



NANCY'S 90TH

BY ALEX HITZ



EVERY SUMMER IN LOS ANGELES, usually the last week in July, I always gave a dinner for several friends who had birthdays close to one another. Birthday parties mean cake—or in this case, cakes—and everyone's favorite dishes. Nancy Reagan loved fish, so I served Mountain Trout from Washington State. David Jones was always happy with anything amandine, so that was easy with the trout. Connie Wald adored fresh summer corn, which got puréed within an inch of its life, and then reduced for several hours to become a sweet, silky bisque that rivals any I

have ever tasted (more on this corn bisque in a minute). Betsy Bloomingdale speaks avocado better than anyone I know—her son grows superb ones in Santa Barbara—and Sophie Winkelmann Windsor loves dessert. Any dessert. In addition to my Peach Cobbler, which I couldn't help but serve because the peaches were unbelievable and sent to me from a family friend in Atlanta, we made five birthday cakes, each one an easy but delicious vanilla cake with candles and varied icings—orange, lemon, strawberry, caramel, and chocolate—for the celebrants to



This page, from bottom left: Alex's Cold Avocado Soup, served for Nancy Reagan's 90th birthday party at his home; Nancy's place card; the table setting; the recipe for Alex's Cold Avocado Soup. Opposite page: Alex and Nancy blow out the candle on one of Alex's homemade vanilla cakes.

take home and share with whomever they'd like. Or not.

The year these photos were taken was 2011, Nancy's 90th birthday. An occasion like that warrants something special, I thought, so...remember that corn bisque? I made it. That bisque takes almost three days, and is completely worth it, but it's an opera to do. Simmering, sitting, straining, resting, and straining again endless times so it becomes the smoothest, most sumptuous it can be. None of it happens without intensive handwork. On the final strain, about an hour before the party, my weary hands slipped and the immense vat of silky corn lusciousness spilled in the sink and, quite literally, went down the drain. Just like that, the last 36 hours of culinary hue and cry were gone in the blink of an eye—see how smooth it was—and I was stuck high and dry without a first course.

Enter some avocados, onions, and a Cuisinart stage left and you've got Cold Avocado Soup. If this soup were any easier it would make itself, and it's just the perfect thing for when you're expecting a former first lady who's celebrating an important birthday—not to mention her discerning pals—in 25 minutes. Even if you're not, whatever and whoever your summer entertaining plans include, make this soup a go-to favorite in your repertoire and remember the moral of this story, which an old French adage says best: "When people make plans, God laughs." ♦

COLD AVOCADO SOUP

Yield: 8 cups, 2 quarts (or 6-8 servings)

Ingredients:

- 4 cups chicken stock
- 3 ripe avocados, spooned out from their skin
- 1 cup chopped red onion
- ½ cup chopped cilantro
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt
- ¾ teaspoon ground black pepper
- Crème fraîche or sour cream to garnish
- Additional chopped cilantro to garnish

Preparation:

- In a food processor fitted with a metal blade, purée the avocados, onions, and chicken stock until they are smooth.
- In a large mixing bowl, combine the puréed vegetables and add the cilantro, lemon juice, salt, and pepper.
- Stir the soup well to combine thoroughly. Garnish with a dollop of crème fraîche or sour cream with additional chopped cilantro, and serve immediately.