

FALL 2018

Issue No. 7

# *edible* LA

Sharing the Story of Local Food, Season by Season

*holidays*

local chefs share holiday memories | annual gift guide |  
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Member of Edible Communities

# A KID AT THE BIG TABLE

Four local chefs recall their fondest holiday memories of food from home—with recipes to boot.

BY LISA ALEXANDER

**A**ny chef could spend a lifetime recreating not only the tastes and scents, but the inescapable emotional responses to the foods first experienced at grandma's kitchen table—that chunk of gingerbread with applesauce that no one could ever make as well as she did, those sweet yams covered with gooey marshmallows, that perfect stuffing, the spicy pumpkin pie with toasty pecans on top. I decided to have conversations with three local chefs, all from very different places, about this unifying topic — their own holiday traditions and food memories from childhood. The most glorious part of discussing childhood food memories is the sense of pure love and nostalgia, which is something we can all relate to in one way or another.

Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis, the creative husband-and-wife team behind the wildly popular Bavel (and the acclaimed Bestia) in DTLA, focus on Eastern Europe and the flavors of the Middle East at home.

We meet at their restaurant, a place famous for Menashe's 400-recipe-walkabout to find the perfect hummus. It's fantastic, silky smooth, redolent of garlic and dabbled with red and green sauce that adds a new dimension, to say nothing of the blistered pita from their wood-fired oven. It's all an addiction waiting to happen, and the whole menu is surprising and familiar at the same time, right down to chef Gergis' spectacular roasted fig and semolina tart with thyme. The restaurant itself is gorgeous too, with an unusual centerpiece that covers almost the entire ceiling, an herbaceous chandelier.

"This dude from Malibu designed it for us," Gergis tells me. "It's completely hydroponic." And deeply cool, with curtains of ivy hanging down.



Ori and Genevieve of DTLA's Bavel



Chef Teresa Montaño of Otoño

These chefs are a magical couple; they have a feisty foodaholic four-year-old, appropriately named Saffron; and they seem to lead a charmed if insanely hardworking life at the restaurant and their house in Silver Lake. They also finish each other's sentences as they tell me how their childhood memories inform their food.

A flavorful mix of nationalities—Menashe grew up near Tel Aviv with a mom from Morocco and a Lebanese dad. Gergis' mom is Ukrainian and her dad's Egyptian.

"My mom has nine brothers and sisters and my dad has four brothers and sisters, and every holiday had at least fifty people," Menashe tells me, admitting to missing the crowd. His most vivid memory is when he and his dad managed to talk his grandmother into making her special *kninkali*. "It's Georgian, but my grandfather did the Jewish version with no mixing of yogurt and meat. She would boil ground beef and stuff these pockets with it and then serve it with raw onion and tons of garlic and black pepper," he remembers.

"I love it because whenever we would visit Pittsburgh, we'd go to the Catholic church and pick up a bunch of pierogis," Gergis adds. "It has the same chewy, dense dough, though my mom's were filled with potatoes and cheese or potatoes and sauerkraut."

Menashe continues to tell me, "my dad would pull up a table that was long and wide and topped with a little bit of flour, and then me and my cousins would just roll and cook, roll and cook. We'd each eat forty or fifty and, when I got older, I got to drink vodka as well."

If Menashe is savory, Gergis is all about sweet and sweet with her holiday memories. "Every year my mom made these Mexican wedding cookies that I did not appreciate," she said, "but now they're my favorite cookie ever." (*get the recipe on p. 32*)

Gergis has made the recipe her own by adding more pecans and salt, as well as the Swedish press cookies she's obsessed with. She tells me, "I have my own Italian Swedish press cookie machine that I got at a vintage place...I want to give it to my daughter someday."

"I crave her desserts," Menashe admits, a little sheepishly. "It's a problem, actually. I finish my shift and I'm over on her station, snacking on everything."

"I tested eight or nine different versions of the Swedish press cookie," Gergis agrees. "He was like, can you stop making these, because I can't stop eating them!"

When it comes to the holidays, she also loves her mom's stuffing (*get the recipe on p. 31*) with apples, raisins, celery, onions, and chestnuts. "No one cares about the turkey, they care about the stuffing," she said.

