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Cuisine what i can't live without

Ben Ford's Soul Satisfaction

Chef Ben Ford picks the playlist each night at Ford's Filling Station, his downtown Culver City, California, gastropub. Lively enough for the likes of Indiana Jones (also known as Ben's dad, Harrison, star of this summer's movie blockbuster), the Filling Station rocks with good tunes, good times, and good eats. Dressy if you want to be and casual if you don't, Ford's is warmed by wood-beamed ceilings, brick walls, and loads of polished wood—an atmosphere that aims to satisfy the soul. "It's a metaphor," Ford says. "The Filling Station nurtures all the things that fill you up, like music, books that you love lining the walls, things that evoke great memories." Not to mention to-die-for fish and chips.

Ford studied culinary pursuits in Burgundy, France, before he graduated from the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco. He's worked his way through the ranks at many of southern California's hottest eateries, but his earliest inspiration was cooking at home with his mom, Mary. "I worked with her from the time I was 5," says Ford. "She did great roasts and other braised dishes and perfectly cooked vegetables from our garden." Now struggling with multiple sclerosis, she derives pleasure from watching her son work. "Illness has taken some of her energy," Ford says, "but she's still a wonderful cook."

What are your top five favorite cookbooks or cooking technique books?

- *Cooking by Hand by Paul Bertolli* — my chef from Chez Panisse on Italian cooking.
- *The Whole Beast: Nose to Tail Eating* by Fergus Henderson — Nose to tail, he started it all.
- **The Elements of Taste** by Gray Kunz and Peter Kaminsky — a great cookbook for understanding how to cook.
- *Dessert Cuisine* by Oriol Balaguer — a great cookbook that breaks down dishes into components that you can use to create new dishes (not for the amateur).
- *Les Halles Cookbook* by Anthony Bourdain — a good bistro cookbook.

What kitchen appliance do you use most and what for?

A mortar and pestle are the consummate tools for cooking by hand, preserving the flavor and the integrity of ingredients. Pulverizing something in a blender or food processor aids the depletion of flavor by dispersing it. I can't really explain it, but when you manipulate something by hand rather than mechanically, the results are more flavorful. It really is the difference between what is good and what is great.

What kitchen gadget couldn't you live without?

Cast iron pans. They have a consistent flat bottom and are very versatile. And my Cryovac to infuse and marinate meats and preserve freshness for just about everything. It's a great asset for traveling with special ingredients that are needed for out-of-town events.

If you had to limit your spice rack to five spices, which would they be and why?

- Espelette pepper — the best of the smoked chili powders, used heavily in Basque cooking.
- Curry powder — I use this spice not only to make curries but also to add depth to butter sauces like a hollandaise.
- Kosher salt — not all kosher salts are alike.
- Cumin — This spice is so universal and since my training is rooted in the Iberian Peninsula, I couldn't live without it.
- Tellicherry black pepper — the best of the best. It has a sweet and more rounded flavor than most pepper.

What single food or dish couldn't you live without?

That is a tough one. I live in probably the best city when it comes to the amount of great cuisines or culinary influences. I want to say Lamb Saag from India's Grill or Seared Toro from Kiriko. But the truth is, it's still probably matzo ball soup and a Dr. Brown's Cream Soda.

What dish do you get requests for from your loved ones?

Nothing too fancy or over the top. People just want good food. My style emphasizes flavor over everything, so when it comes time for me to cook, I am known for my feasts off the backyard wood grill.

Visit Ford's Filling Station at www.fordsfillingstation.net.

— MD