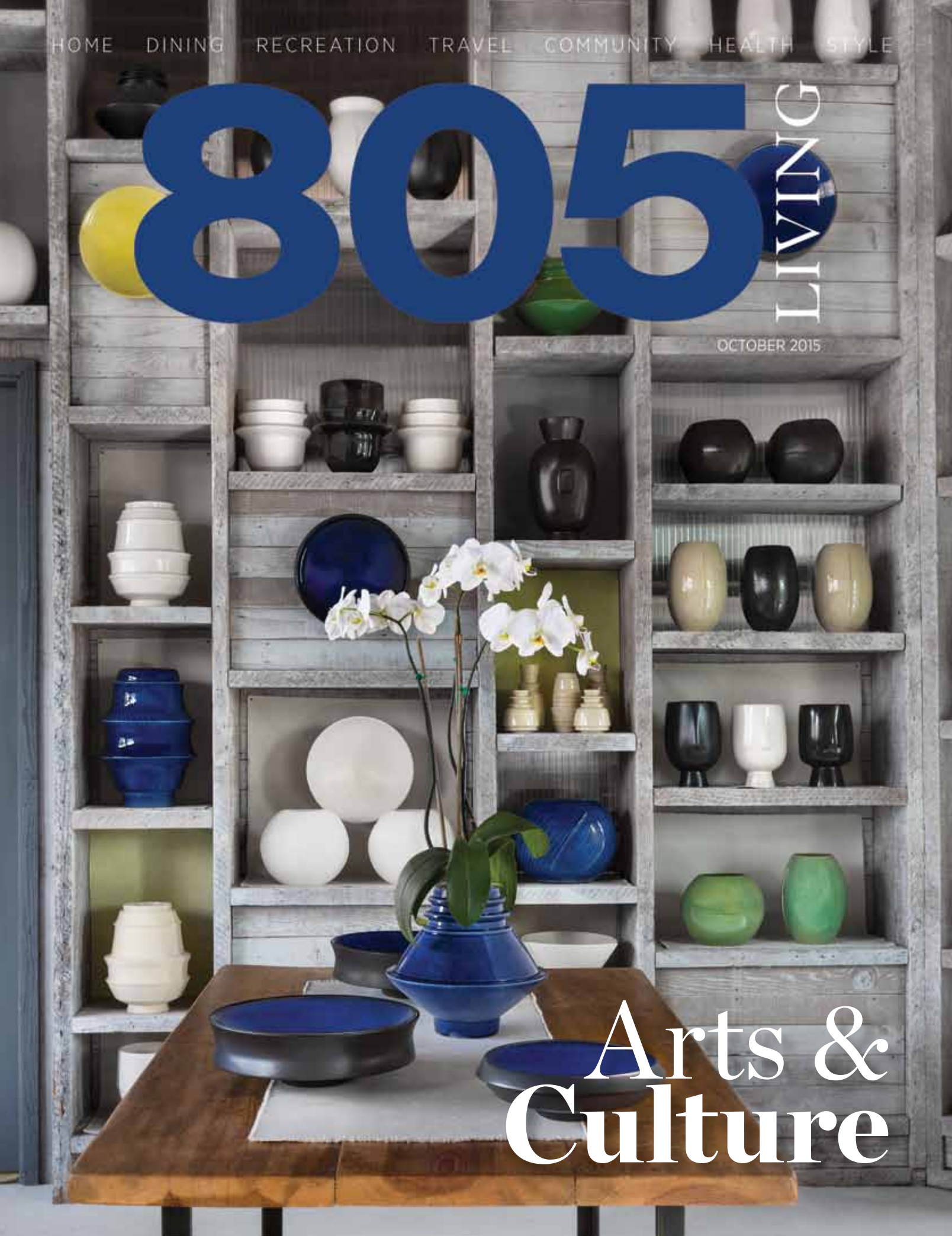


# 805

LIVING

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# POPCORN WITH PIZZAZZ

A classic snack gets trendy with the addition of fresh, new flavors.

BY JAIME LEWIS PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS

**WATCH OUT, CRACKER JACK:** Popcorn makers all over are stepping up their game. After languishing in movie theaters and microwavable bags for decades, popcorn is on the rise as chefs and purveyors pop up wild, whimsical, and decadent recipes that give Orville Redenbacher a run for his money.

