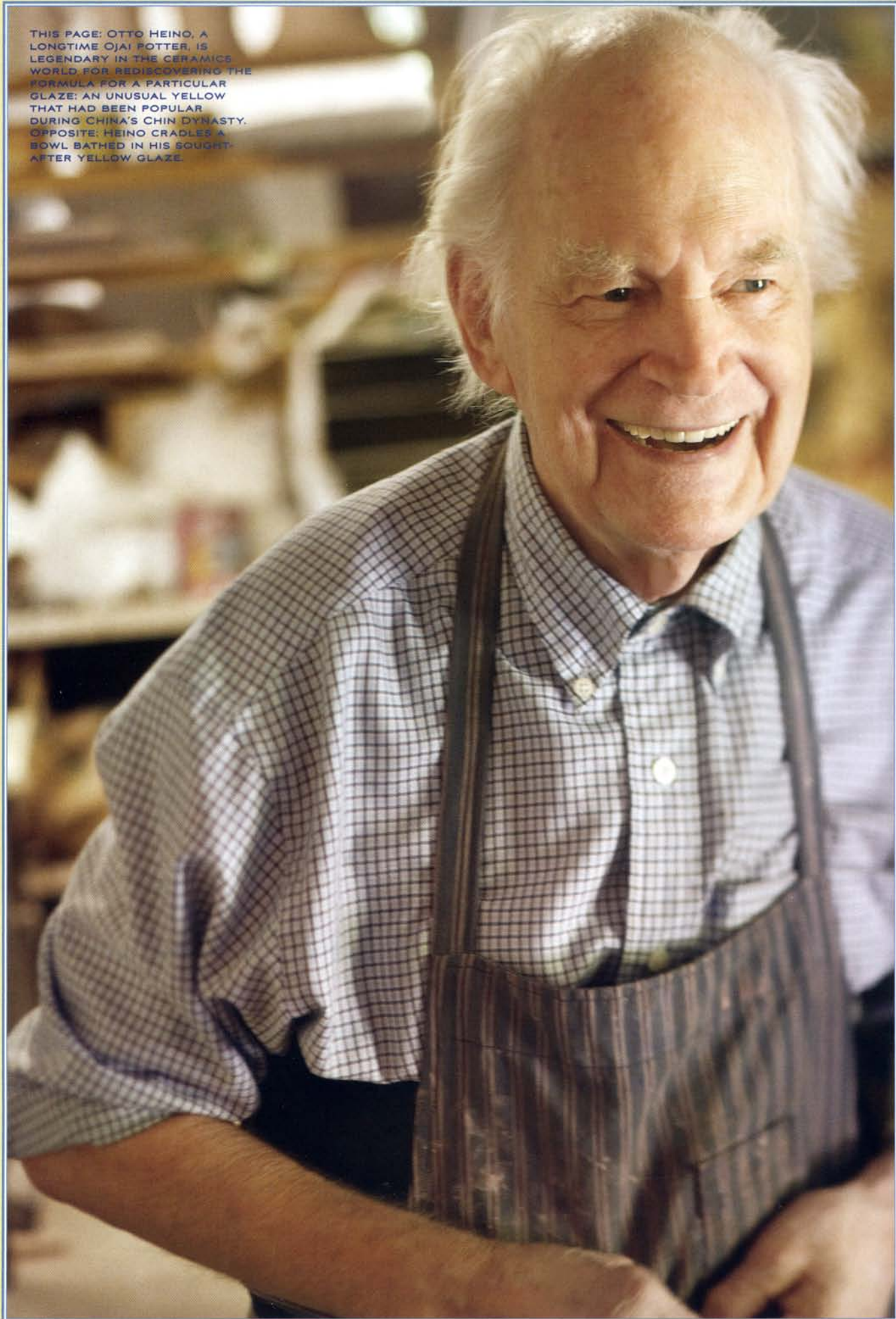
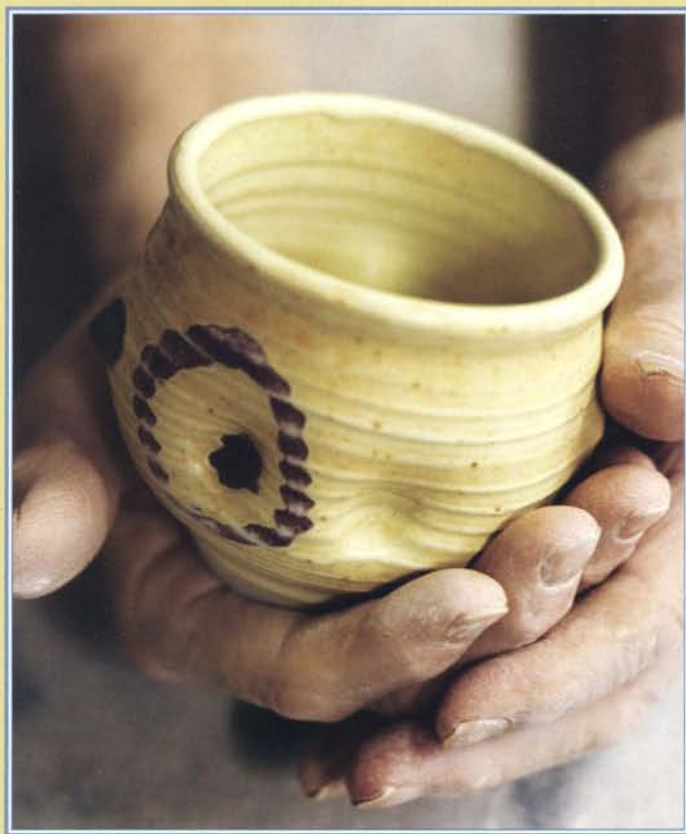