"That's why I do a duck as well," Menashe tells me (*get the recipe on p. 30*). "I'll air dry it for a week so that it's aged and the skin gets super crispy and paper thin." His version is stuffed with oranges, dill, black peppercorns, garlic, and orange blossom water.

"It's actually amazing to be married to someone who has totally different holidays," Gergis said. "There's no competition. Even if Hanukkah lands during Christmas, it doesn't matter because there're eight days of it. And Christmas Day and Christmas Eve are like two different holidays."

"Yeah," Menashe says. "I like it. There're more festivities [for everyone to take part in]."



Chef Teresa Motaño's Highland Park restaurant, Ontoño, occupies a long, narrow space with sea green doors and gold and white tiles that radiate pink at sunset. The name means autumn in Spanish, because that's chili season in Albuquerque, where chef Motaño grew up, and from the passion she's put into every detail of the restaurant, I can tell that it's a distillation of everything she comes from, of her *terroir*. Integral to her memories is her grandmother, a huge entertainer who always had a big spread during chili season.

"We'd all get together—and there were a lot of us, five siblings and tons of cousins—and every family would bring their grills and a hundred pounds of chilis over in trucks to my grandfather's," she tells me. "We'd roast the chilis and then have kind of an assembly line to peel off the skins and pack them into little bags. That would be our chili supply for the year," she explains.

Chef Motaño glows telling me, "it's tattooed on my brain, the smell, that first taste of the season." She also remembers being a little girl, picturing her grandfather giving her a freshly charred chili on a tortilla, so perfect and so delicious. "My family is always definitely about food," she said.

Motaño was a tomboy growing up, an athlete who loved to be outside in her mother's garden. She'd keep a salt shaker outside and eat apples and drink hose water, then go back to the game.

"Tomatoes are a big part of that memory," she tells me, and that's why *pan con tomate* is now a staple on her restaurant's menu—a perfectly charred sliver of bread with a thin layer of fresh garlic and the ripest tomatoes.

The flavors of Otoño are not of her childhood in New Mexico, but are more traditionally Spanish. It's a story that she clearly loves to tell as we sit in the front window. It all began when she worked for Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken at the now-shuttered Ciudad restaurant. "They used to do a weekly paella on the patio," Motaño tells me, "and as a young line cook, I was super eager and wanted to learn, so they handed me that project... it got me really turned on to the flavors of Spain."

It also started her wanderings. Her first restaurant, the acclaimed Racion, was based on the Basque region of Spain, then she went to Valencia, where she particularly loves the old town callad Barrio del Carmen. She explains, "I loved the gorgeous old architecture juxtaposed with buildings that were so modern and beautiful, and the street art!"

It not only inspired her, but reminded her of her own food as well: market-driven, seasonal, and spicy. Motaño couldn't wait to research flavors when she got back home. She even invited two graffiti artists from Valencia—collectively named Pichiavo—to paint Otoño's spectacular mural. A peach-colored deconstruction



Ori's Whole Roasted Duck, courtesy of the Bestia cookbook (Ten Speed Press. Photo: Nicole Franzen © 2018.

of classic and contemporary urban art, "it just speaks volumes to the concept [of the restaurant] and what I saw during my travels," she tells me.

Otoño has its own Spanish bar program: Spanish gin for G and T's with homemade tonic, vermouth, sherry, brandies, beer, and wine—all from Spain. There's even a *porron*, a festive glass wine pitcher with a very narrow spout that pours wine straight into your mouth. "So we're playing on the classics in a neighborhood where people are wanting something new," she explains.

The restaurant is casual and meant to be used daily. Come to a happy hour and have some snacks. Come on a date. Come for a drink. Have a more adventurous meal, like one of Motaño's paellas, where the flavor's soaked into the fat grains of rice. Around Christmastime, she's planning to give out *biscochitos* too (*get the recipe on p. 32*), a very Spanish-inspired cookie that she used to have back home.

"It's a sugar cookie with anise and wine and it's just so good...my younger sister makes the best ones. When she's producing dozens and dozens of these [to give away], she and I are in her kitchen with a fire going." She smiles, recalling the memory, "and drinking wine. It just ties everything together and makes sense with my food."

