

# A groundbreaking chef with the soul of a peasant makes her way home

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By Alex Witchel October 25

LOS ANGELES — Of course it was a worthy cause. They're all worthy causes.

But the singular detail about the charity event in Santa Monica, Calif., that Nancy Silverton was about to cook for was that the hostess was feeding her 300 guests at home — on her tennis courts.

Silverton looked past my dropped jaw. “Isn't it wonderful someone like that is so generous?” she asked brightly.

Well, yes. And if that event ratifies a show-business stereotype about Hollywood excess, let's be clear that Silverton, who was born and raised in Los Angeles, is the antithesis of a Disney princess.

At 62, she is not only an iconic California chef but also an iconic American chef. When she opened La Brea Bakery in 1989 with a sourdough starter she'd made herself, she created six breads — including a country white, an olive loaf and a dark Normandy rye — and essentially founded the artisan bread industry. As the head pastry chef and co-owner with her then-husband, Mark Peel, of the L.A. restaurant Campanile, she introduced a weekly grilled-cheese night in 1998, kicking off a national trend that has yet to wane. Along with Mario Batali and Joseph Bastianich, she owns and runs the Mozzaplex, as her four businesses here are called: Osteria Mozza, an upscale Italian restaurant; Pizzeria Mozza; Mozza2Go; and Chi Spacca, a tiny meat-centric spot in a hidden space that began as a cooking school and has become one of the most critically acclaimed restaurants in town. Chi Spacca is everything a traditional Florentine restaurant tries to be but goes it one better with meat that boasts an unmistakable West Coast char.

This week marks the publication of Silverton's ninth cookbook: “[Mozza at](#)

Home: More Than 150 Crowd-Pleasing Recipes for Relaxed, Family-Style Entertaining,” with Carolyn Carreño. When she was running La Brea Bakery and Campanile, Silverton didn’t have time to cook at home for her three children, who are now grown. And it wasn’t until 2000 that, along with her good friend and fellow L.A. chef Suzanne Tracht, of the estimable Jar restaurant, she started spending chunks of her summers in Italy. For several years, the two women rented an apartment on a piazza in a small town at the Umbria-Tuscany border and spent all day cooking dinners — 15 to 20 dishes, typically — that they served each night right in the piazza, at long tables, for friends and neighbors.

“As a chef in a restaurant, going away to cook was a busman’s holiday, but really a joy,” Silverton said. “When I’m here, my parties are more planned, and I always have the restaurants at the back of my mind. There, you have all the time in the world to make it great. We laid out giant spreads, the food was at room temperature and nothing was individually plated. I like to do the dishes ahead of time, one by one. No fragile salads. Some braised dishes. I always prefer a buffet. So much happens at a buffet table. You learn.”

The “home” in “Mozza at Home” refers to both Italy, where she has since bought a house, and California, although she cooks more frequently overseas, and for larger groups, than in Los Angeles. The book is organized by meals, each with a main dish and a selection of antipasti, side dishes and salads to accompany it. “This is not a menu cookbook,” Silverton said, “These are suggestions. You don’t need 15 dishes. Some of them are easy, some more complex. If you even pick a couple and scramble it all together, it will still taste good.”

True enough. But on certain issues, Silverton is unyielding. Take the way she writes about salt. It is not for the timid. In every recipe that calls for salting boiling water, she specifies that it must “taste like the ocean,” one tablespoon of salt for each quart of water. “People are so afraid of salt,” she said. “At the end, you can dump as much as you want on top, but if you’re not using it during the cooking, you don’t have it.”

The book includes a radicchio-and-beet salad with either labneh or goat cheese, and her recipe headnote is a classic. She has always had mixed feelings about beet salads, she says, specifically about their aesthetics. “I needed something to protect the white cheese from being stained by the beets, which always reminds me of an old lady’s lipstick using the wrinkles on her upper lip to crawl up her face,” she writes. To prevent that from happening, she makes bite-size cheese balls and coats them in chopped walnuts, an idea she got from

some giant cheese balls she saw in a Harry & David catalogue. “It hit me,” she said. “The nuts will stop the beets from bleeding.”

