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Winter FancyFaire*

Six Specialty Food Principles California Gave the World

California is the birthplace of plenty of iconic culinary experiences: sourdough bread with crackly crust, farmers market produce that makes you reconsider your relationship with vegetables, and Sriracha on just about everything. Spanning these and countless notable foods to come out of the Sunshine State are a handful of enduring principles—ways of thinking about ingredients, flavor, sourcing, and eating—that have shaped and elevated today's specialty food market.

For more than a century, California's cheesemakers, coffee roasters, farmers, chocolatiers, bakers, and immigrant entrepreneurs have changed the way Americans think about what we eat. They helped teach us to care about who made something and where it came from. They made process part of the pleasure. They showed that an everyday pantry staple could have a story, a sense of place, even a point of view.

Consumers' passion for specialty food today owes a lot to the trend-setting West Coast mentality. As we prepare to encounter new big California ideas at [Winter FancyFaire*](#), these principles are a good reminder of always-evolving nature of the specialty market.



1 American Cheese Can Be Artisan Cheese

There was a time when great cheese in America largely meant cheese imported from Europe. California helped change that.

After studying cheesemaking in France, Laura Chenel began producing French-style goat cheese in Sonoma, CA, in the late 1970s. Chez Panisse famously put her chèvre on its menu, and something clicked: American cheese could be handmade, expressive, and worthy of the same attention as its European counterparts. [SFA inducted Chenel into its Hall of Fame in 2016](#), crediting her with helping turn small-batch goat cheese into an American staple.

Others carried that idea forward. SFA member brand [Cypress Grove](#), founded in Arcata in 1983, helped build an audience for distinctly American cheeses like Humboldt Fog, while fellow SFA member [Cowgirl Creamery](#) connected cheesemaking even more explicitly to Northern California farms, dairies, and restaurants. Cowgirl founders Sue Conley and Peggy Smith were recognized by SFA with [Lifetime Achievement Awards in 2026](#) for their role in the American artisan cheese movement.

Today, discerning shoppers ask about maker, milk, region, and method—and “American artisan cheese” needs no explanation.



PHOTO: MARCO PALUMBO

2 Coffee Can Be a Craft Product

Before third-wave coffee had tasting notes and pour-over rituals, there was Alfred Peet. When Peet opened his Berkeley, CA, shop in 1966, he approached coffee as something that deserved careful sourcing, roasting, and freshness (not simply something brown and hot to get you through the morning).

That mindset spread throughout the Bay Area. SFA member [Mr. Espresso](#) offers another distinctly California chapter. Founder Carlo Di Ruocco began the company in the East Bay in 1978, bringing Italian espresso culture to Northern California and eventually roasting coffee over oak wood. Early customers included some of the chefs helping define California cuisine, including Alice Waters. ([Look for Mr. Espresso at SFA's Winter FancyFaire* 2027 in San Francisco!](#))

Now provenance, processing, roast style, and producer stories are fundamental to specialty coffee. More importantly, coffee helped establish a playbook that the specialty food market would use again and again: take a commodity, showcase the craft behind it, and give consumers a reason to trade up.



PHOTO: BEAU CARPENTER

3 Chocolate Can Have Terroir

San Francisco's chocolate history stretches back generations. [Guittard Chocolate Company](#) was founded in 1868, and the family-owned California company remains an SFA member today.

In the years since, Bay Area chocolate makers have pushed the chocolate conversation in a new direction. Companies including [Scharffen Berger](#) and [TCHO](#) encouraged consumers to think not only about chocolate, but cacao: where the beans grew, how they were fermented and roasted, their cacao percentage, and the flavors hiding inside. It was a vocabulary borrowed partly from wine, and it stuck.

Today "single-origin" and "bean-to-bar" are familiar territory for chocolate lovers. Berkeley-based SFA member and Winter FancyFaire* 2027 exhibitor [TCHO](#) takes that idea all the way back to the farm, emphasizing traceability and working directly with cacao-growing partners through its Flavor Labs. A chocolate bar became something you could taste closely, and somewhere you could taste place.



