

FLAVOR & THE MENU

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TOP 10 TRENDS



INFLUENCING FLAVOR & MENU DEVELOPMENT

RUSTIC *revolution*

A fuss-free, back-to-basics approach satisfies yearnings for simpler times

IN THE DINING MECCA OF CHICAGO, MANY OF THE MOST CRITICALLY acclaimed spots are beer-friendly neighborhood joints with unassuming décor and straightforward menus. One is The Gage, known for its “refined rusticity” and described as having a “rustic yet refined seasonal menu complemented by an array of fine wines, boutique beers and single-malt whiskeys.” Here, the fanciest dish may be the rabbit pâté starter; fish and chips, chicken noodle soup and roast chicken are the standard bill of fare.

Meanwhile, Feast, which offers “rustic European fare” and is one of the sought-after reservations in Houston, serves cock-a-leekie, pork and beans, dandelions greens and earthy rutabagas and parsnips.

When it comes to pizzeria names, “Pizza Rustica” has become almost as common as “House of Pizza.” Similarly, the multi-unit Italian concept Bravo added to its menu the Insalata Rustica, a salad of crisp romaine, peppery arugula and radicchio with balsamic vinaigrette, fresh pears, dried cherries, spicy pecans and crispy pancetta.

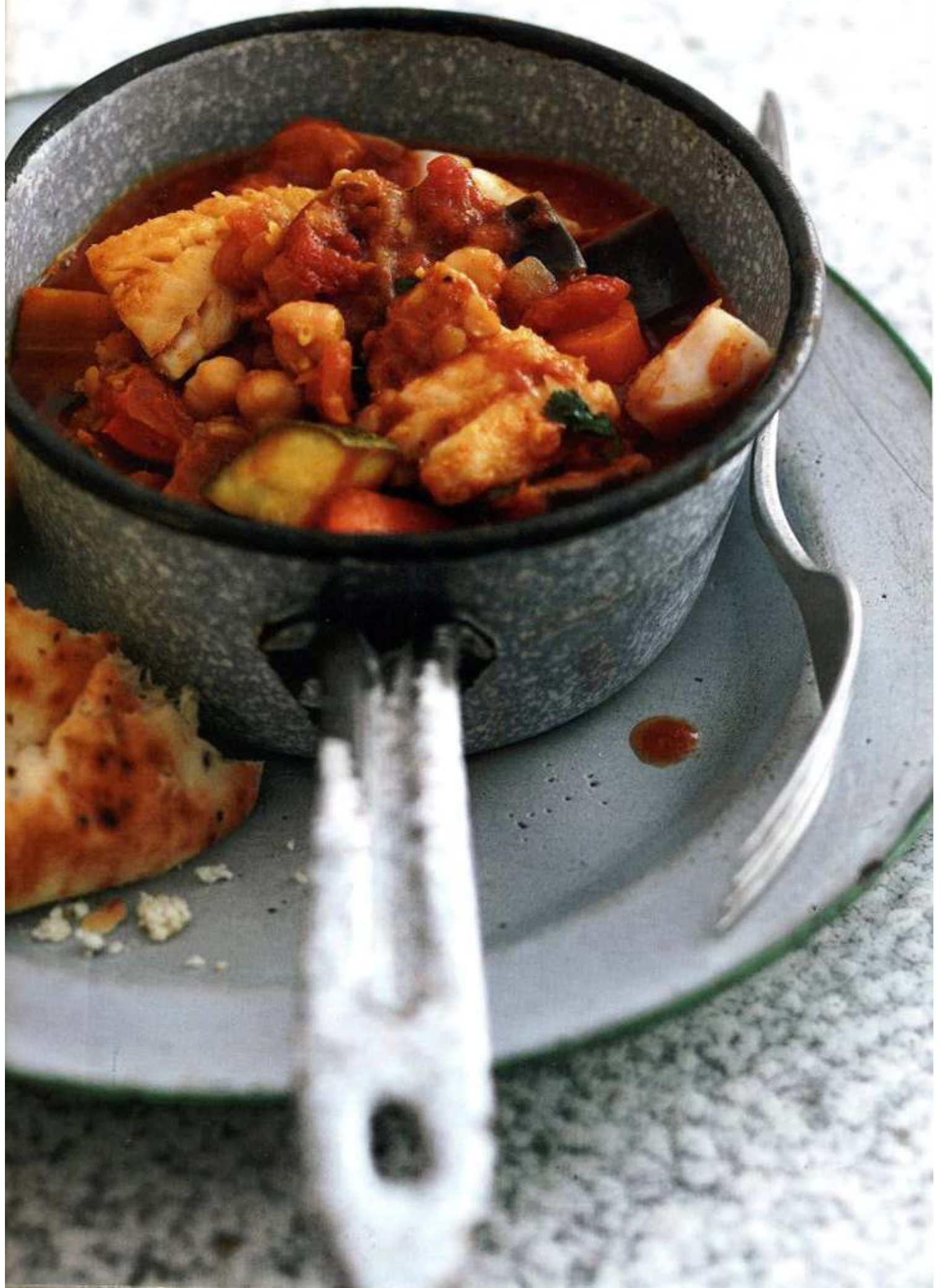
Le Pain Quotidien, an international bakery-café with some 120 units, is taking American cities by storm with its country breads and specials like Rustic Tuna Salad Tartine with tomatoes, black-olive tapenade and roasted red peppers.