She calls that solution “an un-Nancy thing to do,” because of the fuss involved. Silverton has always shunned ostentation, celebrating her love of plebeian ingredients such as iceberg lettuce and popcorn, not to mention her passion for burgers. (Huntington Meats at the Original Farmer’s Market here sells her “Backyard Burger Blend,” which is ground chuck with an added 10 percent fat.) She is the chef least likely to wield a pair of tweezers in a kitchen, restaurant or home. We had been talking at her dining room table as she was about to prepare two of the side dishes she recommends serving with her skirt steak. I looked skeptically at her white dress, which would take her through that exercise and then to her charity event, bemoaning the cleaning bill. But she shrugged that off, speaking animatedly: about her latest trip to Italy, her addiction to CNN and the way she has started to braid her hair. She’s what my grandmother would have called “a live wire.”

Silverton’s affect was decidedly different from the last time I interviewed her, in 2011, when she published “[The Mozza Cookbook](#).” Then, we discussed the unhappy fact that after selling La Brea Bakery in 2001 for \$7 million, she invested it with an L.A. money manager who in turn invested it with Bernard Madoff. In 2008, she lost it all. She was stoic about it — publicly, at least. At the time, she told me she never lived on that money, using it only to pay taxes, so her lifestyle never changed. She did what she always had done. Worked.

The first two Mozza restaurants had been launched and were solid by then, and now there are the four here, two branches in Singapore and one in Orange County. She produces a small-batch line of gelati and sorbetti called Nancy’s Fancy, sold nationally through Dean & DeLuca and other upscale grocers. She still owns her home in the Hancock Park section of the city, where she has lived since 1993. And she has made her peace with television, as any book-writing chef must. In January, she will be featured on an episode of “Chef’s Table,” David Gelb’s Netflix documentary series, and she is on an episode of “Emeril Eats the World,” now on Amazon. (She takes him to Italy for pizza.) “I never watch myself,” she said. “But the only people who sell books these days are on TV.”

In the kitchen, Silverton got busy. You would never guess that a professional chef lives here. Yes, there are two ovens and a butcher-block station, but also a microwave and a standard four-burner stove. The cabinet doors are mustard-colored, the counters avocado tile, the floors wood-planked. Mostly, the decorating motif is whimsy. The window over the sink is hung with eggbeaters,

which Silverton used to collect. One wall is covered with rolling pins, displayed as art.

For her Charred Broccoli With Salami and Burrata, she spread the broccoli onto two baking sheets and salted them the way a sailor curses. Her recipe — for this and many other dishes in the book — calls for setting the trays on the oven floor and cooking at 500 degrees. That does char the food, and if you don't watch how you open the oven door, it may feel like it's charring your face, too.

Ten minutes later, she moved the broccoli from the oven to a bowl and covered it with plastic wrap to let it steam. Then she deftly assembled the fava bean succotash salad using butter beans, because favas were already out of season.

I watched her artfully compose the broccoli on a plate and shook my head. I just don't have the salad gene, I told her. "The salad gene is my dominant gene," she replied. "It's the hardest station in a restaurant because, recipes aside, what is a properly dressed or seasoned salad? That's really hard to gauge. This succotash is a different kind, but in restaurants they're built and layered and you just can't tell someone how to do it. When you put fish on a plate, it's square every time. With lettuce, each shape is different. You need an eye to build it on the spot."

She cut the burrata. Her phone was ringing in the next room — she was late for the tennis courts — but she was ensconced in her home-cooking zone.

"I get so much pleasure making the food I make, especially when it comes out the way I want it to," she said, painting the burrata with vinaigrette. "The pleasure when people eat it is so rewarding. So first and foremost, it's selfish. But in a good way."

*Witchel is a former staff writer for the New York Times Magazine and the author of "All Gone: A Memoir of My Mother's Dementia. With Refreshments" (Riverhead Books, 2012).*

## **Recipes:**

Charred Broccoli With Salami and Burrata

Garlic-Rubbed Skirt Steak With Scallion Vinaigrette

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