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Rustic, complex and delicious

Start the meal with chef Chris Cosentino's Italian-inflected seasonal appetizers

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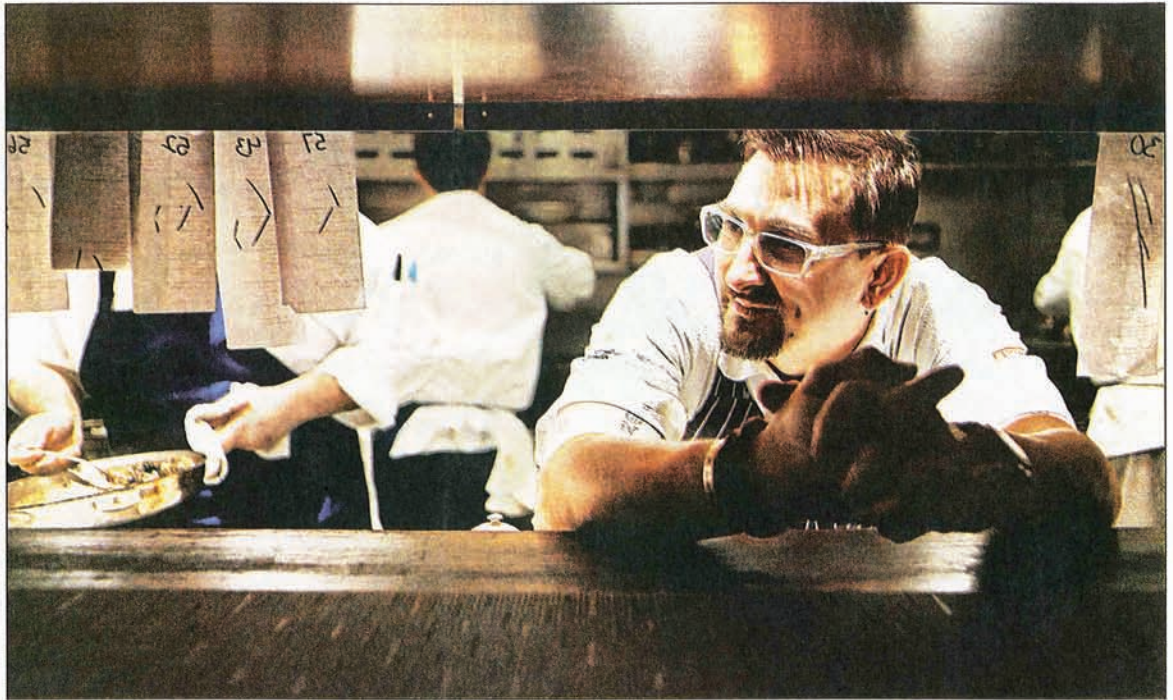
San Francisco chef Chris Cosentino is perhaps best known for his passion for offal — he could be called the poster child of the “nose-to-tail” cooking movement. But his new (and his first) cookbook, “Beginnings,” barely mentions the blood, guts and organs that Cosentino usually peddles, both at Incanto, where he is executive chef, and at Boccalone, the artisanal salumi business that he owns with business partner Mark Pastore.

Instead, we are treated to a feast of recipes for starters that reflect Cosentino's passion for the seasonal bounty of the earth. The chef's rustic Italian-inflected aesthetic reveals itself through the simple flavors and photographs of dishes like treviso, pomegranate and pistachios (winter) and grilled peaches, gorgonzola and dandelion greens (summer). The spare simplicity of the titles belies the thoughtful complexity of the recipes — this guy knows his stuff, while possessing an unwavering commitment to seasonality. This is a book you can bring to the farmers market as a guide and an inspiration.

Best of all, most of the recipes are approachable. You'll only need eight ingredients to recreate Cosentino's broccoli rabe and potato frittata (including sea salt!), and we saw five of them on our most recent market visit.

Don't be fooled — this book is not vegetarian. And the ideas are not all as easy as a stroll through the pumpkin patch. Modern cooking techniques are sprinkled liberally throughout the pages, and a seemingly straightforward recipe for pan-roasted grapes, turnips and grape leaves calls for pan-frying the leaves — if you can find them outside of the Napa Valley — not to mention the four varieties of grapes he lists.

That said, Cosentino takes on



MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL PHOTO

Chris Cosentino is executive chef at the Italian restaurant Incanto in San Francisco and chef/co-founder of Boccalone, which makes artisan salumi.

tasks like preparing quail (“Pound the bird flat,” he instructs. “You don't need to kill it — it is already dead.”) with humor and complete focus. His casual language feels as if he's in the kitchen with you, and his hand-drawn diagrams are completely accurate ... and charming. You will never cut corn kernels incorrectly again, once you see the picture captioned “Perfectly cut kernels: not too deep, look like teeth.”

We caught up with Cosentino in a recent phone interview about his book and his cooking style.

Q: Why a book about appetizers from the King of Offal?

A: Offal is not the majority of what I do. Plus I have to admit there was fear in the publishing industry's heart about a book like that. The first course sets the tone of the meal. Everything's approachable. And it's not that hard to get people to eat vegetables,

unless they are under the age of 7.

Q: What do you say to people who claim your cooking is not “authentic” Italian?

A: What is authentic Italian? In St. Louis, fried ravioli is considered authentic. Italian is a philosophy. You take what's best and work with what's right there. That's what this book is about.

Q: You have a lot of tricks you whip out when cooking with vegetables. In your book, you season a roasted olive and cherry tomato dish with tomato leaves. You make tomato French toast. What other tricks do you have in your arsenal?

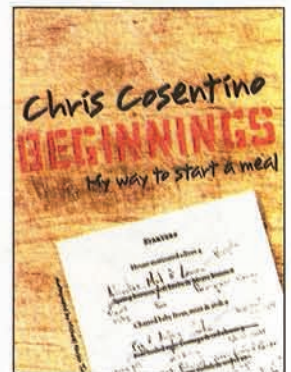
A: Oh, I have lots of tricks. *Pappa al pomodoro* is literally just bread and tomato. I say why not make it sexy, crisp it up, caramelize the sugar in the tomato, still have that mushy porridge in the

middle. I cook my porcini (mushrooms) with sprigs of Douglas fir. Porcini grow under pine trees ... hmm, what do you know, it works together!

Q: We love the introductions to the recipes in “Beginnings.” They sound very personal, as if you are telling a story. Did you write this book or did you “talk” it?

A: I talked it. When I was a kid in school, we were taught to never write like you speak, red pencils and grammar every single day. Here I am, dyslexic and ADD, it was hard. Writing the foreword, my editor Jennifer Newens hammered me for 2½ hours about my recipes. She took my words verbatim, and it sounds like me being who I am and encouraging people to cook at home. If cooking comes from the heart, then it's good.

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**‘Beginnings:
My Way to Start
a Meal’**

By Chris Cosentino
Weldon Owen, \$25