

STYLE & TRAVEL

Cook Luxury Foods Without Missing a Morsel

TRICKS OF
THE TRADE:

Chef
Christopher Kostow

By SARAH ROSE

Early in his career, chef Christopher Kostow left a lobe of foie gras on the stove so long it melted away to nothing but goose fat. It is the fear of every home cook using a luxury ingredient for the first time: that he or she will make a mistake with an expensive delicacy, such as foie gras, truffles or caviar.

For Mr. Kostow, the lesson of that early kitchen disaster is still present, though he recently won the James Beard Award for his Michelin-starred Napa Valley restaurant, the Restaurant at Meadowood Inn. (California banned the sale of foie gras in 2012.)

"Restaurants do such weird things to these products, but at home, regardless of the expense, the simplest preparation is best," says Mr. Kostow.

Home cooks serving haute ingredients for the first time should stick to basic skills and pair exotic luxury items with familiar, even rustic foods.

Couple a delicacy with something easily recognized—pasta or toast, Mr. Kostow says. He suggests serving foie gras with store-bought jam. A dollop of caviar and sour cream suits tiny pancakes, which can be dressed up by adding grated vegetables to the batter. Shaved white truffles will turn plain buttered noodles with Parmesan cheese into a party food.

To get the most bang for your gourmet buck, Mr. Kostow suggests serving a cold terrine of foie gras. Present it with grilled country bread, stir it in a sauce at the last minute to thicken it and add richness, or put it on a simply seared steak.

Understanding the economics of portions will lower the stress of working with lavish items. The best way to know in advance if that \$100 goose liver feeds 10 people or if a \$300 tin of caviar will be enough for 25 guests is to ask a knowledgeable purveyor. Mr. Kostow errs on the side of being too generous since "there is nothing more disappointing than being served something luxurious and not



Christopher Kostow, in the kitchen of the Restaurant at Meadowood Inn, says simple is best when preparing pricey food.



Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal (4); Corbis (below middle)



Top, Mr. Kostow grates dried uni, or sea urchin, above, as a topping. Pair luxury foods such as foie gras, left, with recognizable items such as grilled bread, or caviar, far left, with sour cream.

getting enough of it."

Luxury foods are often delicate, so it's important to understand their quirks. Mr. Kostow suggests seeking specialty grocers who can tell you that washing a truffle will turn it to mush or that caviar served on ice can go back in the fridge and keep for weeks.

Repurposing prized ingredients will make the celebration last for

months to come. Foie gras can be frozen and shaved over salads. Lobster or escargot can be frozen and chopped to top pasta or used as filling in ravioli, while truffles can be worked into butter for topping a steak or potato.

Knowing your audience is key to making the most out of a precious item. Guests might not always under-

stand they are being treated to something special. Older family members or children might not be familiar with a food such as uni, the roe of sea urchins, and it would likely be out of place at an office party, Mr. Kostow says. (He dries uni and grates it as a topping. Home chefs could use bottarga, a salted, cured fish roe, in a similar way.)

It is easy for the home cook to get too fussy with a star ingredient and ruin a night with a recipe he or she can't pull off. Mr. Kostow stresses that guests at a dinner party aren't restaurant diners and will forgive you if the lobster is a little overcooked.

"People will like it if it tastes amazing," he says. "It doesn't need more pomp and circumstance."

How You Know Him

- ◆ Chef at the Restaurant at Meadowood in St. Helena, Calif.
- ◆ At 36, he won the 2013 James Beard award for Best Chef: West.
- ◆ Received his first Michelin star before age 30.
- ◆ One of two California chefs to hold the highest three-star rating from Michelin, along with Thomas Keller at the French Laundry.