We aren’t imagining things when we say that rustic is the new artisanal.

“People have this hunger for a simple way of life that their DNA can connect with, even if they don’t realize that’s what’s happening,” says Jack Moran, vice president of food, beverage and brand for Le Pain Quotidien, a chain that’s been ahead of its time since founder Alain Coumont developed a recipe for “the perfect bread,” using traditional ingredients and methods, back in 1990.

Rustic serviceware and less-refined preparation touches enhance the from-scratch appeal of an Alaska fish stew.





FLAVOR PAYOFF

HOW TO MAKE THE RUSTIC REVOLUTION WORK FOR YOU

Taking a rustic approach has to be done authentically, or else you run the risk looking insincere. Here are some easy ways to do it well.

- ▶ **BONE IN:** Short ribs, lamb shanks, chicken under a brick and even bone-in filet mignon are all ways of presenting less-refined protein entrées.
- ▶ **GO WILD:** Elk, venison, boar and other wild game are popular right now, and just the word on menus adds a rustic touch.
- ▶ **FIRE UP:** The smell of a wood-fired oven or grill permeates indoor space and even the outdoors and draws people in, the way a campfire or a home hearth does; the word "charred" is powerful right now.
- ▶ **WORD UP:** Speaking of words, for every fancy culinary terms, think of its rustic opposite. Tarts become handheld pies or crostadas; purees are chunky mashes; pigs are hogs, and spices are coarsely ground. Other evocative words are country, farmstand, rural and harvest.
- ▶ **RETHINK KNIFE SKILLS:** As with butchery, the way you cut many ingredients can take something from fancy to plain. Brownies and bar cookies should be cut imperfectly, as if home baked. Vegetables and fruit need to be chunky and irregularly sized.
- ▶ **BIG DISH:** Clay pots, skillets, pottery and pot pies served at the table are less-fancy ways to present this rustic fare.

— PRISCILLA MARTEL

And everything follows the integrity of the bread, from the traditional boulangerie menu, organically sourced, if possible, to the Harvest Porridge with whole-grain farro, cranberries, almond milk, pecans and walnuts to the lentil stew with chicken breast and sausage served on the limited dinner menu. All food is taken on communal tables situated on salvaged-wood floors.

"Rustic, irregular, artisanal, artistic... it's antithetical to the whole fluorescent-light, sensory-overload quality of modern life," says Coumont.

Feeding the Soul

And here's where LPQ hits a recently intensified nerve that's been twitching since the age of industrial food began in the 1950s, with its bleached flour and shelf-stable ingredients. When Coumont applied stone to whole-grain wheat and recreated a loaf of bread that couldn't be shipped from Paris to his restaurant in Brussels, he was part of the early movement back to a simpler, less-processed way of preparing food.

This movement is bringing sustenance to many chefs and consumers alike, and it's revolutionizing American life yet again.

"My cooking style is so different now than it used to be, more playful and new," says Ben Ford, chef/owner of Ford's Filling Station in Los Angeles, where he specializes in American classic food with occasional pub and brasserie touches.

Cured meats, house-made charcuterie and artisanal cheeses are on offer, but Ford's true style shines in entrées like hand-rolled pasta with pulled pork and three-chile-pepper relish, spicy Kobe Beef Cheeks with cracked-wheat risotto and root vegetables

Mintel Menu Insights showed "rustic" breaking the top 50 menu marketing claims in 2009, coming in at No. 49 in the third quarter of 2009 and growing by 42% since 2007. It's a great word to describe imperfectly shaped pizza, roughly mashed potatoes or country bread. Adding *hand-crafted touches* wherever possible is a great way for restaurants to differentiate.

Maria Caranfa, Mintel Menu Insights

and crispy flattened Jidori chicken with roasted-corn succotash, mashed potatoes and lemon-garlic confit.

When he opened the restaurant four years ago, Ford wanted a "restaurant that was economy-proof." He recounts, "I've had to shutter a restaurant once before, and I never want to have to do it again. And it turns out the concept was perfect for now."

Ford only half-jokingly calls his kitchen a "halfway house for fine-dining," where cooks come to really learn about food and flavors.

"Lack of passion in the kitchen is the death of great food," says Ford, "and here I think my staff has a reverence for food, and it feeds the passion, not just the profit margin."

