



Left to right: The stylishly rustic interior at Mediterraneo; Vazquez's dishes pay homage to the abundance of fresh local produce

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

If Alberto Vazquez's food is even half as good as it sounds, then guests at the Westlake Village Inn's Mediterraneo restaurant in California are in for a treat. Just don't expect to find alligator on the menu, says **JACKIE SCULLY**



How has your background influenced your development as a chef?

My passion for cooking and love of feeding people comes from my parents. My mom is a great home cook who taught me how wonderful it is to make people smile with food. My dad is a retired chef who always looked dramatic in his white toque, shirt and trousers and red apron. I used to sit watching him in his open kitchen through the lunch rush and just knew it was what I wanted to do.

How would you describe your style of cooking?

Fresh seasonal European cuisine. The restaurant serves up European dishes but with local ingredients and influences. There is such an over-abundance of fresh produce in California. It is a mecca for food here.

What attracted you to the Westlake Village Inn?

The opportunity to provide the community with a cuisine that has a Mediterranean influence (ie French, Italian, Greek,

Spanish and Moroccan). The owner, John Notter, shares a passion for Mediterranean cuisine and is such a well-travelled man that he always brings back ideas and keeps us on the right track. It's my kind of place.

What would you order from your restaurant?

The grilled calamari or the brick chicken. We also have a great pasta dish called 'Olivia's orecchiette'. It is named after my daughter who ate three adult portions of the dish in one sitting at the age of three and a half.

Any old favourites?

I inherited the 'Florentine art', which is an almond tulip shell filled with white chocolate mousse and loads of wild berries. If I took it off the menu, I'd cause a riot.

What would you say is the best thing about your food?

It's fresh, healthy and simple – although simple food is often the hardest to get right.

What's the most unusual request you've ever had?

We're in California, so

nothing surprises me any more. Thanks to the health-conscious movie stars, people are used to modifying menus and changing entire dishes. I am pretty relaxed about it now.

How would your colleagues in the kitchen describe you?

Passionate and energetic.

You run a Culinary Arts Series to help people develop their kitchen skills. Do you think it is possible to teach anyone to cook?

If you cook with your heart, you can cook. Anyone can throw food in a pot and put it on the fire, but if there's no love, it won't make sense.

What's the one thing you can't leave California without tasting?

Local-grown produce from the farmers' market.

What's your favourite food?

I really like Italian, Latino and Thai food. If I had one last request, it would be for a good plate of pasta.

What did you last learn?

That in cooking, history

repeats itself. At the moment, certain cuts of meat are coming back. Pig's feet, sweetbreads and other old-school delicacies are now back on the menu. As a chef you never stop learning.

What should no chef be without?

A stereotypical answer would be 'a knife'. But I'd say a love for cooking is your number one tool. If you don't love the art, get out of the kitchen.

What is the most unusual thing you have ever tasted?

Alligator. I was living in Florida at the time and was told I couldn't leave without trying it. So I did. It was tough and I'd only eat it again if I was starving.

Who'd you like to cook for?

Chefs like Mario Batali, Jamie Oliver and Jean-Georges Vongerichten, plus a couple of the Red Hot Chili Peppers – I might even throw in a famous actor.

Any tips for budding chefs?

Have everything in place before you start cooking.

Is there anything you really can't or won't cook?

I'd cook it all. I'm not afraid of anything – you kill it, I grill it. I don't seem to get on with pastry cooking, though. You need cold and slow hands.

Who cooks at home?

Wherever I am, I'm always in the kitchen. In the summer I grill, in the winter I braise and I do a lot in Dutch ovens.

If you weren't a chef you'd...

Work in the music business or be a wildlife explorer, being chased around Africa by lions.

How would you like to be remembered?

As the guy who brought love and passion to his dishes. The proof is always in the pudding. ■

Sample Alberto's passion for yourself at the Mediterraneo restaurant. With its lakeside views and varied menu, it is a slice of Europe in the US. Visit www.summithotels.com for more information