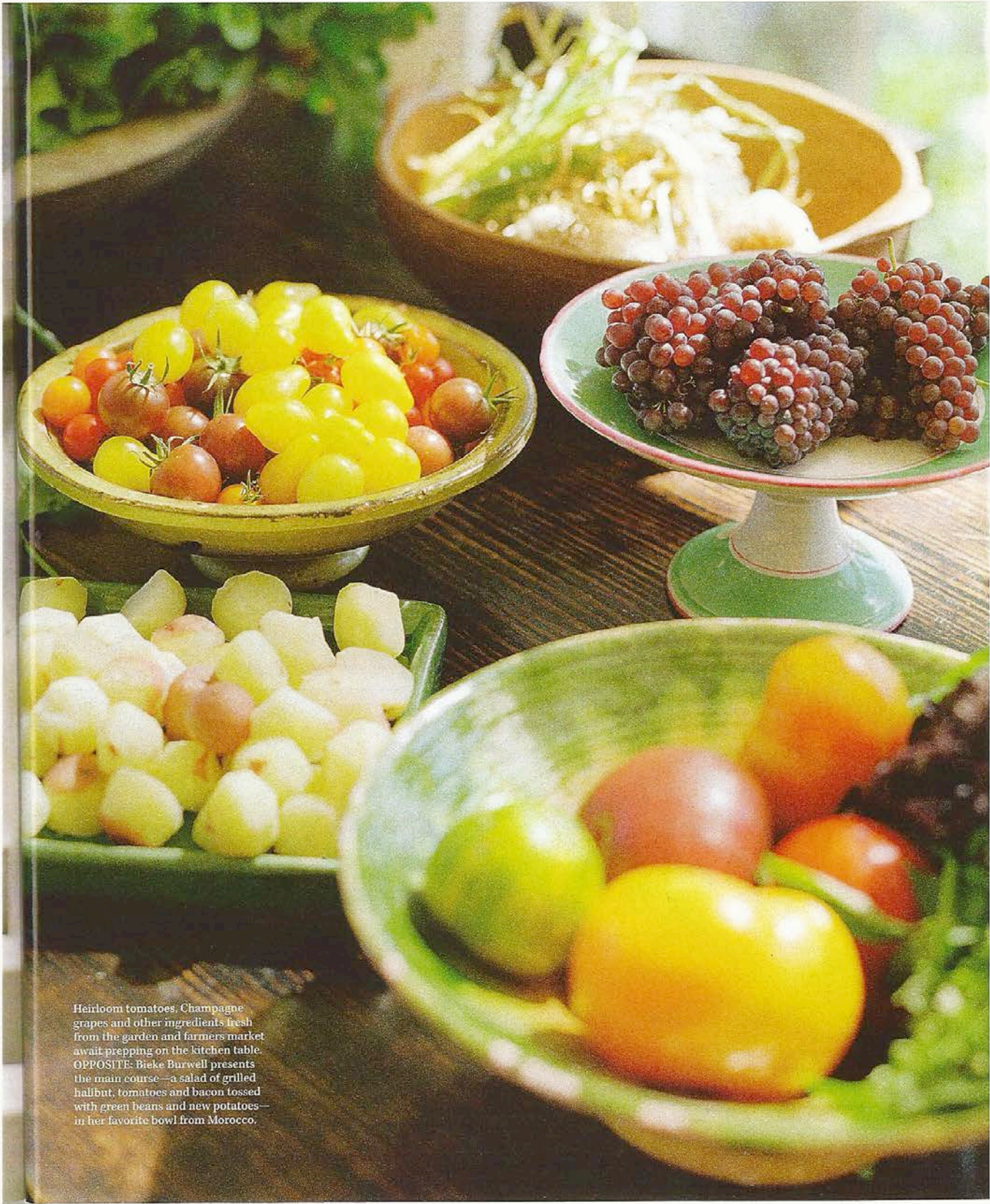


A woman with short brown hair, wearing a white long-sleeved top and a yellow skirt, stands on a stone terrace. She is smiling and holding a large, shallow wooden bowl filled with a fresh salad. The background shows a stone wall and some greenery.