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Chef Nysha Arrington of Native in Santa Monica has childhood memories that form the foundation of her cooking as well. As a child, she never played house, but played restaurant instead. Armed with her Easy-Bake Oven at nine years old, she'd have her school friends come over and serve them broth.

"I was obsessed with it," she tells me. "I'd take water and soy and add little things like fresh garlic and it would always make this heartwarming thing."

Sitting on the sun-warmed patio of her sleek westside restaurant, she tells me that her strongest influences are from her biracial (Korean and African-American) family. Arrington also relates how the first thing she tried to make from start to finish was a disaster of an apple pie. "I didn't put sugar in the apples," she explains. "In my little-kid mind, I thought apples were sweet and all

you needed to do was slice them up...I went to taste it—I remember this moment—and I thought, *that isn't how it's supposed to taste!* It was definitely my first understanding of how to build flavor, to take nuances and make them taste more like themselves. A little sweet, a little tart, what happens if we accentuate this? What happens when we apply heat?"

Chef Arrington's menu tastes like comfort food until you realize the subtlety that she brings to each plate. A Top Chef contestant, she was also named one of Zagat's "30 Under 30" chefs to watch in LA. Her Jidori chicken with yucca and roasted chicken jus seems like the best chicken you could ever taste, something your mom might have made, until you realize that the sauce has been reduced to absolute perfection. The bumble bee potatoes with tandoori butter are a revelatory fusion of cultures. The foraged mushroom spaghetti manages to be silky, delicate, savory, and slightly crunchy, all at the same time. Somehow I can tell that her creativity comes straight from her personal history, and she also wants you to connect to yours. As she tells me, that's why the restaurant is called Native, because everyone's a native of somewhere.

Arrington's mom is Korean and her dad is African-American, but it was her maternal grandmother who first showed her how to express love through sustenance.

"At that time, it felt golden," she says. "Going to grandma's house was like a hug for the soul... we'd lay out newspaper on the table, then stand around and make wontons and dumplings," she remembers (*get the dumpling recipe on p. 33*). "That would be our offering of love...and it had a huge impact on my life: taking something and making food from the heart and soul that could nurture another being."

The idea of sitting down at a dining table every night and breaking bread set a foundation for her, as well as the times they insisted she eat her vegetables. "It helped me to understand how powerful food is. It should never be wasted...it comes from Mother Nature and it nurtures our bodies and it should never be garbage," she explains.

She considers herself a "seedling" of both her parents for sure, but even more of a daddy's girl. "He's my moon and stars," she tells me. "He comes from a martial arts background, and I studied martial arts too. My dad and I talk seventeen times a day and he's always asking me for cooking tips—'I've got this red snapper, how should I do it?'—he's so proud of me, and it's literally the thing that gets me out of bed every day, seeing that joy on his face."

Another feature of the holidays for Arrington is opening up a dialogue. As she tells me, "I celebrate food every day. And bringing that to the holiday season is what makes me me. My legacy is well-rooted in the farmers, growers, ranchers, the seasonality of Mother Nature. Food and understanding people through culture is definitely what I love to do."

She continues, "in a world of tech where you can download anything these days, you cannot download grandma's recipes. I feel like those things that are passed down on oily, creased pieces of paper that I can adapt and make my own and give to someone, there's a story and a meaning and a purpose behind it and that's real history."

## WHOLE ROASTED DUCK WITH DILL AND CITRUS

courtesy of Chef Ori Menashe | Bavel in DTLA

serves 4

"This is my go-to recipe for every holiday feast. It's one of those



Chef Nysha Arrington of Native Santa Monica. Photo: Jim Sullivan

recipes where you can just season it, put it in the oven, and then walk away. That's because we're cooking the meat for a longer time at a lower temperature until it falls apart. This way you get the flavor from the bones into the meat. The key is dry-aging the duck first in the refrigerator to help the fat render and the skin to crisp, and then cooking the meat breast-side down for added moisture." Find this recipe in the new Bestia cookbook (Ten Speed Press, 2018).

