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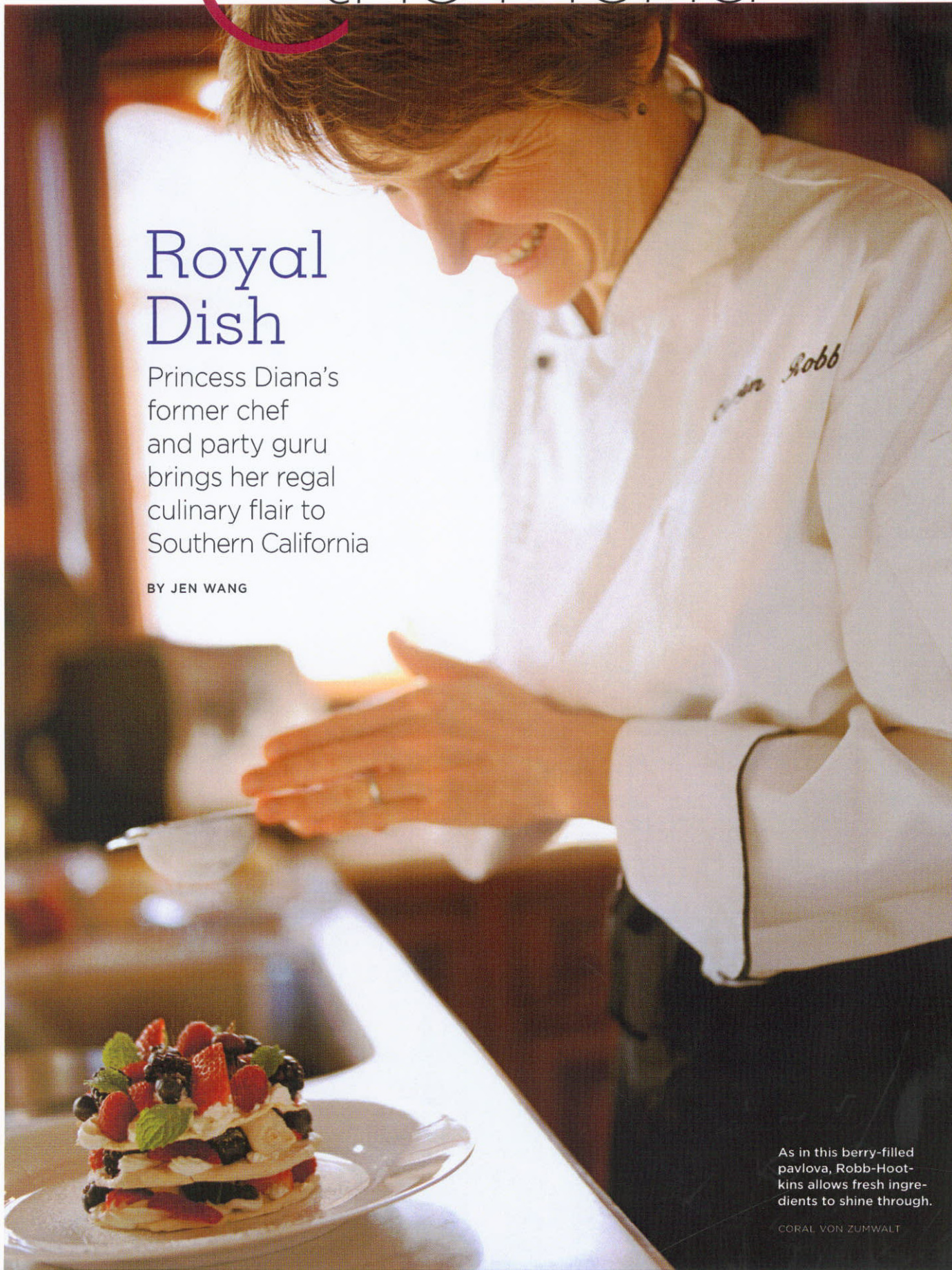
Royal Dish

Princess Diana's former chef and party guru brings her regal culinary flair to Southern California

BY JEN WANG

As in this berry-filled pavlova, Robb-Hootkins allows fresh ingredients to shine through.