In his kitchen, chefs learn how to manipulate ingredients for the desired effect, like Ford's signature steak tartare, which takes a deconstructed approach to the classic: "I garnish it with roasted-garlic-and-shallot confit, which provides silkiness, instead of the traditional egg, and pickled fennel instead of capers."

Home-Grown Influences

At The Lazy Goat in Greenville, S.C., part of the Table 301 Restaurant Group, Chef de Cuisine Victoria Ann Moore's gutsy, Mediterranean-inflected cooking is informed by her upbringing in Alabama, where her family owned a cattle farm and gardened extensively.

The Lazy Goat takes its inspiration from an old legend about "a sleepy little goat who changed a sleepy little town forever," says Moore. This goat may have been lazy, but he was friendly and loved to have a good time, and the restaurant is all about "time well wasted."

The Lazy Goat centers on an open kitchen surrounded by platform bars where customers can watch the action. Lots of communal tables allow for large gatherings and conversation — the ultimate in social dining, says Moore.

The menu comprises multiple sections; one touts "Meats & Cheeses," and a "Graze & Nibble" section includes things like grilled-red-onion salad with shaved-ricotta salata or braised pork belly with cannellini-bean cassoulet and fresh herbs. The "To Share or Not to Share"

TAKE-AWAY: *culinary review*

Playing on guests' nostalgia is always good for business. Sometimes the best thing is a Bolognese with fresh noodles and a light shaving of Parmesan. [Rustic food] does something to the soul that over-worked, busy food just can't match. And it's just a matter of reexploring what we already know.

THOMAS J. DELLE DONNE



HUNGRY MOTHER

Country picnic fare gets top billing on many homespun menus; Boston's Hungry Mother serves deviled eggs and other dishes blending Southern charm and Northern ingredients.



"Refined rusticity" defines the food and atmosphere at The Gage in Chicago, where hearty fare like this brisket sandwich pairs well with the extensive drinks menu.

items like the Trout Spanikopita, where the trout is so crisply fried that its skin resembles phyllo dough; it's layered with ingredients both traditional (creamy spinach and feta) and not (salmon roe and crispy leeks). "I take the simple, flavorful feeling of Mediterranean food and translate it to my cooking style," Moore explains.

Deconstructing Culture

Moore is not alone in using the Mediterranean as a map for inspiration back to unfussy, handcrafted food.

"I've had salami curing for the past 12 months," says Alon Shaya, chef/partner with John Besh in the new *Domenica* in New Orleans, where traditional, country-Italian fare relies heavily on local Louisiana ingredients.

Shaya spent several years living and learning in Italy, immersing himself in the ancient craft of salami-making after earning certification from the prestigious Meat Science Department at

Iowa State University in order to learn the scientific fundamentals of butchery and preserved-meat production.

Not surprisingly, *Domenica's* menu is anchored by a selection of house-cured meats, including coppa (cured pork shoulder), bresaola (air-dried beef), guanciale and pancetta (cured pork jowl and belly, respectively), speck (smoked and cured pork leg), culatello (from the top round of the pig) and various kinds of salami.

Shaya has been pleasantly surprised by the way New Orleans has embraced some of the more rustic specialties, like *Bracirole di Capretto* (braised goat) and fried squash

TAKE-AWAY: *global comforts*

Rustic is all about value and comfort. Serving different cultures' versions of comfort food gives the operator opportunities to realize acceptable profit margins while still offering a unique dining experience that is affordable and simple. Tasting platters and soups, stews and braised one-dish meals are becoming more and more prevalent on menus and offer great opportunities for the kitchen to utilize trimmings and less-expensive proteins that benefit from slow cooking.

TODD DOWNS

TAKE-AWAY: *rustic rotations*

Featuring a comfort food from a different country each month is a great marketing strategy. Try to modernize the presentations of these dishes, and emphasize ingredients in menu copy: for example, a Tuscan Ribollita Soup in a beautiful white crock with rustic Italian bread and lacinato kale.

KATHY CASEY

families go out and while away the afternoon talking and eating and drinking lambrusco from bowls that they pick up with both hands.

"Most of our menu is based on that kind of experience, and on old, traditional recipes from small towns and trattorias around Italy. There's a sentimental value in that way of life that we try to communicate to our customers; it's a way of life and a glimpse into a culture, not just something to eat."

Sourcing Close to Home

Certainly, much of the rustic cuisine so popular now is inspired by the abundance of the garden and other locally sourced ingredients. At State Road Restaurant, which opened in June 2009 in West Tisbury, Mass., husband-and-wife owners Jackson and Mary Kenworth consider themselves surrounded, literally and figuratively, by ingredients.

"We are right in the midst of agriculture and a bounty of fresh seafood here on Martha's Vineyard, and we try to take advantage of that," says chef Jackson Kenworth.