PHOTO: TETIANA BYKOVETS

4 Fermentation Can Be Part of the Selling Point

San Francisco sourdough is older than the modern specialty food movement. Since at least 1849, California bakers have helped turn the magic happening inside that dough—the starter, the time, the microbes, the waiting—into part of the appeal.

Later bakeries like [Tartine](#), which now has locations around the world, helped usher naturally leavened bread into its modern cult era. Suddenly people weren't just buying a loaf; they wanted to know how long it fermented and how old the starter was.

That fascination has expanded far beyond bread. Fermentation now adds value, story, flavor, and craft to everything from kimchi and pickles to hot sauce and cultured dairy. Even sourdough itself keeps evolving. Oakland-based SFA member [Bread SRSly](#), which began with founder Sadie Scheffer's gluten-free sourdough experiments in San Francisco, applies the technique to gluten-free loaves and rolls.

Sometimes the process isn't something happening behind the scenes. It's the very thing consumers want to know all about.



PHOTO: VICTORIA-SHES



PHOTO: CHRIS LIVERANI

5 Immigrants' Ingredients Can Become Basket Mainstays

California's specialty food history is inseparable from immigration, and from entrepreneurs who brought the flavors of their own tables to a much wider audience.

The La Baca family, who emigrated from Mexico to Los Angeles, founded [La Victoria](#) in 1917 and began commercializing their family's salsa recipes. Decades later, Vietnamese refugee David Tran founded [Huy Fong Foods](#) in Los Angeles and turned his now-iconic rooster bottle of Sriracha into an American pantry phenomenon. Foods once treated by mainstream retailers as belonging in an "ethnic" aisle increasingly became simply... food.

That shift is everywhere in specialty today. Los Angeles-based SFA member [Fly By Jing](#) has helped make Sichuan chili crisp a household pantry staple, while California-based Winter FancyFaire* 2027 exhibitor [A-Sha Foods USA](#) brings Taiwanese noodle traditions to an American audience. Fellow exhibitor [50Hertz Tingly Foods](#) is building an entire specialty line around the citrusy, numbing sensation of Sichuan pepper.

Chili crisps, sambals, harissas, curry sauces, salsa machas, and other culturally rooted foods aren't side categories anymore. They're driving specialty forward.

6 Pantry Staples Can Express Place

Olive oil may be where California's wine sensibility most obviously wandered into the pantry. Beginning in the early 1990s, as the state's modern olive oil industry began a major revival, producers taught shoppers a new vocabulary for an ingredient many people once bought largely on price: harvest date, varietal, estate-grown, freshness, tasting notes, terroir.

SFA member [Sutter Buttes Olive Oil Co.](#) produces oil in Yuba City, while California Olive Ranch helped build the modern domestic category around California-grown extra virgin olive oil and greater transparency about sourcing and flavor.

The ripple effect is easy to spot. Today, vinegar can tell you about the fruit it began with. Honey can taste like a particular landscape. Salt comes with geography. Flour, grains, nuts, and beans can name their farms and varieties. California helped make provenance part of the value proposition—and gave even the most familiar pantry ingredients a story worth telling.



PHOTO: ROBERTA SORGE



California's contributions to today's specialty food market are, of course, impossible to number, and there are many more to come.

The momentum and demand surrounding specialty products today is driven in large part by consumers' desire for connection—to people, places, and processes—that makes them feel good about the products they consume. By centering the farmer, the cheesemaker, and the culture, by emphasizing landscape, technique, and history, these six principles have much to teach today's specialty food industry about how to succeed in 2027 and beyond.



- Get a First look at the next
- big California food trends
- at Winter FancyFaire*,
- SFA's West Coast trade show.
- winterfancyfaire.com