TOASTING THE HARVEST

A WINEGROWER AND ENTERTAINING EXPERT CELEBRATES THE BOUNTY OF
DRY CREEK VALLEY BY INVITING A FEW LOCALS OVER FOR LUNCH ON THE TERRACE.

BY JEAN VICTOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHERRI GIBLIN

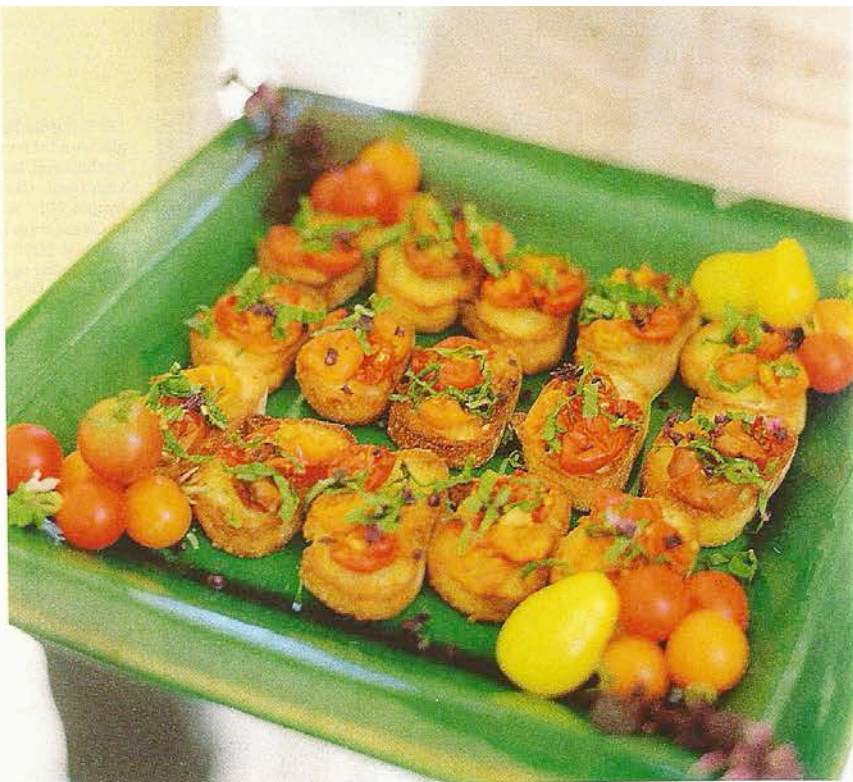


Heirloom tomatoes, Champagne grapes and other ingredients fresh from the garden and farmers market await prepping on the kitchen table
OPPOSITE: Bieke Burwell presents the main course—a salad of grilled halibut, tomatoes and bacon tossed with green beans and new potatoes—in her favorite bowl from Morocco.



Cool and crisp, a rosé from nearby Unti Vineyards has the flavor and intensity of a red wine and the refreshment of a white, making it Bieke's wine of choice for pairing with grilled foods in hot weather.

The informal alfresco lunch starts with a rustic bruschetta made from heirloom tomatoes and basil picked at the peak of summer flavor.



The grand exit of summer in Dry Creek Valley—one of Sonoma County’s most bucolic and sleepy vineyard regions—is marked by a hot breeze followed by the intoxicating perfume of earth and fermenting grape skins. After weeks of playing hurry-up-and-wait for the optimum time to harvest, growers breathe an exhilarated sigh of relief and toast their ripest hour, comparing notes on cluster counts and juice yields. “During the harvest, the whole valley smells like a wine vat,” says Bieke Burwell, who grows Syrah grapes—not to mention 41

varieties of heirloom tomatoes—with her husband, Brian, on their 28-acre property west of Healdsburg. “The passion and devotion that people in the Wine Country have for bringing out the best of the land, whether it’s in grapes or tomatoes, really comes together during this busy time.”

