

# Datebook

Jon Carroll:  
What to do  
with a bored  
cat **E6**

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## RESTAURANTS

# Dining out on a diet

Former 'Top Chef' to offer healthy eats at Palo Alto cafe



Photos by Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

**Art Smith, Oprah's former personal chef, bakes a vegan banana cheese-cake, right. All the desserts at his LYFE Kitchen will also be vegan.**

**By Sophie Brickman**  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

During a challenge on Season 1 of "Top Chef Masters," chef and contestant Art Smith, best known for being Oprah Winfrey's longtime private chef, opened a mystery box of ingredients he'd have to cook for the show's judges. With ominous music in the background, he squeezed his eyes shut, winced, took a look, then breathed a sigh of relief. "Chicken!" he crowed. "My middle name is chicken!"

Art "Chicken" Smith proceeded to win the challenge — beating out fellow chefs Jonathan Waxman, Michael Cimarusti and Roy Yamaguchi — with a plate of fried chicken thigh, smothered chicken thigh, cheddar grits and mango pie with a sugar crust.

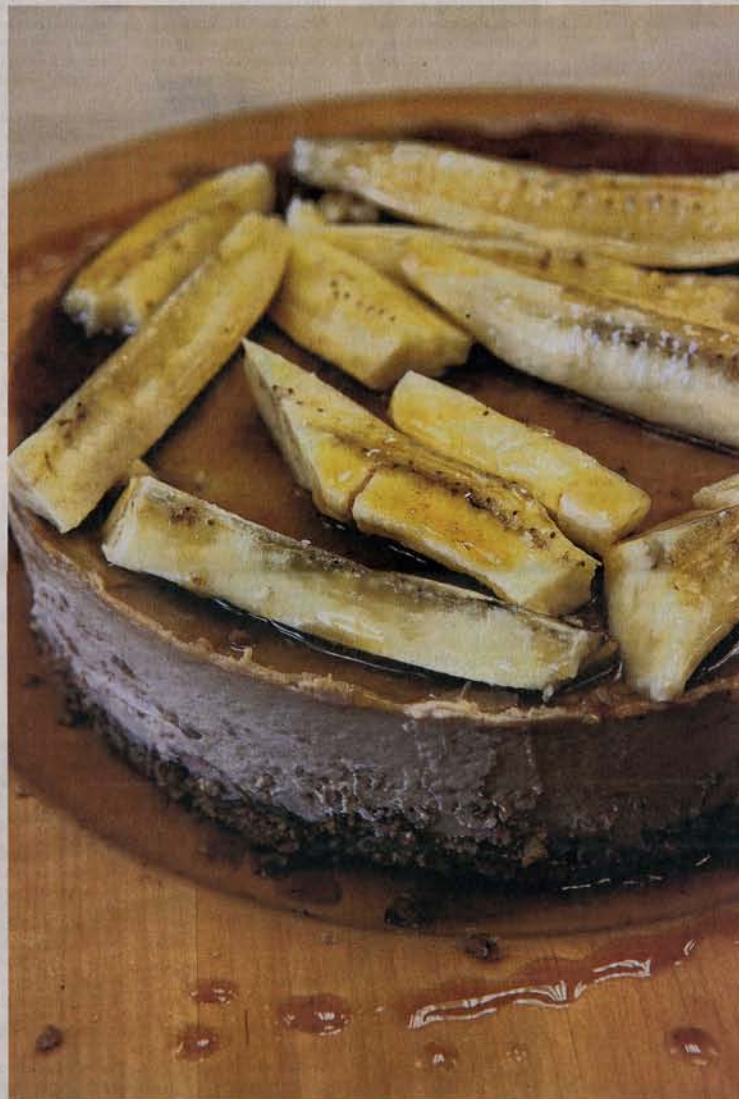
But these days, as far as middle names go, Art "Unfried Chicken" Smith rings truer.

