

Los Angeles Times FOOD

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CHARMIO JOHNSON For The Times
VISION: Hugo Liu's computer technology aims to "help people become fluent in taste."

MEDIA DISH

Pensive deviled eggs?irate gazpacho?

MIT Media Lab's Hugo Liu has radical ideas about the future of recipes.

By REGINA SCHRAMBLING
Special to The Times

H Cambridge, Mass. UGO LIU says he tastes recipes, the whole concept seems hopelessly antiquated to a guy who starts cooking by sniffing spices and thinking. Yet he has invented a revolutionary way of developing them.

He has no formal background in food or drink, only a passion for both. Yet he has developed a radical new method of categorizing both ingredients and wines.

He explores new tastes with a vengeance — to learn to appreciate kale recently, he consumed it steamed, boiled, sautéed, raw, puréed and even as a cocktail. Yet he believes the future lies in helping other people make food decisions not by mouth but with the click of a mouse. Give him your last few meals and he can virtually map your taste buds.

Excited? He would be added by the very notions, but this 27-year-old, spiky-haired computer whiz at the MIT Media Lab here in Cambridge is starting to shake up the food world with a combination of artificial intelligence and natural obsession. Any geek could run 100,000 recipes on the Internet through a software program to deconstruct them. How many would think to sort them not by course or ingredient or even technique but by that most ineffable of quantifiers: emotion?

His first big project, a searchable database called the Symes [See Computer, Page F4]

THE REVIEW

Tower of power

Killer view, new chef: S. Irene Virbila revisits the Strip's Tower Bar. Page 10

THE FIND

Indie pub dining

The York carves its own casual gastro-niche in Highland Park. Page 10

Spain's Priorat wine region is poised for greatness. But the challenges are steep.



AMAZING TERROIR: Thanks to 80-year-old vines and shale-flecked soil, Priorat's best wines are seriously expressive — intense and rustic, yet elegant and complex. But perilous hillsides make viticulture difficult — and the wines wildly expensive. Now vintners are trying to shake things up.

Photograph by LARRY MARSHALL For The Times

Move over, Bordeaux

By CORIE BROWN
Times Staff Writer

Gratallops, Spain

PRIORAT, the boutique wine region southwest of Barcelona known for its distinctive, staggeringly expensive red wines, is coming of age. The number of wineries here has nearly doubled in five years, acres of new vineyards are being planted, and even the winemakers who personify the isolated region's fiercely independent spirit are channeling their ambition toward making more affordable wines. Despite the high costs of working the steep terrain, wines expressive of this amazing *terroir* are now within reach of wine lovers other than just the deep-pocketed cognoscenti.

But as quickly as Priorat's reputation was made, it could be lost as some of these new wines fail to live up to the region's high standards.

In 1992, Priorat rocketed to the top of the Spanish wine world with the release of its first mod- [See Priorat, Page F6]



WINEMAKER: Esther Nin oversees Clos Erasmus, one of Priorat's pioneer wineries. At top, a glass of Priorat red.



APPETIZER: Rich, silky braised Roma tomatoes are perfect with a glass of wine.

THE CALIFORNIA COOK

Summertime, and the cooking is languid

By RUSS PARSONS
Times Staff Writer

WALK into a really hopping *fajita* bar in Spain or a swanky little *osteria* in Italy on a summer evening, and right at the front door you're likely to be confronted with a long table full of bowls of vegetables. At first glance, you might think this is just one more sign that the end of the world is near: a salad bar in Europe?

But there's one big difference: Most of the vegetables will have been cooked, and not just a

little bit — they'll be almost limp. Well, actually, there's another difference as well: They will be absolutely delicious.

While we modern cooks have made a cult of crispness since the introduction of nouvelle cuisine back in the 1970s, it pays to remember that sometimes it takes long cooking to bring out flavor. And while it may seem paradoxical, that's especially true in the summertime.

Well-cooked vegetables have depth and richness. Even better, they are usually served at room temperature. Though some of their bright colors may have faded a bit, and though their crisp textures may have softened to the point

that they flop lazily on a fork, this gives them a cool languor that is infinitely appealing when the weather is scorching.

The combination of all these things creates what can best be described as almost a negative heat. Come in from a hot, hectic day of running around, and a bowl of sweet braised zucchini — cooked to the texture of butter, tart with lemon and perfumed with fresh herbs — is almost as good as air conditioning.

You can serve these vegetables as the Spanish and Italians would, as appetizers (and the more the merrier — mix and match vegetables to make an assort- [See Vegetables, Page F1]