After years of living in London, the Burwells’ move to Dry Creek Valley with their three sons five years ago was a homecoming of sorts. She grew up in Belgium, but he is a Santa Rosa native, and the terraced house they built into a hill eight miles from the Healdsburg town plaza is modern, classic and clean-lined—an urban sophisticate at home amidst the oaks and vines of the country. “*Understated* is a big word in the vocabulary

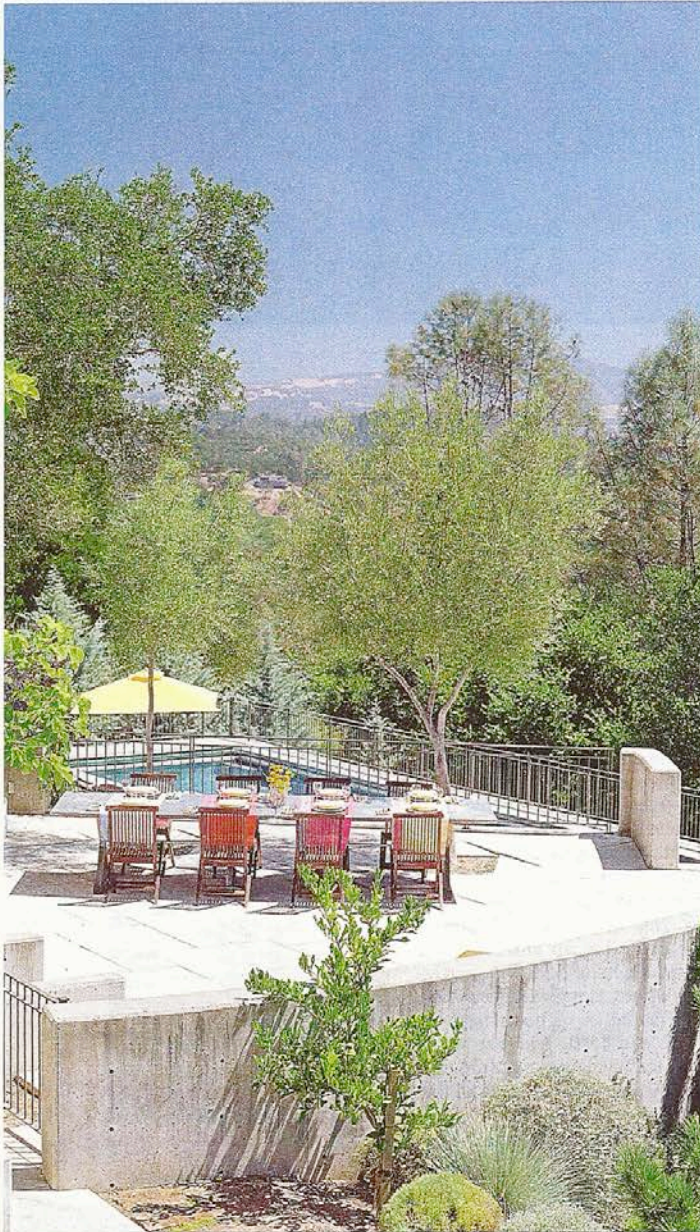
around here,” says Bieke. “I don’t like ‘overdone,’ whether it’s in architecture, furniture or food.” Indeed, when Bieke teaches her intensive mid-term course at Sonoma Academy on the 10 most important rules of entertaining, simplicity—from the menu to the table setting—tops the list.

The harvest season reaches its peak around September. During this time, one of Bieke’s favorite activities is preparing an alfresco meal for guests using the products of her own quarter-acre kitchen garden, where, along with tomatoes, she also grows rare varieties of beets, squash, corn, peppers, melons and basil. “I love to cook,” she says, “but it gives me particular pleasure this time of year, when I can share with friends all the produce and fresh foods we’ve grown from seed.”





LEFT: Ingvild Thommis helps keep water glasses filled for other lunch guests, including her husband, Marco Thommis, shown seated with Tatsuo Okaya and Virginia and Davis Bynum. BELOW: Bieke will use the zucchini blossoms, fresh from the garden, to garnish the soup. BOTTOM LEFT: The view from the lower dining terrace looks out over the pool and across Dry Creek Valley.