After being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes shortly after the show, Smith changed his diet and lifestyle. He dropped 85 pounds from his 324-pound frame and started running 10K races and marathons.

Two years later, his lifestyle changes have kept his diabetes under control. He swears by oatmeal, fish and vegetables, and is putting some of that approach into his newest venture, a fast-casual healthy restaurant called LYFE Kitchen.

The first one of a hoped-for nationwide venture is set to open in Palo Alto in August. Butter and high-fructose corn syrup are banned, as is fried food, and no dish contains more than 600 calories per serving.

"People are not going to slow down and  
*LYFE continues on E3*



**Smith coats his Southern Oven Unfried Chicken, left, in whole wheat panko breadcrumbs and a secret LYFE spice mixture.**

**Inside:** Reviews of Vis a Vis and L'Appart; plus the Inside Scoop. **E2, E3**

**Sunday:** How to make the most of your cookbook shelf. **Food & Wine**



# Not-fried chicken

*LYFE from page E1*

cook," said Smith, 51, while cooking up Southern Oven Unfried Chicken and a vegan cheesecake at The Chronicle's test kitchen last week. Smith was wearing a LYFE chef's coat and blue Nike running shoes, in which he had run 5 miles the previous day up and down San Francisco hills.

Instead of coating the chicken in flour and deep-frying it, Smith coated it in whole wheat panko breadcrumbs and a secret LYFE spice mixture and popped it in the oven. Admittedly, it's not so much unfried as baked.

## **600 calories or fewer**

"When you want to grab something that's good and wholesome now," said Smith, as he sliced the chicken, "let's face it, you can grab a salad. That's not interesting. But to be able to grab something familiar like a burger or a chicken dish that's less than 600 calories, that's something."

LYFE — which stands for Love Your Food Everyday — is being spearheaded by two former McDonald's executives and is tailored to healthy, active women from 18 to 49. The menu features everything from oatmeal and flatbreads to burgers and fish entrees, with a top price of \$12.99. All desserts are vegan, thanks in part to partner Tal Ronnen, vegan chef and cookbook author.

Smith is known primarily for his Southern comfort food, a cuisine which, at face value, doesn't jibe with California. But Smith feels otherwise.

"Regardless of the cuisine, as long as it's authentic, comforting and fresh, people don't care," Smith said. "To me, the one thing that sings out from all these dishes is that it tastes of home."

Home, for Smith, is Chicago, but he grew up in Jasper, Fla., on a cattle farm that had been in the family for generations. He

dreamed of studying piano at Juilliard, but once he realized he didn't have the chops for it, he turned his focus to food.

He cooked at the renowned Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia and for the governor of Florida but found a passion for private cheffing, which culminated in a 10-year stint with Winfrey. He has cooked for celebrities and politicians all over the world, is a two-time James Beard Award recipient and in 2003 founded Common Threads, a nonprofit that teaches children about healthy eating.

Smith first cooked his "unfried chicken" for Winfrey's 50th birthday party, but it would seem out of place at his Chicago restaurant, Table 52.

"Table 52 is all about gooey bowls of macaroni and cheese and homemade biscuits," Smith said. Still, diners who saw his physical transformation wanted to know more.

"My customers come in and say, 'Chef Art, we love everything you're doing here, but what else are you eating?'"

As he drizzled agave caramel syrup over his vegan cheesecake, he shrugged off notions that his new style of cooking was challenging.

"If you've cooked for Hollywood, you've cooked vegan," he said.

Most recently, Smith cooked for Lady Gaga's 25th birthday, making a Lady Gaga-sans-heels-size Hummingbird Cake, one of his specialties. The two had met on Winfrey's show. Now, whenever their paths cross, he cooks her chicken and waffles, one of her favorite dishes.

## **Gaga for Gaga**

So what does he think of her music?

"Please, I lost 85 pounds to 'Bad Romance,'" he said.

That, and abstaining from those chicken and waffles — unless it's unfried and whole grain, of course.

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