Not only do they buy directly from local farmers, foragers, producers and fishermen, but the Kenworths also have planted extensive gardens around their restaurant, a tear-down building they bought and lovingly rebuilt as a Vineyard-style farmhouse, with oak floors, vaulted, beamed ceilings and a huge stone fireplace. The restaurant serves dinner, and an adjacent café dispenses hearty country breakfasts and lunches.

The setting's rusticity is matched by a menu that is almost wholly ingredient-driven.

"The kitchen is so excited about being able to run out and pick herbs and salad ingredients whenever they need something," says the chef.

And, in this climate, that bounty needs to be preserved wherever possible, whether by drying herbs from the rafters and turning local apples into jarred fruit butter or by relying on traditional foods like salt cod, done up into crispy brandade fritters with sauce gribiche. In fact, pickles and preserved foods figure prominently in the State Road larder; the hamburger is served with port-onion jam and house-made pickles, as well as Grafton cheddar and pommes frites. The Pan-Roasted Georges Bank Cod is wrapped in house-made pancetta and garnished with braised mustard greens and pickled green onions, finished with roasted-tomato vinaigrette from the garden.

"That's the way people in New England have always been able to enjoy a fresh taste of summer all winter long," Jackson Kenworth notes.



BACK FORTY

Peter Hoffman of Back Forty in Manhattan is among the fine-dining chefs who are putting aside linens and china for simpler charms and dressed-down foods in casual settings.

Comfort for Colder Times

For Jamie Fowler, executive chef of Noah's Restaurant in Stonington, Conn., a summer town at the end of Long Island Sound, winter is a time to step back and enjoy the comforts of such rustic classics as Irish lamb stew, Portuguese-style New Bedford pork, and clams and bollito misto (an Italian "mixed boil" of meats).

This hearty fare is culled from a list of hundreds of such specialties in the restaurant's repertoire, rotated through at three to six at a clip on any given night of the week.

"We're located just three blocks away from the docks, and we buy beautiful, fresh fish there all summer long," says Fowler, who helped Noah's celebrate its 30th anniversary in 2009.

"Something like Block Island swordfish, which we serve with panzanella, made to order, pretty much takes care of itself. But it takes real kitchen chops to confit a duck and make cassoulet."

So the braises and stews and other winter specials not only entice year-rounders in out of the cold, but they also serve as training and a means to keep the kitchen gainfully employed during the long off-season. And it's an exercise in cost savings.

In the wintertime, this kind of hand-crafted, classic, comforting food sells well and provides a good profit margin, and the kitchen has the time to create items like Bolognese sauce, pot au feu and Riesling Braised Pork Backhoffs, a brothy Alsatian casserole with potato, sweet onion and tomato.

Many of these popular specials are days in the making; for cassoulet, the mise en place is positively daunting. The confit, beans and pork stew are all prepared separately and brought together for service, but the item is so popular that Fowler has a call list of customers who want to be informed when it's on the night's menu.

The same for fried chicken. "On a cold night, we sell the heck out of it," says Fowler.

Back to Americana Basics

Michael LaScola, the chef/owner of American Seasons in Nantucket, calls this style of cooking "back to basics": simple, honest food, very grounded in place, reflecting the melting pot of American cuisine.

LaScola's menu celebrates the seasons and regions of America; New England is represented with items like Pan Stew of Haddock with leeks, potatoes, apples, crispy oysters, bacon and lemon confit. The Pacific Coast shows up in Grimaud Farms Guinea Hen with barley "risotto," fig jam and hazelnut-brown-butter vinaigrette.

The Deep South tastes like Crispy Fried Chicken Livers with tomato-and-bacon dressing, avocado relish and citrus-black-pepper glaze. Ingredients are treated to classical techniques with a relaxed style that is uniquely American and very much LaScola's own approach.

His popular meatloaf sandwich begins with a country pâté and house-cured foie gras torchon and is dressed up with smoked-tomato ketchup, brioche and Vidalia-onion marmalade to bring a taste of the South to the whole assemblage. In fact, the Down South section of the menu really resonates with locals and traveling foodies once the cooler weather comes on.

"Who could resist Four-Day Beef Brisket?" LaScola asks, describing a process in which Wagyu beef takes a dry rub for two days and then is braised another day in Pabst Blue Ribbon beer for a time-consuming yet unfussy and very satisfying result.

"We've all gone a little crazy with molecular gastronomy and ingredients flown in from all over the world, but now I find that I want to go backwards a bit and concentrate on food that people can identify with," concludes La Scola. ☞

TAKE-AWAY: *make connections*

This food reminds us of how cooking traditions and handcrafted, artisan products connect us not only to our past but to our future. And, perhaps most importantly, it reintroduces dining as a familial cornerstone of pleasure, culture and community.

ROBIN SCHEMPP

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for more on the Rustic Revolution