I've been making my own easy recipe for Chimichurri Popcorn at home for about a year now, and it never fails to elicit a high-five from guests. Even top chefs, like Tony Ventura at Blind Tiger ([blindtigersb.com](http://blindtigersb.com)) in Santa Barbara, are coming up with interesting twists on the popular snack. Ventura says his Maple-Bacon Popcorn is a huge seller on the late-night menu. In Grover Beach at The Spoon Trade ([thespoontrade.com](http://thespoontrade.com)), proprietors Jacob and Brooke Town and Patrick Bergseid welcome guests with complimentary bowls of their organic paprika-and-butter popcorn. SLOpop! ([slopopgourmetpopcorn](http://slopopgourmetpopcorn) on Facebook) of Templeton has seen a spike in orders from brides and grooms who want fun, fringe-y popcorn flavors as part of their big day. Christopher Pollastrini, owner of Santa Barbara Popcorn Co. ([sbpopcorn.com](http://sbpopcorn.com)), launched the company in response to all the sweet varieties on the market. "I wanted savory popcorn," he says, "particularly something with zing." His zing of choice is balsamic vinegar, a flavor that, to his knowledge, had never before been used commercially on popcorn.

A simple, healthful snack, popcorn's nooks-and-crannies and absorbent texture make it an especially well-suited canvas for creative ingredient combinations. Best of all: An ounce of unpopped kernels costs about 12 cents, 25 cents for organic. That means everyone from Michelin-starred chefs to humble home cooks and kids can afford to dream up big flavors and play with their food.

## MAPLE-BACON POPCORN

Serves 6

*"The ingredients are really easy to prep," says Blind Tiger's executive chef, Tony Ventura, of the decadent popcorn he created for the Santa Barbara restaurant's late-night snack menu. "And people love anything with bacon."*

- ½ pound slab applewood-smoked bacon
- 2 tablespoons reserved bacon drippings
- ½ cup popcorn kernels
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- ⅔ cup pure maple syrup
- 3 tablespoons salted butter
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon baking soda

In a skillet, cook bacon until crispy. Transfer to paper towel-lined plate, reserving drippings. When bacon has cooled, crumble into bits. In a 2-quart saucepan combine 2 tablespoons of drippings and 3 kernels of popcorn; cover with a tight-fitting lid and cook over medium heat. When the kernels start popping, add the remaining kernels and cover. Gently shake the pan as the popcorn pops. When the popping slows—about 1 pop every 1 to 2 seconds—turn off the heat, and let the pan sit for 1 minute.

Coat a large baking sheet with cooking spray, spread out the popcorn, and sprinkle with sea salt. Preheat oven to 250°F.

In another 2-quart pot, combine brown sugar, maple syrup, and butter. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently. Sugar mixture should boil and start to thicken after about 6 to 9 minutes. Turn off the heat, and quickly stir in the vanilla and baking soda; the mixture will lighten in color and become foamy. Pour the mixture evenly over the popcorn. Sprinkle with bacon bits.

Bake for 30 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes. Remove from oven and let popcorn cool and harden. Break into pieces and store in an airtight container.

## CHIMICHURRI POPCORN

Serves 6

*A very creative friend suggested I stir condiments like pesto, gremolata, and chimichurri into popcorn, and now I whip up batches of this snack for happy hour at home or for a grown-up movie night. Just be sure to serve it immediately to keep it from getting soggy.*

- ¼ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 3 green onions, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon hot red pepper flakes
- 1 teaspoon oregano
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- ¼ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- ½ cup popcorn kernels
- Salt to taste >



Blind Tiger chef Tony Ventura's Maple-Bacon Popcorn is an enticing blend of sweet, savory, chewy, and crunchy.



In a medium bowl, whisk together the parsley, green onions, red pepper flakes, oregano, garlic, olive oil, and red wine vinegar for chimichurri. Set aside.

Heat vegetable oil in a stockpot or Dutch oven on high. Add 1 popcorn kernel. When it pops, add remaining kernels and cover with a lid. Once the kernels are popping every two seconds or so, remove from heat. Transfer to a large bowl. Add the chimichurri and toss to coat evenly. Spread onto a baking sheet, let cool briefly. Sprinkle with salt to taste, transfer to serving bowl and serve.

## BALSAMIC VINEGAR AND BASIL POPCORN

Serves 6

Before launching the Santa Barbara Popcorn Co., Christopher Pollastrini was a high-school physics and biology teacher, a profession that afforded him laboratory skills that are, he says, “applicable to trying out different recipes and concoctions.” Preparing this snack immediately before serving is critical to its success. Pollastrini warns, “Wet ingredients like balsamic vinegar will make popcorn soggy if it’s not consumed right away.”

