



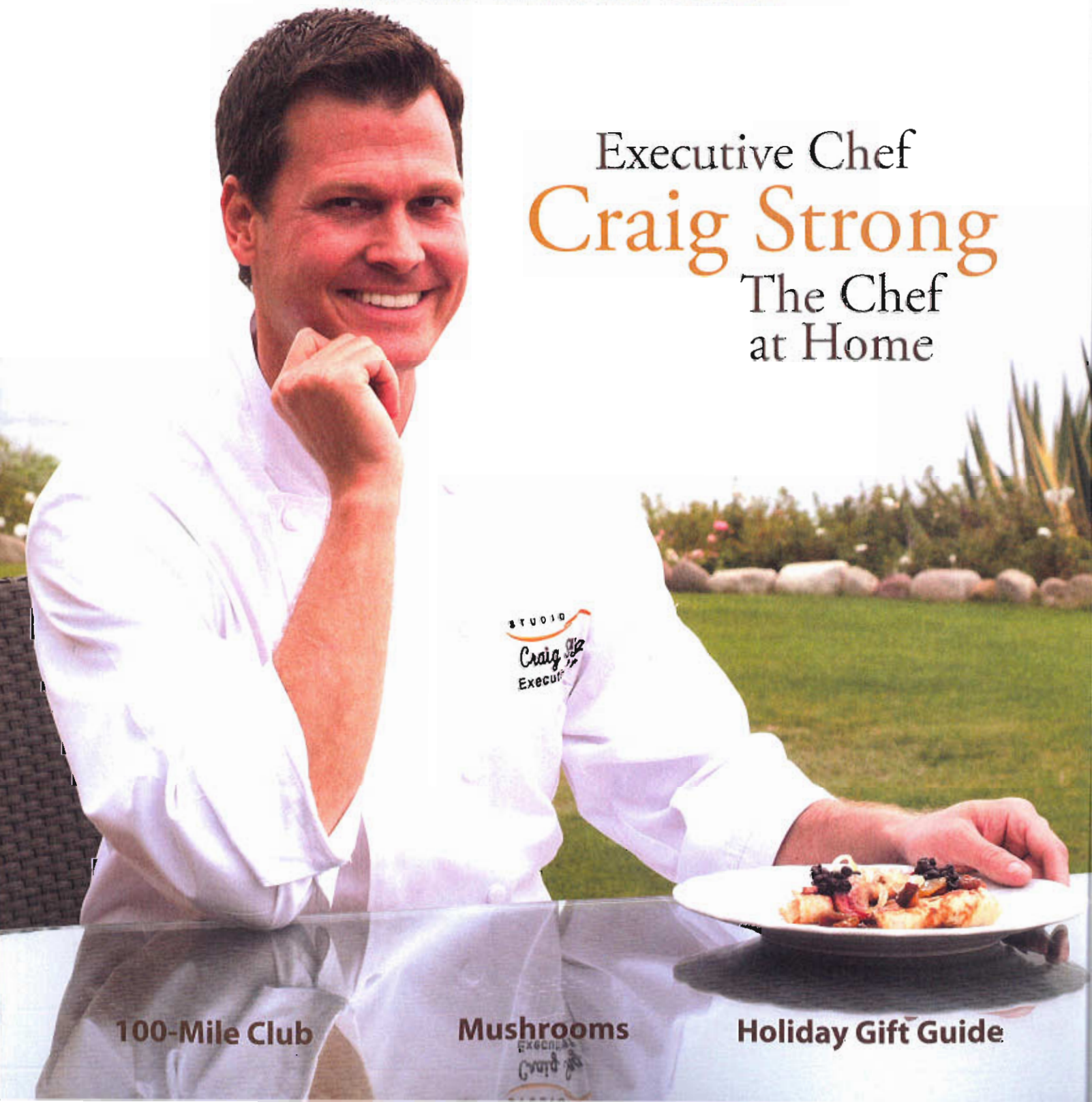
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Executive Chef **Craig Strong** The Chef at Home



STUDIO
Craig Strong
Executive Chef

100-Mile Club

Mushrooms

Holiday Gift Guide

STRONG INPUT

STORY BY
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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When Studio at Montage Resort's Executive Chef, Craig Strong, texts me his vegetable order late at night, I sometimes add a teaser ... "What would you make with 'such and such' vegetable?" He always responds with "Why do you ask?" He knows what's coming next and, that next morning, it was a stalk of fresh fennel and a jar of our new Fennel Honeybush Tea. As a small, local farmer in San Clemente, I couldn't resist planting another crop of fennel last April, which now means a nice supply of anise scented fennel seed blossoms for tea blending, updating an Old World spice rack, and the secret ingredient in homemade sweet Italian sausage.

