

48 SIMPLE SUMMER RECIPES

bon appétit

THE ULTIMATE CHERRY PIE

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*
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TO GRILL
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PASTA
1-2-3
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COCKTAILS
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BAKE ME!
I'M YOURS



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EVERY
WHICH WAY
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& BURRATA
SALAD
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THE HOTTEST FRIED CHICKEN

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+
CUCUMBER
LIME
ICE POPS
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L.A.'s coolest café

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cherry pie

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The best chef you've
never heard of—yet

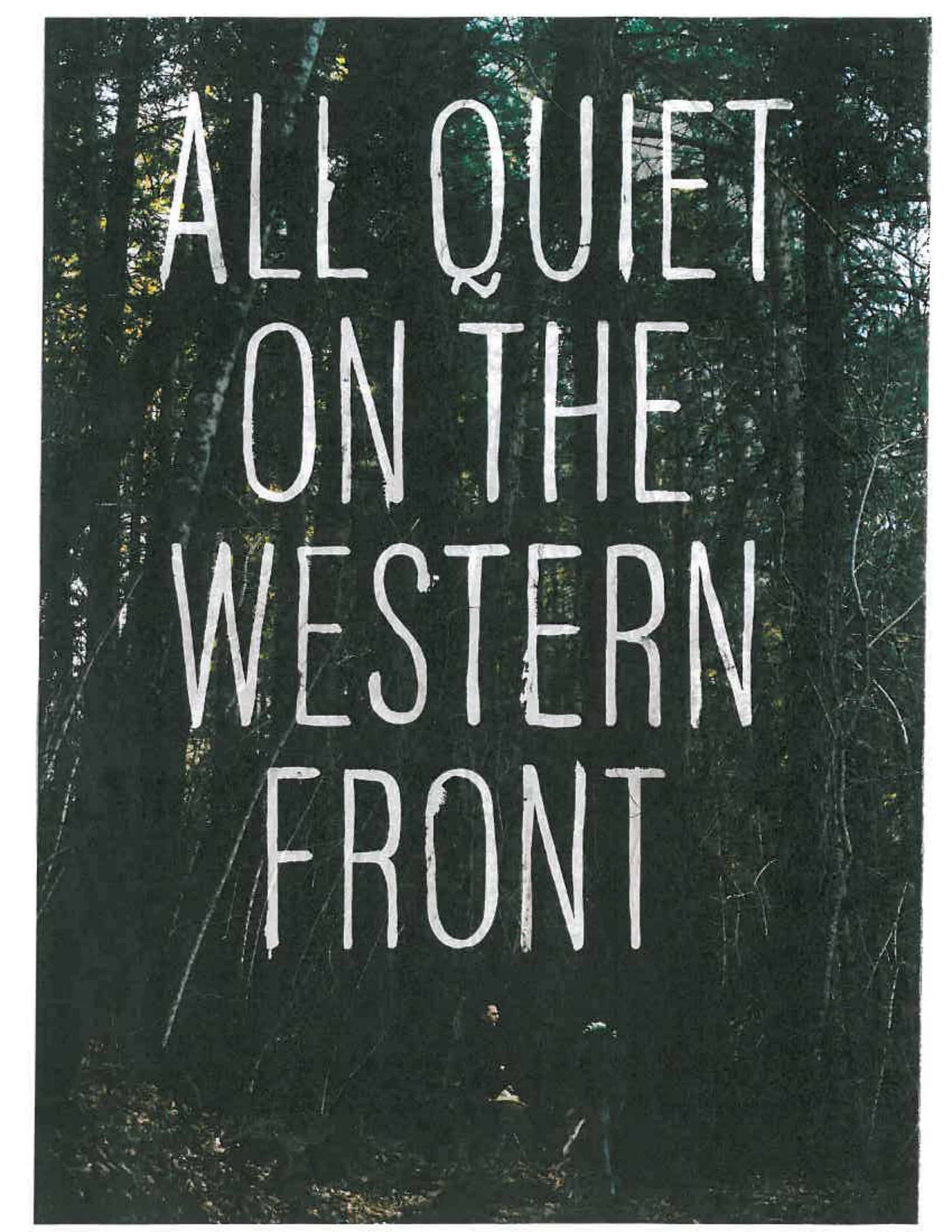
SUMMER

bon appétit

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Meadowood's
Christopher
Kostow visits
the restaurant's
culinary garden
with Charke

14



ALL QUIET
ON THE
WESTERN
FRONT



Rutabaga
baked in salt
and soil,
as presented
tableside.