#### INGREDIENTS

1 whole duck (3 1/2 to 4 pounds)  
 kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper  
 3 cloves garlic  
 6 juniper berries, smashed  
 10 black peppercorns  
 6 sprigs dill, cut in half  
 3 sprigs thyme, cut in half  
 1 sprig sage  
 1 small sprig rosemary  
 2 fresh bay leaves or 1 dried  
 1 orange, cut into 8 wedges  
 1 tbsp grapeseed oil  
 fennel pollen, for garnish

#### INSTRUCTIONS

- Using a sharp knife, remove the wing tips from the duck. Season the body cavity of the duck with 1 tablespoon salt and ¼ teaspoon black pepper. Place the garlic, juniper berries, and peppercorns in the cavity. Line the bottom of the cavity with half of the dill sprig pieces, half of the thyme sprig pieces, the sage, rosemary, and bay leaves. Top with the orange wedges, then pile the remaining herbs on top of the oranges.
- Cut two 10-inch lengths of kitchen string. Use one piece to tie the ends of the legs together. Use the second piece of string to tie the wings closed behind the back. Place the duck, breast-side up, on a baking sheet lined with a clean kitchen towel and refrigerate uncovered for 24 to 72 hours.
- Preheat the oven to 325°F.
- Rub the outside of the duck with the grapeseed oil. Season the duck exterior with 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon salt, applying a bit more salt to the breast, then season with ¼ teaspoon pepper. Transfer the duck, breast-side down, to a roasting pan and roast for 3 ½ hours. Wearing oven mitts and working carefully, rotate the bird at the following intervals: 45 minutes breast-side down; 45 minutes left-side down; 45 minutes right-side down; 25 minutes left-side down; and 25 minutes right-side down.
- Remove the bird from the oven, rotate it onto its back, and let rest, breast-side up, for 15 to 30 minutes.
- To carve, pull the legs back from the body; they should easily separate. Using a sharp chef's knife, cut half of the breast meat off the body and transfer to a cutting board. Repeat to remove the other half. Carve the breast into thick slices against the grain on the bias. Arrange the slices on a serving platter and finish with a pinch of fennel pollen.

## GENEVIEVE'S FAMILY STUFFING

courtesy of Chef Genevieve Gergis | Bavel in DTLA

#### INGREDIENTS

1 loaf of good challah or ciabatta bread, cubed  
 4 tbsp unsalted butter  
 1 brown, yellow or white onion, chopped  
 3 stalks celery, chopped  
 1 Granny Smith or other tart apple, peeled and chopped  
 ½ Fuji or other sweet apple, peeled and chopped



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Genevieve's Mexican Wedding Cookies, courtesy of the Bestia cookbook (Ten Speed Press). Photo: Nicole Franzen © 2018.

- 1/2 cup golden raisins
- 1 cup fresh chestnuts, chopped
- kosher salt & freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- poultry seasoning, to taste
- chicken broth, warmed
- optionally, to make it a sausage stuffing, add 1 cup browned, crumbled sausage of choice

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Slowly bake cubed bread on a sheet tray in the oven at around 250°F until completely dry and lightly toasted. Allow to cool.
2. Melt butter in a skillet and slowly sauté onions on low-med heat until soft and translucent. Add celery and cook for an additional 5-10 minutes, or until softened a bit. Remove from heat and combine all of the above ingredients, except for the broth, in a large bowl.
3. Once everything is mixed, pour in about 1/2 cup of warm broth to dampen ingredients, mixing well, and adding a little bit more as needed. Taste stuffing for seasoning, and adjust with more salt, pepper, and poultry seasoning as desired. Keep in mind that the apples will moisten the stuffing as it cooks in the bird, so don't get it too wet; it should be lightly moist and not soggy. Stuff into your turkey or chicken and cook accordingly.