Chef Strong had other ideas. He always does.

"I can see a fennel tea scented pastry creme in a parfait or crepe and maybe a fennel infused salmon cure," says Chef Strong. One can almost see the wheels turning



Executive Chef
Craig Strong in the
organic garden outside
Studio restaurant at the
Montage Resort.



Executive Chef Strong in one of the private dining rooms at Studio.



glory, his “field of dreams” and it was the perfect setting to talk fennel. Most people don’t realize that it’s related to the anise plant and has its own “licorice” flavoring so its natural, spicy sweetness goes well with savory dishes like pork sausage, citrus salads and fruits compotes. Even the stalks of fennel may be dried and used as fuel when grilling fish, as it provides a nice aromatic smoke.

So the challenge was on . . . fresh fennel and loose leaf dried fennel blended with South African Honeybush Tea. I took the easy-idea route and thought of a special sun tea concoction. Chef Strong went right over the top with glazing the bulbs and brewing the tea.

He started with two fennel infused desserts created in Studio’s kitchen. Both were spectacular in presentation and taste with a soft hint of the fennel’s sweetness captured fresh right from our fields.

Experiencing firsthand the morning harvest of a plant and tasting it the same afternoon through the culinary creative process of a master chef make a farmer proud. I like to think the recent “local food” movement is starting to appreciate this Old World process. “Farm to table” has now become “field to kitchen” thanks to a growing number of Orange County chefs and none more passionately than Chef Strong.

“I grew up the youngest of six kids and my role in the family chores was keeping up our backyard garden in San Diego. Growing fresh vegetables as a youngster was a major inspiration for my culinary yearning and career path. You can’t duplicate fresh ingredients and pairing seasonal items is the fun part,” he says.

Chef Strong’s path has taken him to Atlanta, Barcelona, Spain and Pasadena, but he feels right at home discovering locally grown produce and creating unique combinations for his

Studio at Montage Resort following.

For the second part of our fennel delivery, Chef Strong invited

in his head as the passion meter zooms to a 10. It’s one thing to watch a tiny seed grow into something so versatile as a fennel plant, but to watch the idea hatch in a top-notch chef is another. And while we’re talking “top notch,” Studio at Montage Resort was just named one of the top 10 hotel restaurants in the world by Villeroy & Boch. That’s “creme de la creme” in the culinary world and it’s probably no coincidence Chef Strong conjured up a pastry item for our same day fennel cuttings.

Sitting in the middle of the Studio at Montage Resort herb garden, located outside the restaurant’s front door, Strong was in his

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our team up to his cottage residence high above Laguna Beach for a step-by-step of curing fresh salmon. After a tour of his wife, Lissa's, garden, we gathered around his granite topped home kitchen to watch another creative use of our fennel in the form of infused tea as a three-day marinade.

According to Strong, "curing methods prolonged the shelf life of all types of food gathering since the beginning of man. It's a natural process using salt and herb coatings that 'cooks' or cures the meat or fish, preserving its innate taste and nutrition."

His recipe and process for this salmon/tea-marinated entree is profoundly simple, with lemon slices and hand-picked fennel fronds bringing the anise-seed cousin full circle.

Once he wrapped and tied the fresh salmon in cheesecloth, he reversed the process with one he had prepared three days earlier. Taking a very sharp knife, he carefully sliced the salmon on the bias and layered it on a steamed baby potato and fresh romaine lettuce salad. It was stunning visually as much as it was a crowning salute to the perfect fennel dish. No wonder the Romanelite served it centuries ago.

Chef Strong not only lives his fresh ingredient mantra at the "office," but also at his home in Laguna Beach. Lissa, his wife, maintains their hillside garden using all natural growing methods and the two of them like to end their day picking and tasting their seasonal plantings.