THIS PAGE: OTTO HEINO, A  
LONGTIME OJAI POTTER, IS  
LEGENDARY IN THE CERAMICS  
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FORMULA FOR A PARTICULAR  
GLAZE: AN UNUSUAL YELLOW  
THAT HAD BEEN POPULAR  
DURING CHINA'S CHIN DYNASTY.  
OPPOSITE: HEINO CRADLES A  
BOWL BATHED IN HIS SOUGHT-  
AFTER YELLOW GLAZE.





THE MAN WITH THE

# *Golden Hands*

ACTUALLY THEY'RE YELLOW HANDS—AND THEY'RE WORTH MILLIONS. HERE'S WHY.

BY ANTHONY HEAD PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS

**T**here are legends all around us in this world. I'm not speaking of tall tales whispered in the woods, but real living legends moving the mountains of their chosen pursuits. Today's legends, though, tend to also lead everyday lives. They're stuck in traffic with the rest of us. They shop at our stores. They blend in. One of these legends lives in Ojai. **HIS NAME IS OTTO.**

Otto Heino is a true mythic figure in the pottery world. He's absolutely masterful at refining shapes from clay that display both delicateness and strength. But let's be honest: "legend" and "potter" don't normally go together—and "millionaire" and "potter" are never uttered in the same breath. But remember Otto is a legend. In fact, he was once offered a billion dollars from the Chinese just for what he knows about the color yellow.

"I went to a conference in Japan in 1980 and this Chinese monk wanted Americans and Europeans to work on this certain color. They said it was lost," Otto explains while seated in his gallery surrounded by his colorful works. He says the monk was looking for a high-temperature yellow glaze that was popular during China's Chin Dynasty (from A.D. 265 to 420). It was the color of a Buddhist monk's robe, but the recipe for making it had been lost to civilization for hundreds of years, and that intrigued Otto. "I found an old book in a library that said the original Chinese artist had burned the formula because he didn't want it to be put onto cheap pots. So my wife and I decided to work on it."

Vivika, his wife and partner, was every bit as talented as Otto. Every bit as legendary. In fact, the two of them always signed their works "Vivika + Otto" regardless of who actually created it. Together they dedicated one day a week to work specifically on this yellow glaze. They were in no hurry. After all, it had been lost for so long. Then one day in 1995, just a few months after Vivika passed away, Otto got it. It took 15 years and 2 months, but he had rediscovered yellow. "I knew it right away. I opened a bottle of champagne. I celebrated all day. I called China," Otto says.

When word got out, the ceramics world descended on Ojai. They came in droves. Japan and other countries sent official delegations to scrutinize the color and the ability to fire the glaze at high temperatures. Once they confirmed that the secret of this precious color had indeed revealed itself to Otto, they spent a lot of money obtaining his pottery created with this newly uncovered treasure.

Even though this yellow was *just that* important a color, and Otto was *just that* good of a potter, you might not believe someone could actually make *that* much money throwing clay. The FBI didn't. And after Otto deposited a huge cashier's check, the Feds showed up at his place at dawn. "They came at seven in the morning, three with rifles, two with pistols," Otto recalls. "They were dumping everything all around. They tore up the bed. They took everything out of the chest of drawers and dumped it on the floor. It took me three days to clean it all up. I thought all along the guy was going to shoot me. They said no potter could make that much money. They accused me of being in the drug business because I was on the phone talking about 'shipping yellow.' I kept telling them I could explain everything. They were mad when they left. They haven't bothered me since, though."

**"I KNEW IT RIGHT AWAY. I OPENED A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE. I CELEBRATED ALL DAY. I CALLED CHINA," OTTO SAYS.**

For a legend, Otto has very nice qualities. He greets people warmly at his studio, and seems genuinely touched by those who make the pilgrimage to see him deep in the Ojai wilderness. He has a rock-solid handshake, but his skin looks and feels at least 20 years younger than his 93 years of age. He has the congenial politeness of a farm boy.