OPPOSITE:
Larder manager
Cameron
Cole Rahtz and
Christopher
Kostow
(right) forage.

How do you
become one of
the youngest
chefs in America
to earn three
Michelin stars
while remaining
completely
under the radar?

Christopher
Kostow stealthily
masters the
Napa Valley

by CHRIS YING
photographs by
PEDEN + MUNK



twisting half-hour drive through hobby vineyards and vertiginous sheep pastures did nothing positive for my hangover. The 20 or so courses — plus beverage pairings — from dinner the previous night were soon threatening to make a reappearance in the front seat of chef Christopher Kostow's car. But early this morning was the only chance we were going to have to see a nearly forgotten wonder of California up close.

So I held it together, barely.

During the last few decades of the 19th century, Napa Soda Springs was a lavish compound for wealthy socialites, who would travel by ferry and train, then carriage, to the resort, arriving at the entrance of the towering Rotunda Hotel, which could be seen from all over the Valley. Visitors to the Springs would work up a sweat on the tennis and croquet lawns, refresh themselves from the naturally effervescent springs, repair to the dining room for "the best of everything to eat," dance, and then the men would retire to the Club House for cigars and whiskey. More than 120 years ago, the Napa Valley was already a top destination for rich people looking to part ways with their money.

Kostow, the cerebral 37-year-old chef of the Restaurant at Meadowood in St. Helena, is prone to obsessing over arcana, especially when it comes to the Napa Valley. He'd been trying for months to get a closer look at the ruins of the Soda Springs. (The resort fell into disrepair after the death of its benefactor and developer, Col. John P. Jackson, in 1900.) But at every turn, he'd met resistance: the nay-saying of the Napa County Historical Society, barbed-wire fencing, NO TRESPASSING signs, even, it's been said, armed patrols. Every now and then, he would drive to the edge of the 900-acre plot just to peer in, before scampering off lest someone spot him and, you know, possibly shoot him.

But finally, a barrage of e-mails and phone calls had worn down the property's current owner, who'd agreed to take him on a rare tour. As we walked the grounds, Kostow, with his thick wooden glasses and a Tintin-esque swoop in his hair, clambered over crumbling foundations

to get a closer look at the ruins, speculating excitedly about what the occupants of each room might have been doing a century ago. As I listened to him, I could begin to see why he had been so eager to get up here.

Napa Soda Springs, with its rich legacy and deep ties to this land, is a link to the past to which he can tie his restaurant.

"Once you learn about and experience something like the Soda Springs, a place like Meadowood starts to make a lot more sense," Kostow explained.

As we drove away, I asked him to estimate the value of the property. "I don't know," he said. "Priceless? It's 900 acres of mountainside land in Napa Valley." One sensed a feeling of inevitability that the land would eventually fall out of the control of preservationist souls like the current owners—and that, at some point, it will be paved over by more vineyards or a new resort. In the Napa Valley, wine is where the money and the focus are—often at the expense of everything else. "The Valley has a deep history but a thin veneer," Kostow explained. Hence his kinship with and interest in Napa Soda Springs and the era it represents: when great restaurants and great food were as much a part of the fabric of the Valley as wine. For their part, Kostow and his team are trying to break up the monoculture of the wine grape in a garden located less than a mile from the restaurant, on a parcel of land that he shares with a Montessori school. The garden yields a significant percentage of the herbs, greens, root vegetables, flowers, fruits, and, most recently, snails that the restaurant uses.

"We have an opportunity to have real *terroir* in a way that very few places do," he said. "And we're able to couple that

grasp of *terroir* with being located in a place that has affluence and that is very close to a major metropolitan area. That's like the best of all possible worlds."