Planning today's menu with an ease that reflects her love of entertaining and comfort in the kitchen, Bieke is in her element. With her guests expected at noon, she is still finalizing the details of the meal at nine o'clock. An early stroll through the garden to check on what's ripe for the picking inspires her, and a trip to the farmers market and Downtown Bakery and Creamery in Healdsburg supplements what she doesn't have on hand. She relies on her innate sense of ingredients and seasoning more often than a recipe. For a starter, she decides on bruschetta made from her heirloom tomatoes and basil. Zucchini-blossom soup with fresh corn will follow, along with a main-course salad of grilled halibut, tomatoes and bacon tossed with new potatoes, green beans and lettuce. For dessert: a lemon-verbena *panna cotta* with lime zest and raspberry coulis, garnished with tight clusters of Champagne grapes.

"I try to keep the menu as simple and straightforward as possible, so I can leave the kitchen and spend time with my guests," Bieke says. Each dish can be served at room temperature, and, aside from grilling the fish, the prep work between courses is minimal. By ten o'clock, the fish is marinating, the dessert is chilling and the rest of the ingredients are laid out on the kitchen table. Two houseguests from Belgium, Marco and Ingvild Thommis, have joined Bieke at the prep island, offering to dice vegetables. "I never give up control of my kitchen when I cook, but I don't mind asking for a little help," says Bieke. "It adds

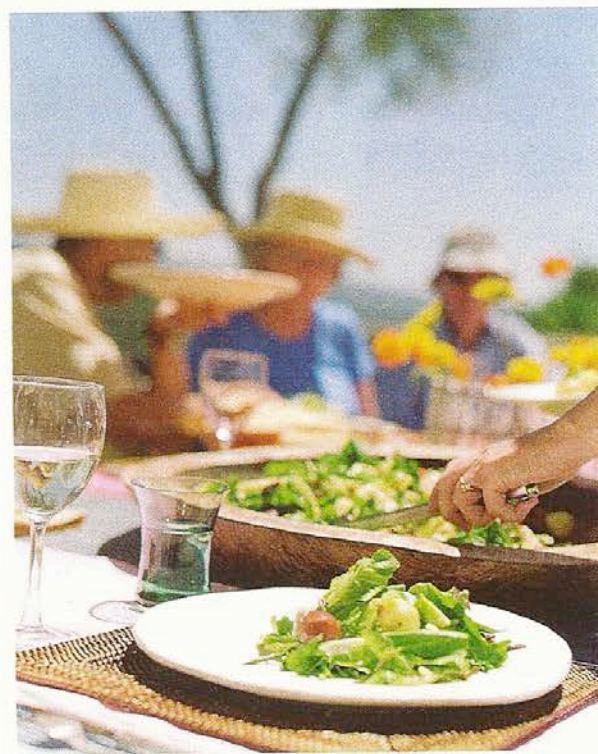
A close-up photograph of a person's hand garnishing a bowl of yellow soup. The hand is positioned over a bowl, sprinkling small, fresh ingredients (corn and zucchini blossoms) onto the surface of the soup. Several other similar bowls are visible on a dark wooden table, suggesting a dining setting. The lighting is warm and natural, highlighting the textures of the soup and the freshness of the garnishes.

Bieke tops the soup—served in rustic Italian bowls from The Gardener, her favorite local source—with fresh corn as well as the zucchini blossoms from her garden.

"I don't like 'overdone,' whether it's in architecture, furniture or food," says the hostess.