The son of Finnish immigrants, Otto was raised in East Hampton, Connecticut, on a dairy farm, and he likes to tell people that his hands are free of rheumatism and arthritis because he milked so many cows as a kid. But Otto didn't want to be a farmer.

When he was 17 he went into the trucking business hauling milk, lumber, and granite, until World War II broke out. He went to war for five and a half years with the Air Force. As a gunner on a B-17 bomber, he flew 40 missions over Germany and came home with the Bronze and Silver Stars.

After the war, America and Europe were experiencing something of an avant-garde period for ceramics, and in 1949 Otto used money from the GI Bill to study painting, drawing, and pottery. That's also when he met Vivika, who was his first real teacher in the art world. "My wife wanted to teach all the time. She threw more delicately than I could. She was a wonderful artist," he says.

They married and together moved to Southern California to teach at USC and the Chouinard School of Art. Both excelled at their crafts, and Otto's and Vivika's pottery began being exhibited internationally. In the 1970s they moved to Ojai because of the area's low humidity. "It has a nice breeze blowing. Our semi-desert weather helps dry the clay," Otto says.

It's clear, however, that the beautiful landscapes also inspired him. In 1978 when Pablo Picasso sent out a request to the ceramics world, Otto answered. "Picasso wanted to know who was the best potter in the world. He invited 50 countries to participate. Ojai is called 'the nest,' so I made a 24-inch base, put two birds on it. It won the grand prize. So I said to myself that I guess I'm on the right track. It's in Picasso's museum. Picasso was a good guy."

Otto's renown as a master potter began to spread even wider. Because of his strength, he not only manipulated clay, he mastered it. He controlled the contours and developed traditional and utilitarian styles that became popular enough that he could actually make a living as a potter.

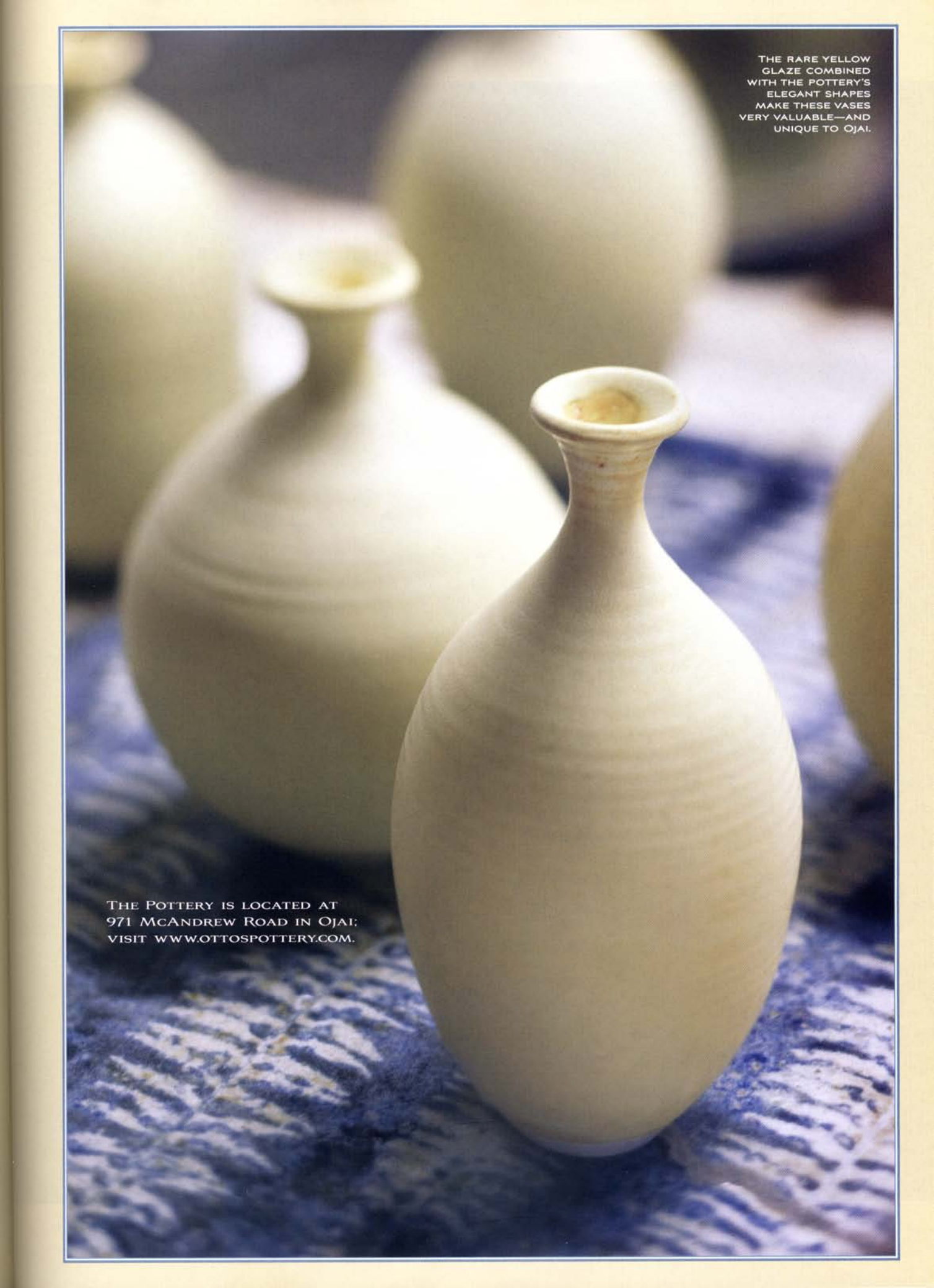
And then came the yellow. And then everything changed. But his work ethic remains just as strong (he still gets up at 4 a.m. every day to begin work) and his principles are still firmly in place (he turned down China's billion-dollar offer for the glaze formula).