THE RESTAURANT AT MEADOWOOD is part of a 250-acre resort of unspeakable loveliness. Amenities include tennis courts, croquet lawns, swimming pools, a health spa, a nine-hole golf course, hiking trails, a vintner's club.... It's silly to even list them, because Meadowood is one of those places where you can basically ask for anything and someone will make it happen. It's so adept at making you feel good, I wager you could drag an anarchist gutter punk from Haight-Ashbury to Meadowood, and—if they were sure no one was watching—they'd be singing "I Could Have Danced All Night" in no time.

The restaurant itself is one of ten in America to earn three stars from the Michelin Guide—and one of only three west of New York City. A third Michelin star is generally reserved for restaurants that pamper the holy bejesus out of their guests: Service is always flawless (the service at Meadowood, under the all-seeing watch of restaurant director Nathaniel Dorn, is easygoing while still deeply attuned to a guest's every possible need); the menus will push things in terms of decadence or grandiosity, but never at the expense of the diner's absolute comfort. Think of it as skydiving with an instructor—intoxicating, sure, but with a buddy strapped to your back to ensure the softest possible landing.

The global restaurants that are often noted for the most exhilarating cooking tend to be (continues on page 100)



Kostow crafts
a dish at the
Restaurant at
Meadowood.

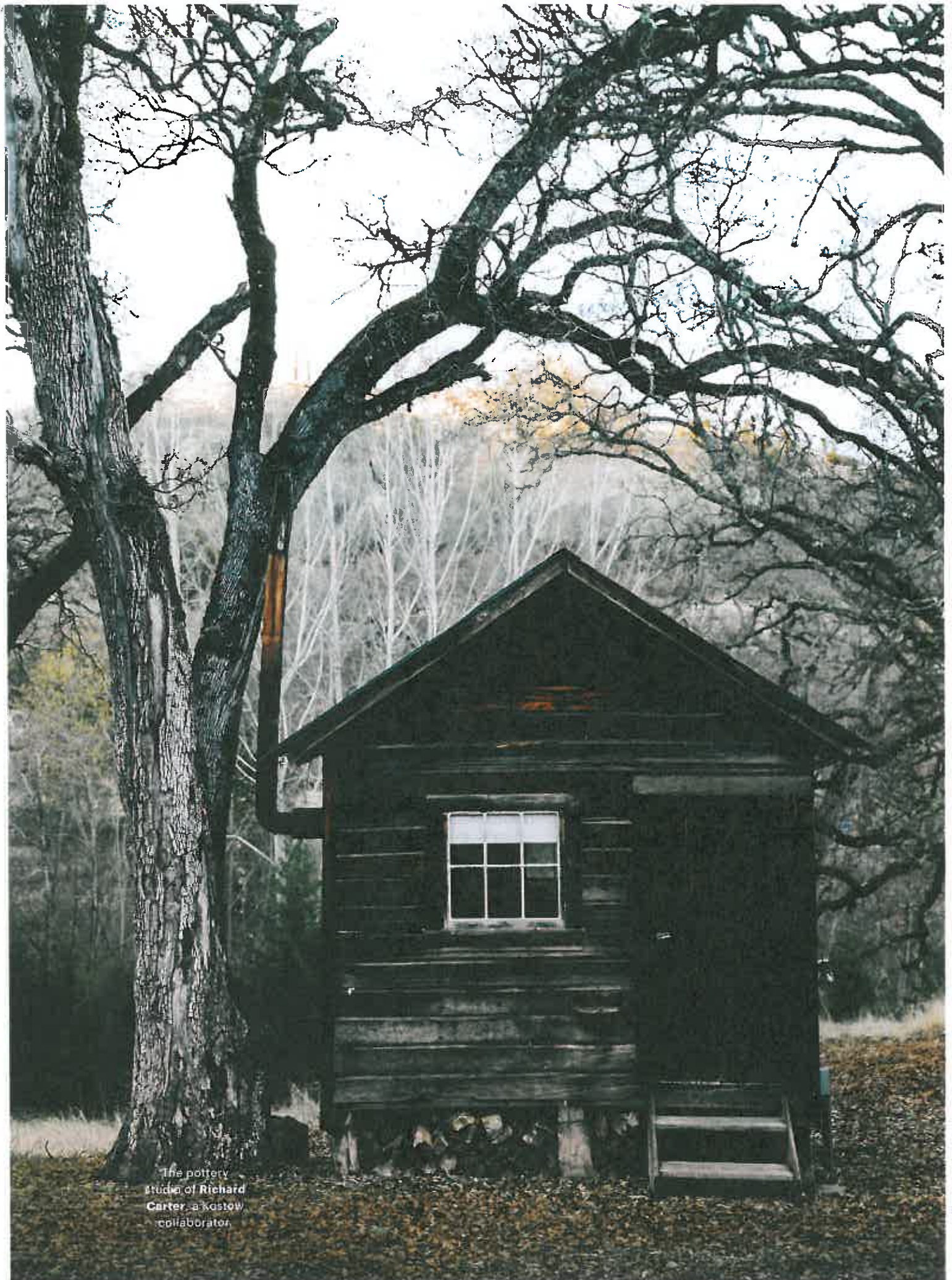
**MORE
MEADOWOOD**

To see Kostow's
Poussin Baked in
Bread from start
to finish, go to
[bonappetit.com
/meadowood](http://bonappetit.com/meadowood)

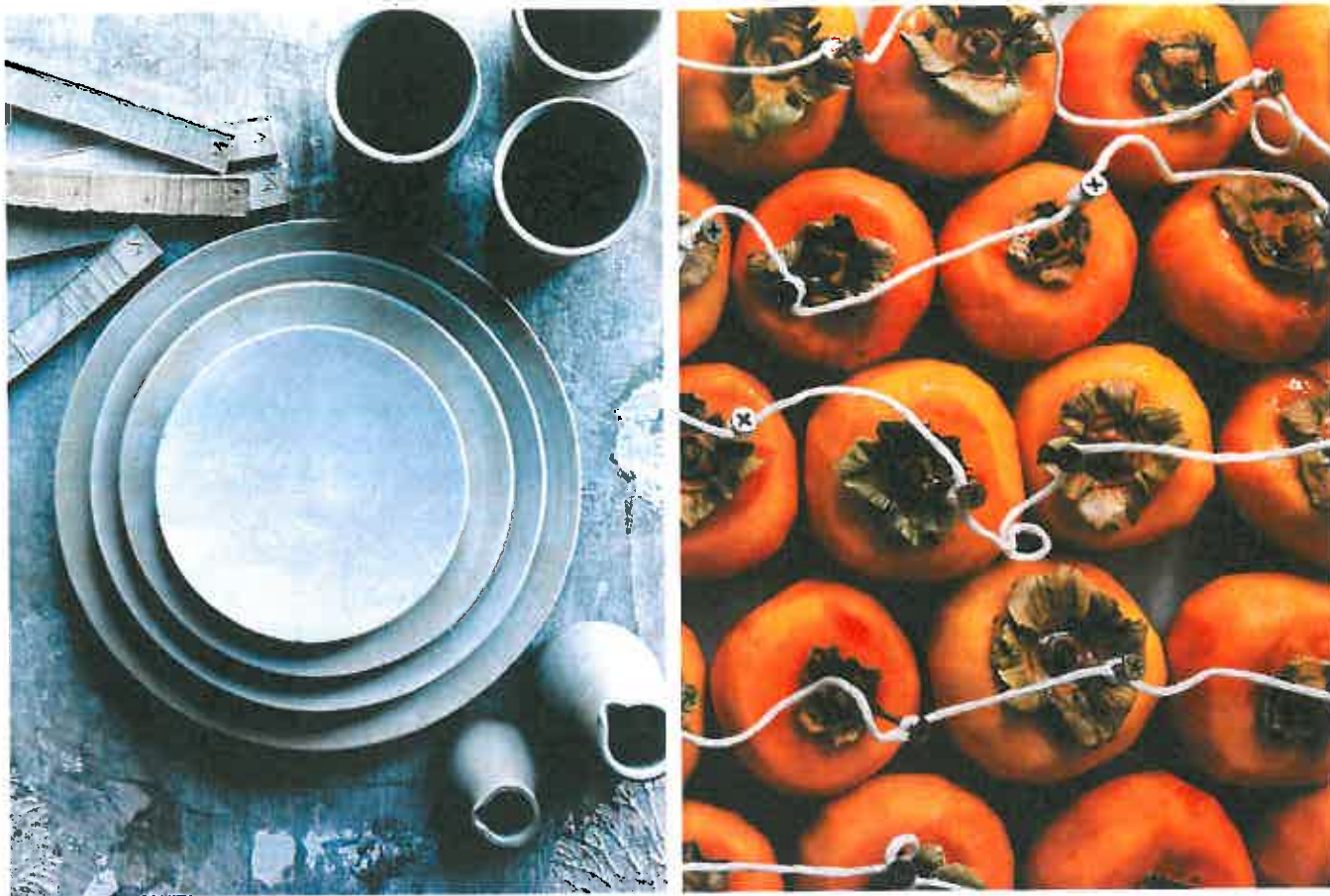
**Whipped
yogurt with
salted wild
plum, black
sesame,
and shiso**