CORAL VON ZUMWALT





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s the former private chef to Prince Charles and Princess Diana of Wales, Carolyn Robb-Hootkins was granted enough access to the royal couple to be able to pen a juicy tell-all about the famously troubled union. The late Princess' butler Paul Burrell did just that, making off with a tidy book advance (and reportedly some of Diana's personal effects, a charge from which he was eventually and abruptly cleared). But unlike Burrell, Robb-Hootkins, who trained at the world-renowned Tante Marie School of Cookery outside of London, is a professional who was schooled in another art as well—the art of discretion.

For the Princess of Wales, the willowy chef has virtually nothing but praise: “She was wonderful. She was just the way people perceived her to be.” Only faintly referring to Diana's darker side, she says, “The Princess wasn't a great foodie,” presumably a tacit reference to her well-publicized battle with bulimia. As for Charles, who received “sole custody” of the chef after the divorce, Robb-Hootkins is equally flattering—if not a tiny bit more restrained. “He was very disciplined,” she recalls with admiration.

After 13 years of presiding over several royal

kitchens, this tactful toque—once lauded as “England's leading organic chef”—recently crossed the pond and relocated to Los Angeles, where the only thing she cares to dish up these days is exquisitely fresh cuisine.

“Through Prince Charles, I was introduced to organics,” she says, citing the prince as an early champion of the sustainable food movement. “About 20 years ago, when he converted Highgrove [his private residence] into an organic farm, people were really skeptical,” a fact difficult to imagine given how widely embraced the concept has become.

And in California, home to sustainable food gurus like Alice Waters, the word “organic” often elicits a kind of “been there, done that” ennui. Robb-Hootkins, however, whose other “great passion” is fitness (“I'm hoping to do a triathlon in the summer,” she says), is determined to reinvigorate this point-of-view with her new private catering company. “The very best food in the world,” she contends, “uses great ingredients simply prepared,” adding that the Santa Monica farmer's market is her favorite local place to shop.

Once she's gathered the freshest ingredients possible, this versatile chef can whip up an intimate dinner for 12 or a lavish wedding reception for 500, as she demonstrated last September at the marriage celebration of Tom Parker Bowles (Camilla's son) to Sara Buys. Not only did Robb-Hootkins design the menu, which included traditional English fare like shepherd's pie, but she also planned everything from the table decor to security for the star-studded affair (attended by the likes of Mick Jagger and Hugh Grant). Robb-Hootkins once again gives credit to the Prince of Wales—“one day, it would be a quiet dinner for two; the next day, a state dinner for 50; and the next day, we'd be in Scotland”—for shaping her into such an extraordinary multitasker.

And what does this royal insider have to say about the Duchess of Cornwall, aka Barbara Walters' Most Fascinating Person of 2005, aka Britain's most famous “other” woman? As with her spring vegetables, Robb-Hootkins picks and chooses her words carefully.

“Following the act of the Princess of Wales is probably one of the hardest things to do. Camilla will never fit into Diana's shoes,” she says, the closest this English Rose comes to showing a thorny side. Yet despite her new environs, Robb-Hootkins is ever the model of British civility and quick to add, “Camilla makes Prince Charles very happy.” 310-454-6120. ●


HEIRLOOM TOMATO PHYLLO TARTLETS

4 yellow heirloom tomatoes
4 red heirloom tomatoes
extra-virgin olive oil
balsamic vinegar
sea salt
freshly ground black pepper
raw brown sugar
4 sprigs fresh thyme
8 sheets phyllo pastry
4 tablespoons freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
4 sprigs fresh basil
8 ounces diced buffalo mozzarella

1. Preheat oven to 200°F. Slice the tomatoes in half and place them on a baking tray. Drizzle each half with oil and vinegar, and sprinkle with a pinch of salt and pepper, brown sugar and a few thyme leaves. Bake for 6 hours.

2. Preheat oven to 350°F. Lay out the first sheet of phyllo and brush with the olive oil. Sprinkle 1 T. of grated cheese on top, and then lay the second sheet. Cut in half, then fold each half in half again. Use this to line a 3-inch tartlet mold. Repeat 3 times to make four total tartlets. Bake for 10 to 15 minutes, or until golden brown.

3. Arrange 2 red and 2 yellow tomato halves in each tartlet with the mozzarella and torn basil. Bake at 350°F for 8 minutes, or until the mozzarella is melted. Drizzle with olive oil and serve immediately. (Serves 4)



Robb-Hootkins' light touch translates into a tomato-mozzarella tart. OPPOSITE The chef at the Santa Monica farmer's market.