"I'm making a good living. They call me the richest potter in the world. I laugh about it. Of course, I like these \$600,000 cashier's checks coming in," Otto says with a laugh. He then picks up a delicate looking yellow pot, fat and round in the middle but very narrow at the opening, like a tear drop. He tells me how much it costs—it's much more than the price of a very nice new car—and those deep ocean-blue eyes of his look at me as if to say: *Why shouldn't I be a millionaire, I work hard.* And at the same time they say, *Can you believe how much fun I'm having making a living?*

As for that secret yellow glaze formula, it's committed to Otto's memory. "I won't sell it to anyone," he says. "I won't pass it on to anyone else either. When I die then it goes with me. It isn't the money. It's the ethics. I don't want anyone to put this yellow glaze on bad pots. It is the most important part of my legacy."

He is willing to part with one secret: how he maintains his youthful-looking skin. "For 20 years I've been applying my own mud mask," he says. "Just make a porcelain slip, which is the liquid porcelain before it has been cast, then apply the slurry to your face. As it dries, it pulls the skin together. Keep it on for about 20 minutes, then just wipe it all off."

And there you go. It's may not be the recipe for eternal riches, but all things considered, the secret to smooth skin at 93—revealed by a legend—ain't too bad. ■

A collection of white ceramic vases with a yellow glaze on their rims, arranged on a blue patterned surface. The vases are of various sizes and shapes, with a bulbous body and a narrow neck. The background is softly blurred, showing more vases. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the pottery and the intricate pattern of the blue fabric.

THE RARE YELLOW  
GLAZE COMBINED  
WITH THE POTTERY'S  
ELEGANT SHAPES  
MAKE THESE VASES  
VERY VALUABLE—AND  
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# THE INTUITIVE FORAGER

KERRY CLASBY HAS A TRANSCENDENT TALENT FOR FINDING THE BEST PRODUCE, MAKING HER INDISPENSABLE TO A NUMBER OF CALIFORNIA'S TOP CHEFS.

**EARLY ONE MORNING** at her warehouse in Westlake Village, Kerry Clasby pops a Tinkerbell pepper into my mouth. This shiny red bell pepper has a diameter no bigger than a silver dollar, and its taste is a sparkling mix of sweetness and tang. I ask where I might find such a treasure, and Clasby responds: "If I told you I'd have to kill you." She's *almost* serious.

BY ANTHONY HEAD PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS



CLASBY'S MORNINGS ARE SPENT COORDINATING DELIVERIES WITH HER ASSISTANT, DRAGAN IVANOVIC.

#### CLASBY CERTAINLY HAS HER REASONS FOR SECRECY.

This Westlake Village resident is a true MVP for chefs up and down the state, and the envy of any farmers' market devotee. Her business is called Fresh Off the Farm and her business card lists her as the Intuitive Forager. Clasby scours the markets and farms of California to find such exotic specimens as these Tinkerbells, as well as the best baby fennel, rich *cipollini* onions, and sun-ripened raisins that have dried on the vine to develop far more intense flavors than conventional raisins.

This is the kind of specialty produce that jumps off the plate because of the unusual sizes and vigorous flavors. Clasby has the know-how and the connections to find and deliver these items straight to the kitchens of chefs like James Boyce of Studio at the Montage Resort & Spa in Laguna Beach, and Robert Grenner at Bellavino Wine Bar & Restaurant in Westlake Village. So addicted are professional cooks to Clasby's ingredients that when Sean Hardy, chef of The Belvedere at The Peninsula Beverly Hills, traveled to New York to cook at the Beard House, he had Clasby find and ship micro-morels and pepperberries to him just for the occasion.