KOSTOW DOWNPLAYS HIS USE OF LUXURY INGREDIENTS, LIKE HOW WHEN YOU'RE A REAL BALLER YOU DON'T NEED TO TELL ANYONE HOW MUCH YOU SPENT ON YOUR WATCH.



The pottery studio of Richard Carter, a Kostow collaborator.



Kostow's collaboration with potter **Richard Carter**, persimmons ready to be dried

(continued from page 96) two-star places. Noma in Copenhagen, though widely considered to be the home of the most exciting restaurant meal on earth, has famously been denied a third star for years. In a way, Kostow is chasing the same ghost as Noma's chef, René Redzepi. Their goal is to connect diners to the specific flavors of their respective regions and to build a reputation for great, progressive cooking where one had not previously existed.

Dinner at Meadowood is a decidedly less buttoned-up affair than at other three-stars. From the moment you walk through the thick wooden doors, you're struck with the sense of being in a home. Not your home, probably—more like the woodsy summerhouse of a Scandinavian art dealer—but a home nonetheless. The wooden walls are washed with a thin cement glaze that's warmed by firelight. Guests congregate in the Rotunda (a happy echo of Napa Soda Springs) and

adjoining bar area, and loosen up with a few carefully constructed, invariably interesting cocktails—think *herbes de Provence*—infused vermouth with bergamot tincture—before proceeding into the dining room.