RECIPE

FENNEL TEA CURED SALMON *by Executive Chef Craig Strong, Studio at Montage*



INGREDIENTS

- one side salmon*
- 7 ounces salt*
- 1 pound brown sugar*
- 3/4 ounce black pepper*
- 1 ounce VRGF fennel tea*

- 2 ounces lemon juice*
- 1 orange zested*
- 1 orange cut into 1" slices*
- 1 bulb fennel, thinly sliced with tops*
- 1 ounce extra virgin olive oil*
- 3 ounces vodka*

METHOD

Mix all dry ingredients together. Add liquid to make paste. Rub mixture on top and bottom of salmon. Top with orange and fennel slices. Wrap in cheese cloth and tie with string. Place on platter and refrigerate for 3 days. Rinse off cure and dry on paper towel. To serve, slice salmon thinly.





Adds Strong, “She has discovered the magic (and hard work) of growing your own produce with all the challenges of staying sustainable. But the discovery and long hours is well worth it. She literally brings it all to life.”

And so much for trying to challenge Chef Strong to a fennel fest. He had us at “bon appétit.”

The fennel is beyond every other vegetable, delicious. It greatly resembles, in appearance, the largest size celery, perfectly white and there is no vegetable that equals its flavour. It is eaten at dessert, crude. — Executive Chef Craig Strong

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Above: Executive Chef Strong, and wife, Lissa, share strawberries from their organic backyard garden, appropriately dubbed Lissa's Garden. Left: Edible Orange County's Gina Mullins-Cohen, Lissa Strong, Chef Strong and writer, Nic Romano, share a home cooked meal prepared by Chef Strong.

RECIPE

HARVEST FRUIT/CARAMELIZED FENNEL CREPES STUDIO by Executive Chef Craig Strong, Studio at Montage

CREPE FILLING

½ liter milk
½ tablespoon VRGF fennel tea
2 vanilla beans, scraped
120 grams egg yolks
100 grams sugar
30 grams corn starch
50 grams butter
2 gelatin sheets (rehydrate in cold water)
1 cup whip cream

CREPE BATTER

1 cup flour
2 eggs
1 cup milk
¼ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon sugar
1 vanilla bean scraped
2 tablespoons melted butter

FOR THE FILLING

In a saucepan, boil milk and tea, cover and steep for 5 minutes and strain. Mix vanilla, yolks, sugar and corn starch together. Temper the milk by adding hot mixture to yolk/sugar mixture slowly whisking all the while. Return to heat in saucepan. Simmer 5 minutes whisking constantly to avoid burning the bottom. Remove from heat, add butter and gelatin. Cool to room temperature. Whip cream to soft peaks and fold together the cream and fennel mixture.

FOR THE CREPES

Mix all ingredients. Refrigerate for 1 hour. Spray non-stick. Place on medium heat. Add a thin layer of batter and cook until set. Flip with a spatula. Lightly brown



the other side. Layer crepes in paper towel to cool.

TO ASSEMBLE

Place filling on ½ of the crepe. Fold in ½ and fold in ½ again to form a triangle. Top with apple, fennel and huckleberries. Dust with powdered sugar.

RECIPE

HARVEST FENNEL PARFAIT RECIPE STUDIO by Executive Chef Craig Strong, Studio at Montage

INGREDIENTS

½ liter milk
½ tablespoon VRGF fennel tea
vanilla
120 grams egg yolks
100 grams sugar
15 grams corn starch
50 grams butter
2 gelatin sheets (rehydrate in cold water)
1 cup whip cream

METHOD

In a saucepan, boil milk and tea, cover and steep for 5 minutes and strain. Mix vanilla, yolks, sugar and corn starch together. Temper the

milk by adding hot mixture to yolk/sugar mixture slowly whisking all the while. Return to heat in saucepan. Simmer 5 minutes whisking constantly to avoid burning the bottom. Remove from heat, add butter and gelatin. Cool to room temperature. Whip cream to soft peaks and fold together the cream and fennel mixture.

To assemble parfait, in a martini glass layer cream, then cake (see Spice Cake Recipe), then cream, then apple, fennel and huckleberries.