With silver hair framing a sun-kissed face, Clasby exudes an earthy, natural appeal that is enhanced by her sky blue eyes and the dirt under her fingernails. Spend some time foraging with her and a few personality traits reveal themselves clearly: She is confident, energetic, and extremely knowledgeable.

And she's in-demand. As her assistant and protégé, Dragan Ivanovic, loads up the refrigerated truck for the day's deliveries,

Clasby answers numerous calls from eager chefs while tossing clipboards and other office-on-the-go tools into a massive Chevy Suburban. The vehicle is about as big as a 747's fuselage, and it's packed with flats of fruits and vegetables, baskets, gardening gloves, golf clubs, sprouted sunflower seeds, a bottle of honey, and wet wipes. (The wipes are perhaps the most important item here because, as I will find out, when you spend a day with Clasby your fingers are going to get sticky.)

"Break open the cherries. Break open the nectarines. I've got apricots we should try, too," Clasby says as we pull north onto the 101. "For me, this season is the best. The cherries, the figs—I'll be eating juicy fruits for months."

She's been called a "taster" and a "personal shopper" but that doesn't quite do justice to her vocation. The job is much more complicated and time-consuming than just tasting. Along with working up extensive dossiers on each chef with whom she works, Clasby also does a lot of menu consulting to ensure that the freshest, in-season items are included. She chose the title of "intuitive forager" because a lot of what she does comes from an internal compass.

"I have an intuitive sense about what my chefs like, and I view my success as a testament to how I follow that intuition," Clasby explains. "I go to farmers' markets and sometimes feel compelled to buy something. Like the one time I just had to buy rose geranium. No one had asked me to do that, but when I saw chef Michael Mina later that day, he asked me if I had any rose geranium. That happens to me all the time."

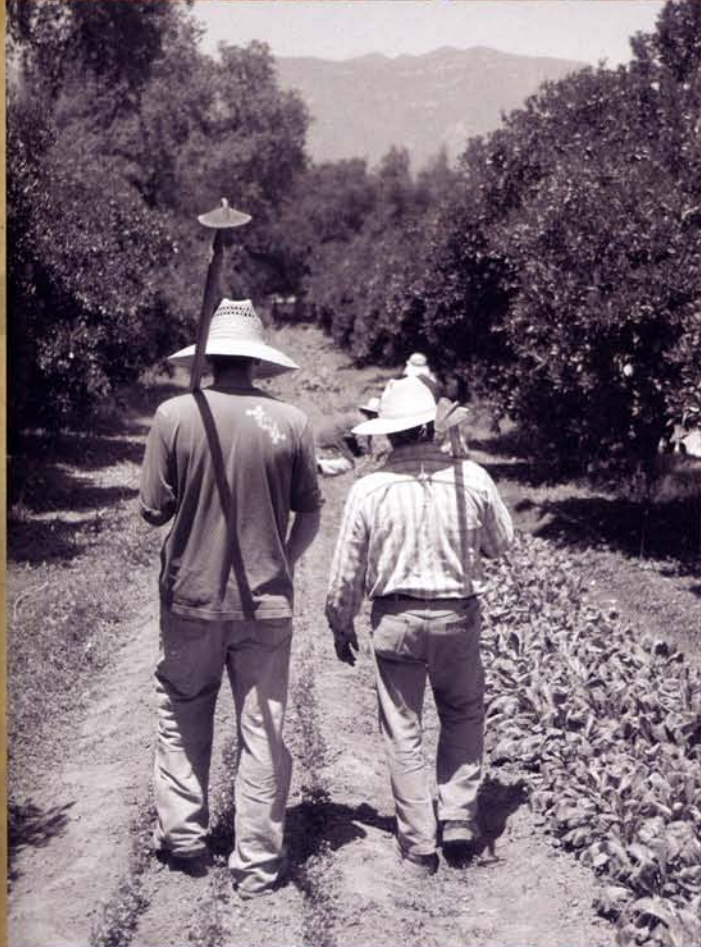
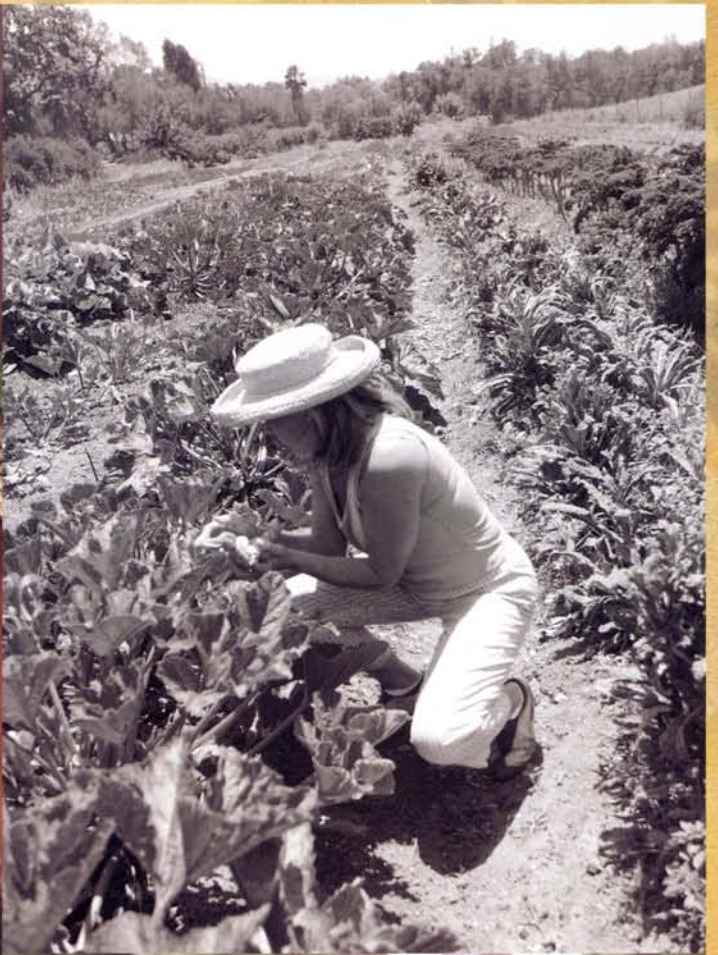
Our first stop of the day is McGrath Family Farms, 45 acres of organic fields in Camarillo. "Phil McGrath is a major reason that I'm in this business. He understood what my vision was, and he's one of the best growers anywhere—baby vegetables, spring onions, specialty lettuces, lima beans, strawberries—and he really embraces the whole seed-to-market philosophy. He wants his produce to be enjoyed at its freshest," Clasby says.