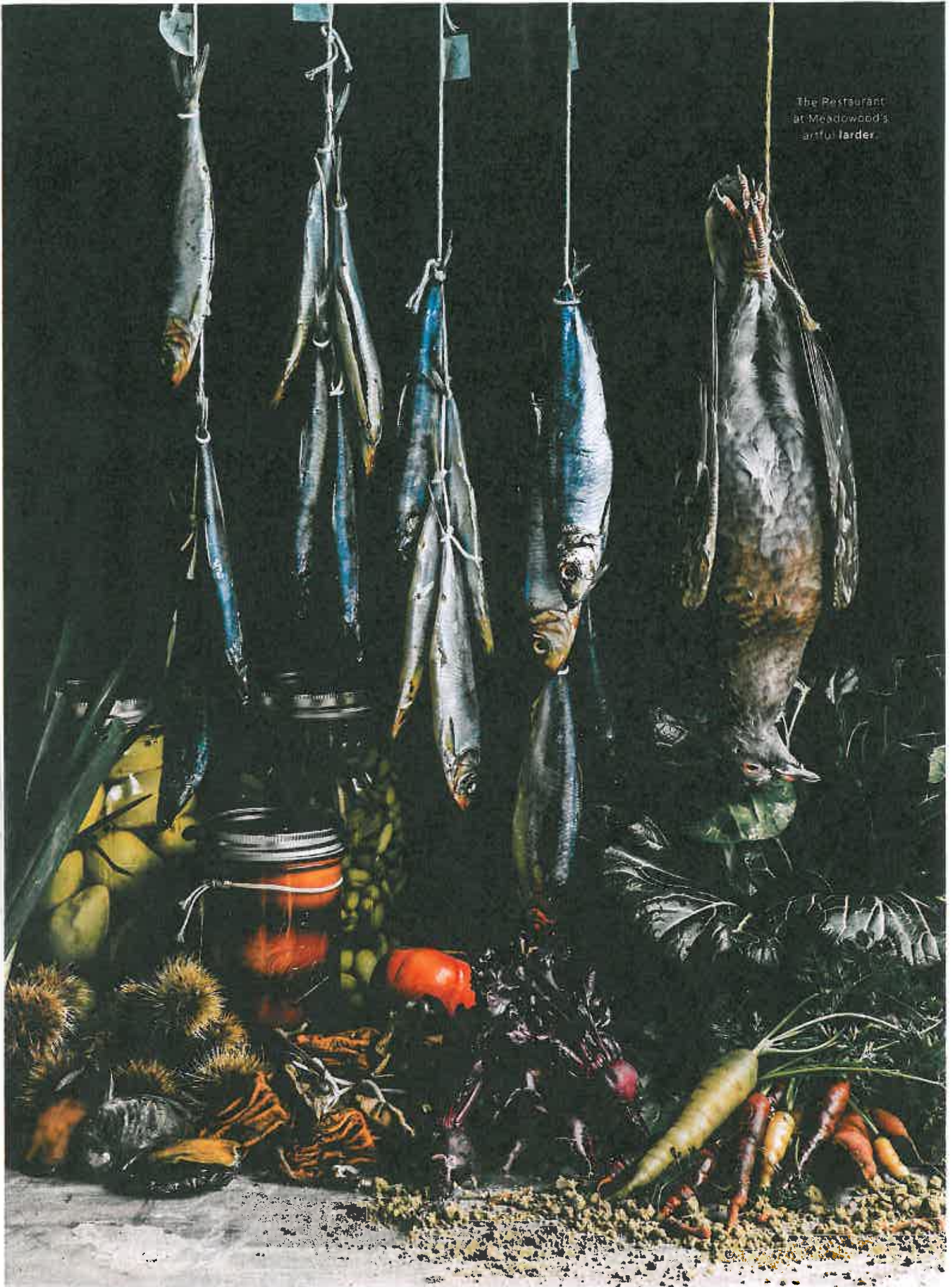
Once you're comfortably nestled into a leather chair, a series of canapés appear in quick succession and Kostow immediately begins to toy with your expectations of texture and temperature. A bite-size shell of black olive meringue filled with whipped olive oil catches you off guard with its firmness. One is programmed to be wary of anything hard when eating an olive, but the shell collapses in a satisfying crunch, and you're hit with a briny sweetness that I can only describe as olive toffee. Next, *fromage blanc* and cured lemon in a thin cracker shell that bursts like a Fruit Gushers candy. Diminutive baby vegetables (turnip, carrot, radish) lightly fermented overnight in Champagne yeast are by turns spicy and astringent. A kale chip,

puffy and ethereal like a Chinese shrimp cracker, is topped with a purée seasoned like Spanish chorizo and packs a meaty savoriness—without the meat.

The main body of the menu—a choice between eight to ten or 15 to 20 courses, for \$225 and \$500 respectively—progresses in related pairs or trios, grouped like movements of a symphony. The freshness of perfectly cooked asparagus pervades a bowl of brined whelk, then highlights a dish of surf clam, smoked goat's butter, and sprouted seeds and grains. The sweet, chewy abductor muscle of the surf clam shows up in the next course, topped with walnuts and walnut oil.

"What's important to me as a diner is rhythm and speed and cadence," Kostow explains. "I don't like meals where I'm sitting there for hours and hours and hours, and there's 25 minutes between each course. The sort of things that you can do with dishes in twos or threes keeps the diner much more engaged."

The Restaurant
at Meadowood's
careful larder.





The rutabaga
from page 95,
carved and
served with
aerated maple,
pecan, and
white truffle.

Punctuating these explorations into the multiple uses of single ingredients are moments of unfettered luxury—this is a grand restaurant, after all. Raw spiny-tail lobster is wrapped in *lardo*, topped with caviar, and set in a spoonful of rich pork stock. A glistening, mahogany Parker House roll stands by for juice-soaking duty. Here, and throughout the menu, Kostow downplays his use of luxury ingredients, like how when you're a real baller you don't need to tell anyone how much you spent on your watch. The caviar is hidden under tiny succulent leaves, seasoning rather than gilding the lobster.

"There needs to be a perception of value, but I think our diners are extremely sophisticated," he says. "I want them to experience luxury, but it's more our definition of luxury." Kostow describes it as "concern and care. I don't think anyone leaves feeling like they weren't incredibly cared for."

