes. Serve immediately, sprinkled with more cheese and a few torn basil leaves.

**MAKE AHEAD** Sauce, up to 1 week, chilled; up to 4 months, frozen.

PER SERVING 621 Cal., 53% (328 Cal.) from fat; 24 g protein; 37 g fat (10 g sat.); 52 g carbo (7 g fiber); 608 mg sodium; 82 mg chol. V

## FENNEL, SHALLOT, AND ORANGE SALAD

SERVES 4 TO 6 / 30 MINUTES

Choose a high-quality extra-virgin olive oil here—it makes a big difference. Garro loves to use spicy-sweet blood oranges for this salad, when they're in season.

3 medium fennel bulbs with stalks and fronds

1 medium shallot

2 large oranges

1 lemon

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

½ tsp. each salt and red chile flakes

1. Trim fronds and stalks from fennel bulbs, setting aside several small fronds for garnish. Cut bulbs in half lengthwise, cut out core, and slice very thinly lengthwise on a handheld slicer. Slice shallot very thinly on slicer (you should have about ¼ cup), and put both in a large salad bowl.
2. Trim peel from oranges. Working over bowl to catch juices, cut oranges into thirds straight down through top of fruit; then cut crosswise into thick

pieces and let fall into bowl.

3. Cut lemon in half crosswise. Set a strainer over same bowl to catch seeds and, twisting a fork into each lemon half, juice them into bowl.
4. Add oil, salt, and chile flakes to bowl and toss salad gently but thoroughly. Taste and add more salt and chile if you like. Toss again and top with fennel fronds.

PER SERVING 152 Cal., 55% (83 Cal.) from fat; 2.2 g protein; 9.7 g fat (1.4 g sat.); 18 g carbo (5.2 g fiber); 256 mg sodium; 0 mg chol. GF/LC/LS/VG

## FIGS IN MOSTO COTTO (GRAPE SYRUP) WITH FRESH RICOTTA

SERVES 4 TO 6 / 45 MINUTES

*Mosto cotto* (also called *saba*) is nothing more than the freshly pressed juice of wine grapes, simmered down to a syrup. It's fairly expensive at specialty markets, but Garro makes his own, from grapes grown in a friend's vineyard. If you can't find wine grapes, try the method on the next page—it's a good approximation of the real thing.

**RICOTTA**

½ gallon whole milk

1 cup half-and-half

2 tsp. rock salt or 1½ tsp. kosher salt

Juice of 1 large lemon (about ¼ cup plus 1 tbsp.)

**FIGS**

1½ tbsp. butter

6 to 8 ripe figs (any kind)

1 tbsp. sugar

½ cup *mosto cotto* (see recipe, facing page)

1 tbsp. balsamic vinegar\*

1. Start ricotta: Pour milk, half-and-half, and salt into a large heavy-bottomed pot and bring to a bare simmer over medium heat, stirring every now and then to prevent scorching, 25 to 30 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, cook figs: Melt butter in a

medium nonstick frying pan over medium heat. Slice figs in half and set cut side down in butter in a single layer. Pour in 2 tbsp. water and sprinkle with sugar. Let figs cook until they start to soften, about 3 minutes. Reduce heat to low.

3. Pour in mosto cotto. Let figs simmer until quite soft and mosto cotto is as thick as honey, about 7 minutes. Add balsamic vinegar and remove from heat.
4. When milk reaches a bare simmer, pour in enough lemon juice to separate it into thick, fluffy white curds and watery, greenish whey (if this doesn't happen immediately, add more lemon juice). Push curds gently once or twice but resist the urge to stir—that will make them gritty. Turn off heat.
5. Scoop ricotta into a medium-mesh

colander set in the sink. Let liquid drain 10 to 15 minutes; ricotta should be moist but not wet.

6. Spoon about  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup ricotta onto each of 4 small plates and add 2 or 3 fig halves. Drizzle with syrup from pan and serve.

*\*Look for reasonably priced cask-aged balsamic vinegar, sometimes labeled "condimento." Avoid cheap "instant" balsamic vinegar, which has colorants and sugars.*

**MAKE AHEAD** Ricotta and figs, each up to 2 hours at room temperature, covered, or up to 1 day, chilled (let them come to room temperature before serving).

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PER SERVING 489 Cal., 34% (164 Cal.) from fat; 12 g protein; 18 g fat (11 g sat.); 71 g carbo (2.4 g fiber); 576 mg sodium; 55 mg chol. GF/V

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## MOSTO COTTO (GRAPE SYRUP)

**MAKES**  $\frac{1}{2}$  CUP / 1½ HOURS

Put 1 qt. unsweetened **white grape juice** in a wide pot with 2 tbsp. **dark brown sugar** and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup *each* **raisins** and **prunes**. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to a simmer and cook until it's as thick as maple syrup, to about 1 cup,  $\frac{1}{4}$  to 1½ hours. Add 2 tbsp. cask-aged **balsamic vinegar** and simmer another 15 minutes. Cool, then strain, pushing on fruit with the back of a spoon. Keeps, chilled, at least 2 months (save fruit for another use, like spooning over ice cream). ☺

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