We park between the fields and an old school house, which serves as an office. Inside, Phil McGrath greets Clasby with warmth and familiarity. They could be related—each with matching suntanned faces, youthful eyes, and whitening hair. Although he's busy in a meeting, he takes the time to praise Clasby: "Kerry is one of my best supporters, and all she asks in return is to get my best stuff. So I comply happily."

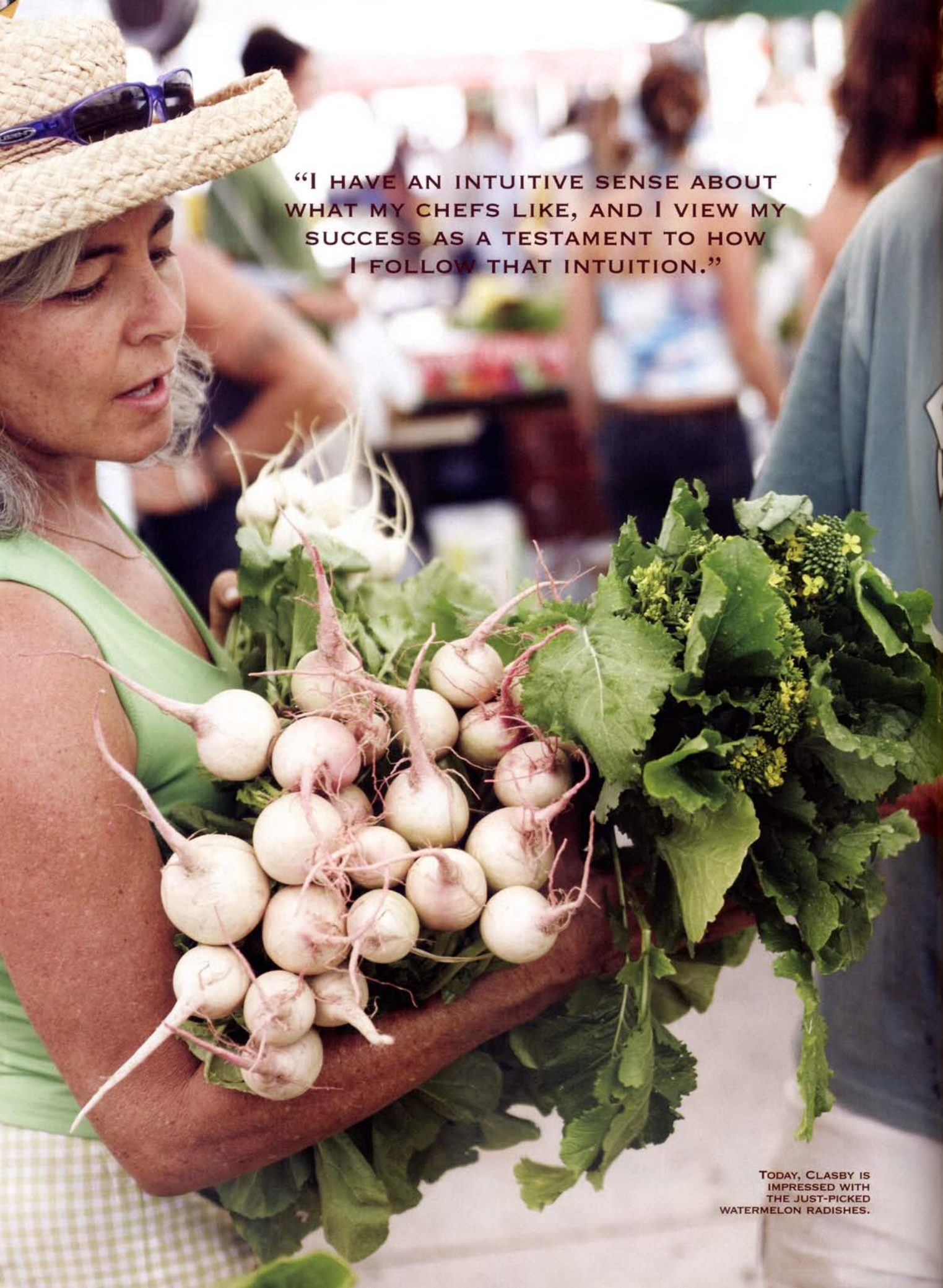
Clasby strolls out to check what's coming up in the fields and is immediately drawn to the organic flowers. She throws some into her basket as well. Being a forager means picking what feels right, even if it's not always edible.