In a moment between courses during my last dinner there, the couple next to me, seeing that I was being treated with familiarity and what they perceived to be extra-special kindness, leaned over and asked, "Are you a regular?"

In my notebook, I have a note that reads: *Ha! I thought they were regulars.*

I'LL ADMIT THAT I NEVER THOUGHT to visit Meadowood until a few months ago. When it landed its third Michelin star in 2011, I imagine I let out a puzzled: "What the hell is Meadowood?"

"We are a restaurant in a town of 5,000 people," Kostow explains. "We're not in a major city. We're expensive. We're not easy to find. But what we do is very timely."

It all raises the question: If Meadowood were in New York or San Francisco or Chicago, would Kostow be a celebrity by now? His career has been a rocket screaming through the upper echelons of fine dining, picking up accolades and stars with startling frequency. Kostow studied philosophy at Hamilton College in New York State before cooking in San Diego, Paris, and Montpellier, France; he was a sous chef under Daniel Humm while he was running the best kitchen in San Francisco, at Campton Place, and then moved on to his first head chef position, at Chez TJ in Mountain View, an hour south of San Francisco. Kostow quickly earned a Michelin star at Chez TJ—then

a second—before arriving at Meadowood in 2009 and, just two years later, becoming the fourth youngest chef ever to be awarded three stars.

Though he accomplished most of this on the DL, Kostow and Meadowood are now primed to storm the scene. In 2013, the James Beard Foundation named him the best chef in the West. He has a line of ceramics due out this summer and a cookbook in the fall. Yet in our conversations, I sense a distinct anxiety at the prospect of being launched into the spotlight.

"I don't need to be famous," he says. "I think the idea of chefs being famous is a joke. Your most famous chef is less famous than your least famous person on *Dancing with the Stars*."

I discuss all of this with him during another drive on the serpentine dirt roads of the Valley, this time to meet his friend and new business partner, the sculptor and ceramics artist Richard Carter. Carter's studio is a breathtaking home-stead from the 1870s, tucked in a small unincorporated stretch of North Napa called Pope Valley. The place gives the impression of a hippie commune that's been injected with the industrious energy of a tech start-up. In a converted prune-drying shed, primitive-looking kilns yield rustic plates, bowls, and pitchers that will ultimately form the basis of the Carter/Kostow line of ceramics.

The prototypes are thick, with slow curves, like something primordial that has been barely tamed into elegance. The clay is speckled with iron that burns into random rust-brown flecks in the glaze. The inspiration for the serving bowl shape is an old tractor part. The look is definitely of this place, if not necessarily this time.

I ask Kostow if he'll use the plates at Meadowood, and he hesitates before saying, "Eventually, yes." When I press a little further, Kostow reveals a reluctance to share what he's building out here in the woods. It seems like it's related to the feeling of anxiety he expressed to me about publicizing Napa Soda Springs. He'd like for more people to know about it, to understand that Meadowood is part of an illustrious lineage of fantastical resorts, but he also voiced numerous reservations about my bringing it up in this article. At the end of the day, he's a champion of the art, the people, the stories, and the food of the Napa Valley because he loves it here. He's wary of what sharing these things means: people coveting it, imitating it, taking it, ruining it.

"I THINK THE IDEA OF CHEFS BEING FAMOUS IS A JOKE," SAYS KOSTOW. "YOUR MOST FAMOUS CHEF IS LESS FAMOUS THAN YOUR LEAST FAMOUS PERSON ON *DANCING WITH THE STARS*."

And so, Kostow is planting his roots deep into the Napa soil, making sure he'll be around to see his work through. "I plan to be here for the long run," he says. "Who else is going to be the steward of this place and these products?" He speaks dreamily about another restaurant, something big and bustling and simple, spearheaded by his longest-tenured lieutenants—it's the typical dream of a fine-dining chef who works under constant scrutiny. It's also a distraction from the conflict at the core of what he does these days. Meadowood has quietly grown into one of the finest restaurants you've probably never heard of. Kostow knows it's for the best that he get out and bang the drum for the restaurant, but part of him wants to keep this place and these lovely things to himself, if only for a moment more. ■

CHRIS YING is a former line cook, onetime publisher of *McSweeney's Books*, and now the editor in chief of *Lucky Peach* magazine.