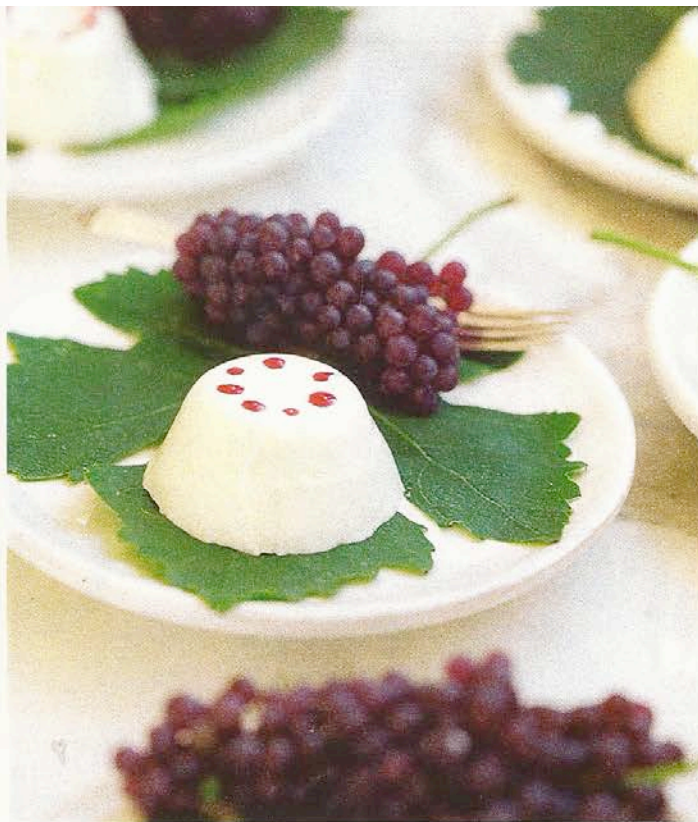
LEFT: Skewers of halibut, tomatoes and bacon are seasoned to taste with a final grinding of pepper while on the grill. BELOW: In keeping with her easygoing philosophy of entertaining, Bieke welcomes Marcó's help at the grill. RIGHT: After a quick toss, the salad is ready to serve. BOTTOM RIGHT: Planning a menu with courses that can be served at room temperature frees the hostess to visit with her guests.



to the sense of informality that I like, and I think it makes everyone feel more comfortable."

The weather is already heating up, with the temperature outside heading into the 80s, so Bieke chooses to serve lunch under the dappled shade of olive trees on the lower terrace, which overlooks the pool and the valley beyond. She sets a long zinc table for eight with the same stylish minimalism that gives her house its natural elegance. Linens in summery hues are folded and laid across the table to let the organic beauty of the zinc show through. The centerpiece, a simple vase holding single stems of orange and gold blooms, picks up the color in the handwoven napkins and colored-glass tumblers. Though Bieke travels widely (the thick olive-wood bowl in which she serves the salad is from a trip to Morocco), most of the tableware was found much closer to home: at the Healdsburg outpost of The Gardener, just down the road. (Bieke's friend Donna Tingle, whose family owns The Gardener, will be joining her for lunch.)

The remaining guests begin to arrive, bearing their own contributions. When locals bring a bottle of wine to a meal in the Wine Country, chances are it's made from their own grapes, and vintner Mick Unti, of Unti Vineyards on Dry Creek Road, shows up with two bottles of his 2004 Grenache Rosé. "When it's hot like this and you're grilling food outdoors, you want a wine that's chillable but also has the body and flavor to stand up to things like fresh herbs and tomatoes and char grilling," explains Unti. "White wines really fall short, but rosés can handle it in stride. That's why rosé accounts for 60 to



LEFT: Served atop grape leaves from the Burwells' Syrah vineyard, dessert is a refreshing lemon-verbena *panna cotta* with a garnish of Champagne grapes, which Ingvild (bottom left) enjoys on the terrace off the living room. BELOW: Beau, the family's German shorthaired pointer.