The next destination is Coleman Family Farm in Carpinteria, and the huge Chevy barrels along a winding road that takes us just minutes from the highway and miles and miles away from stress. Because of her reputation and her clientele, Clasby is granted access to places that even trips to a farmers' market can't satisfy. Many of her stops each day are at private farms that aren't open to the public. She parlays such access into a spectacular array of exclusive and exotic items that don't stay in her possession for long.

"I've got *burrata* [a rich, creamy mozzarella cheese] locally produced from water buffalo," she says in between calls from

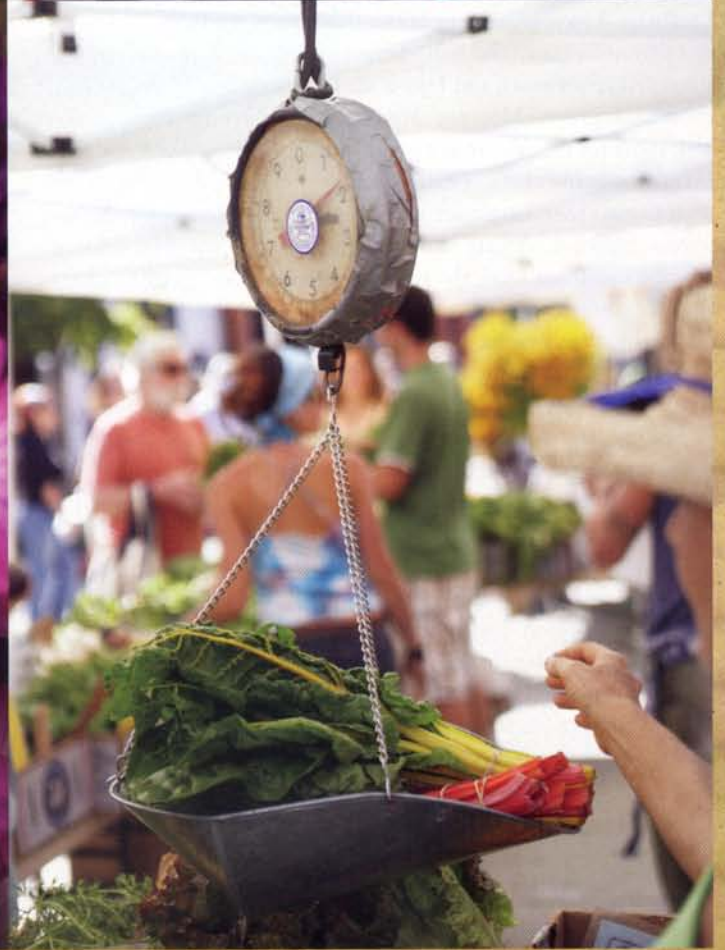






**“I HAVE AN INTUITIVE SENSE ABOUT  
WHAT MY CHEFS LIKE, AND I VIEW MY  
SUCCESS AS A TESTAMENT TO HOW  
I FOLLOW THAT INTUITION.”**

TODAY, CLASBY IS  
IMPRESSED WITH  
THE JUST-PICKED  
WATERMELON RADISHES.