- 2 tablespoons sunflower or canola oil
- ½ cup organic popcorn kernels
- 3 tablespoons organic olive oil
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 2 tablespoons packed brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon dried basil (or use fresh basil pulsed in a food processor for a flavor burst)
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 pinches sea salt

In a large stockpot or Dutch oven over medium heat, add sunflower oil and popcorn kernels and cover with a lid. Gently shake the stockpot to evenly coat kernels with oil. When popping slows, about 2 to 3 seconds between pops, remove from heat, and transfer to a large bowl. Stir in olive oil. In a small bowl, combine remaining ingredients. Toss with popcorn to distribute evenly. Serve immediately.

## PUMPKIN SPICE POPCORN

Serves 6

Customers stock up on this Santa Barbara Popcorn Co. flavor during the short period in autumn and winter when Pollastrini offers it. For even distribution of the brown sugar, he recommends sprinkling and tossing it with your hands before adding the remaining ingredients.

- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon organic coconut oil
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon organic sunflower oil
- ½ cup organic popcorn kernels
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
- 2 pinches sea salt, or more to taste

In a stockpot or Dutch oven over medium heat, combine oils and add kernels. Cover and cook until 2 to 3 seconds pass between pops. Transfer to a large bowl. Using fingers, sprinkle brown sugar on popcorn to evenly distribute, then hand toss with pumpkin pie spice and sea salt.

## FRIED HERB POPCORN WITH BLACK TRUFFLE AND LEMON OIL

Serves 6

During his career at restaurants such as San Francisco’s RN74 and Napa Valley’s La Toque, chef and co-owner Jacob Town of The Spoon Trade in Grover Beach came across an herb-truffle-lemon popcorn preparation that he wanted to re-create on his own menu. Black truffles are seasonal and can usually be purchased at Whole Foods in late fall or online from Earthy Delights (earthy.com). Use a microplane to grate them for this recipe. Lemon oil is available online from LorAnn Oils (lorannoils.com). For the best results, Town recommends using organic heirloom popping corn from Anson Mills (ansonmills.com).

### FRIED HERBS

- 1 cup grape-seed oil
- ½ cup finely chopped fresh rosemary
- ½ cup finely chopped fresh thyme
- ½ cup finely chopped fresh sage
- Pinch of salt

### POPCORN

- 2 tablespoons grape-seed oil
- ½ cup organic popping corn kernels
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Fried herbs
- Lemon oil to taste
- 1 tablespoon grated black truffle

**To fry herbs:** In a pan over medium heat, warm grape-seed oil and add fresh herbs. Fry for 30 seconds to 1 minute. Using a metal strainer or slotted spoon, scoop out herbs and drain on a paper towel-lined tray. Sprinkle with a pinch of salt while hot.

**To make popcorn:** In a large stockpot over medium heat, warm grape-seed oil. Add kernels and cover with lid. Continuously shake the pot until kernels begin to pop. When popping slows to 2 seconds between pops, remove from heat. Add salt, pepper, fried herbs, and lemon oil and toss. Add grated truffle and quickly toss once more. Serve.

## VANILLA-CURRY CARAMEL POPCORN

Serves 6

This recipe is from Troy and Tricia Harbour of Templeton’s SLOpop, an online popcorn, cotton candy, and concession rental business that provides snack stands for weddings and corporate events. For an even more decadent version, they recommend drizzling melted dark chocolate on top after breaking the caramel corn apart.



Pumpkin Spice (left) and Chimichurri flavors

- ½ cup popcorn kernels
- ½ cup salted butter, plus a bit more for coating spatula
- 1 cup light brown sugar
- ¼ cup agave nectar
- 2 teaspoons mild curry powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda

Pop popcorn kernels in an air popper or microwave oven (or by other method, if desired) and place in a large bowl. Line 2 large baking sheets with waxed paper; set aside.

In a heavy saucepan over medium heat, melt butter and then stir in brown sugar, agave nectar, curry powder, and salt; bring to a rolling boil, stirring constantly. Continue to boil, without stirring, for 4 minutes. Remove from heat and stir vanilla and baking soda into hot mixture until well combined. Coat a rubber spatula or large spoon with butter. Working quickly, pour hot caramel over popcorn; using the spatula, coat popcorn evenly. Transfer popcorn to baking sheets, spreading it out in one even layer. Set aside to cool completely, then break apart, and serve. ♦