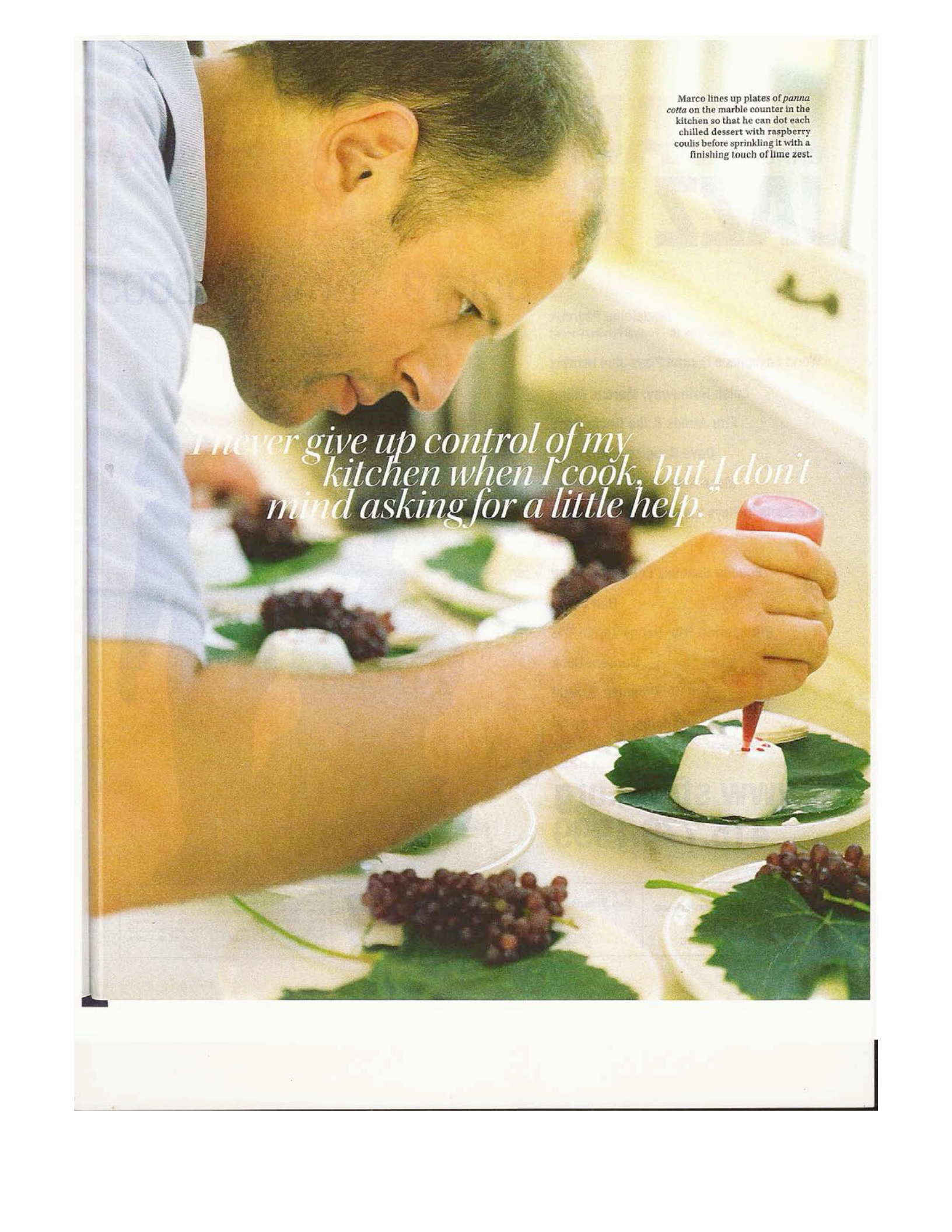


70 percent of what people drink in the south of France, where the climate is so similar to ours."

Tatsuo Okaya, who owns a vineyard across the valley and sells his Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to Benziger, brings a bottle of ruby-hued rosé from his TT label. Wine Country pioneer Davis Bynum—who started the first winery on Westside Road in the 1970s and remembers the days when his great-grandfather lived in the valley and prunes and walnuts were the crops of choice—arrives with his wife, Virginia, and his 2004 Cabernet Franc and Merlot. Bynum, who farms 28 acres of organically grown grapes, has been instrumental over the years in bringing sustainable growing methods to the Russian River and Dry Creek valleys.

"The wine culture, together with the interest in food and the care and guardianship people have for the land, makes this such a unique place," says Bieke as she chops zucchini blossoms to garnish the soup. "The connection with the seasons is practically held sacred here. I find it quite a special approach to living."

Bieke admits there's a downside to the bounty that the fertile soil in her garden has produced this year. "The zucchini," she sighs. "I freeze the tomatoes for sauces in the fall and winter, but I'm starting to hyperventilate thinking about what I'm going to do with all of the zucchini." She quickly regains her characteristic calm. As her guests leave, she hands each of them a paper bag filled with tomatoes, beets and that abundant summer squash, blossoms still stylishly attached. ■



Marco lines up plates of *panna cotta* on the marble counter in the kitchen so that he can dot each chilled dessert with raspberry coulis before sprinkling it with a finishing touch of lime zest.

"I never give up control of my kitchen when I cook, but I don't mind asking for a little help."