THERE'S JUST ENOUGH TIME TO GET THE GOODS BACK TO THE CHEFS. NEXT PAGE: COLORFUL AND FLAVORFUL WATERMELON RADISHES FROM OJAI.

her son something changed inside her. She started to meditate and discovered something deeper. Something intuitive.

Upon moving to Southern California, Clasby found tremendous joy in raising heirloom tomatoes in her backyard to sell at farmers' markets. That led to mushroom hunting on a friend's property in northern Santa Barbara County. "I found so many chanterelles that I went down to Orange County and showed a bunch of chefs and they grabbed them all up. I called that business *Mademoiselle Mushroom*," Clasby says. As she made more connections with both chefs and farmers, her business expanded. She learned what chefs like, and in turn, they learned to be surprised at what she could find.

As our day's journey continues, the conversations inside the Chevy turn from the past to astrology, from the Grateful Dead to the rising cost of gas, which naturally leans into Clasby's profits. "It's frustrating with this big SUV, but the reason I have it is because I have a special air-conditioning unit that a mechanic had to tinker with," she explains. "When I've got it all loaded up with produce, I'm cranking the A/C and I have to wear my hat and gloves. It's that cold in here."

Clasby spends an extraordinary amount of time on the road, including driving to San Francisco once a week to deliver to several Bay Area chefs. On her return trips, she'll comb Central California for produce to bring back south. There is a lot of solitude in the car, but she doesn't mind. She builds a little flex-time into the schedule. "I do my buying and then maybe I'll go biking, or running, or hiking. I like to boogie board, and I'm starting to learn how to surf," she says.

It's late afternoon when we pull into the Santa Barbara Farmers' Market. Clasby dons a straw hat and emerges from the Suburban like a happy warrior. She's in her element here. Shoppers smile at one another under a brilliant blue sky, and from under the tents sellers beam at their pyramids of strawberries, globe artichokes, and green beans, but look up to hail her—"Hi, Kerry!"—as she passes by.

"Check out these," Clasby says reaching for wild spinach; "Look at that," she says pointing to piles of fresh berries. "Taste this," she urges while introducing me to the spicy tingle of onion sprouts. She then leans in to divulge a little shopping secret: "When you ask a farmer what's fresh, you don't follow his words, you follow his eyes—they'll dart to what's best." And that's just what happens when she comes upon the tent of Robert "BD" Dautch, a vegetable grower from Ojai. He packs up bunches of vibrant watermelon radishes for her.

As the day wears on, the calls start coming in more frequently as chefs check in to finalize their menus for the night. Ivanovic calls several times, too, making sure Clasby is filling orders and double-checking his own work with her. But the frenzy doesn't get to her. She remains calm.

"I rarely have to tell Dragan what to do anymore," she says with great satisfaction while packing up the Chevy. "He's learning everything and appreciating the depth of what I know. He's developing his own compass." And with that, Clasby must put an end to this postcard-perfect day and head back to her warehouse—leaving me licking my sticky fingers. ■

Ivanovic. "I have an organic butter that's French cultured with *fleur de sel* from Brittany and hand-ladled into molds. It's produced from grass-fed Jersey cows, and I get it all. Right now my chefs are asking for muscat grapes. Most are saved for wine, but a few of my growers save some for me. You're not going to find these on too many tables except for at my chefs' restaurants."

It doesn't take long after word gets out that she's got something special before it all gets snatched up. When I joke that it sounds like she's scalping food, she replies, "Thanks a lot" with another of those almost-serious looks. Luckily we've arrived at the farm.

Clasby spends entire days in sanctuaries like this, where the fruit hangs low from the branches until gravity slowly pulls it loose to drop with a soft thud onto the clover below. Over there the leaves of celeriac are just now popping up through the soil, while over there the sunflowers stretch to touch the sky. You can sit on a patch of earth and count a dozen different species of insects scurrying around. Other than the wind in the trees, the only noise is the cough of a tractor starting up in the next field.

It's a world away from Clasby's East Coast upbringing. She grew up in Boston during the era of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Kennedys. Her father was a CPA with a master's in English; her mother was a schoolteacher. "Growing up we always had a French foreign exchange student staying with us. I also got to spend time in France. I saw how the French cooked—simple—and I loved it," she says.

After attending Boston College as a political science major, she thought of going to law school. But she gravitated instead toward education and taught seventh-grade algebra. Somehow, Clasby recalls, she transitioned into working for IBM, but when she had