## MEXICAN WEDDING COOKIES

courtesy of Chef Genevieve Gergis | Bavel in DTLA

*makes about 40 cookies*

"These cookies have been a family holiday staple for as long as I can remember. My mom and sister used to use a recipe from some generic Christmas cookie book, but my version of Mexican

wedding cookies are nicely salted, extra buttery, and have a good amount of nuts. I whip the butter first, which makes a delicate, melt-in-your-mouth cookie, but Ori prefers his denser and meatier. If you do too, you can skip whipping the butter in the first step and the cookies will still be great, just sturdier. Whichever way I make these, Saffron will put an entire cookie in her mouth and chew it really slowly in her adorable little chipmunk cheeks until it melts." Find this recipe in the new Bestia cookbook (Ten Speed Press, 2018).

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 1/2 cup powdered sugar, plus more for dusting
- 2 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 3/4 cups pecan halves, very finely chopped
- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp kosher salt

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the butter on medium speed until pale and glossy, about 5 minutes. Stop the mixer and scrape down the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula, then add the powdered sugar and beat on low speed until incorporated. Raise the speed to high and beat until very light and fluffy, about 5 minutes, scraping down the sides of the bowl again about halfway through.
2. Add the vanilla and beat for 1 minute, then add the nuts and beat briefly on low speed just until incorporated.
3. In a small bowl, whisk together the flour and salt, then add it to the batter and mix on very low speed until just incorporated and the mixture forms a loose, shaggy dough. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for 2 hours.
4. Preheat the oven to 325°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
5. Once chilled, shape the dough into smallish Ping-Pong-size balls and place them about 2 inches apart on the prepared baking sheet. Transfer the whole sheet to the refrigerator for 5 minutes to re chill briefly, then bake until just barely golden on top, 20 to 25 minutes.
6. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool on the sheet briefly, then use a spatula to transfer the cookies to the rack and let cool completely. Dust with powdered sugar before serving. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week.

## BISCOCHITOS (ANISE COOKIES)

courtesy of Chef Teresa Montaña | Otoño in Highland Park

*makes about 5 dozen cookies*

**INGREDIENTS**

- 5 1/2 cups of all-purpose flour
- 5 1/2 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- 2 large eggs
- 1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 tbsp anise extract
- 1 1/2 cups unsalted butter, softened
- 1 tbsp anise seeds
- 1 cup rosé wine
- cinnamon sugar, to coat

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Sift together flour, baking powder, and salt in a large mixing bowl. Separately, either by hand or with a mixer, cream together eggs, sugar, vanilla and softened butter. Add dry ingredients and



Above: Teresa Montaño's Biscochitos (anise cookies)

- incorporate thoroughly, take care not to over mix.
2. Fold in anise seeds and wine.
3. Divide dough in half, wrap both with plastic wrap, and allow to chill for an hour. Once rested, on a flour-dusted work surface, roll out dough to 1/8-inch thickness and cut out your desired shape with cookie cutters.
4. Preheat oven to 400°F.
5. Prepare a shallow dish with cinnamon sugar. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper and nonstick spray or a silicone baking sheet, dredge stamped out cookies in cinnamon sugar on all sides, and place neatly on cookie sheet. Bake for about 7 minutes, until slightly browned around edges.

## BRAISED SHORT RIB DUMPLINGS

courtesy of Chef Nyesha Arrington | Native in Santa Monica

*makes about 30 dumplings*

*for the filling:*

### INGREDIENTS

- 8 lbs trimmed short ribs
- 2 small sweet onions, peeled roughly chopped, separated
- 1 small pear, peeled and cored
- 1/3 cup mirin
- 2 medium carrots, roughly chopped into 2-inch chunks
- 1½ cups of soy sauce
- 2 tbsp of minced garlic
- ½ cup of brown sugar
- Heavy pinch of Korean Chili flakes
- ¼ cup sesame seed, toasted and pulverized
- 5 cups water
- 3 tbsp chopped parsley
- 2 tsp chopped thyme

### INSTRUCTIONS

*Note: Have your butcher trim your short ribs in advance to save time!*

1. Put them in a large pot or Dutch oven, cover with cold water, and bring to a boil. Boil ribs for five minutes, skimming off any residue, then drain and rinse.



Above: Nyesha Arrington's Braised Short Rib Dumplings

2. In a food processor, pulse one onion and pear until smooth and pureed, scraping down the sides as you go.
3. Scrape the puree into a bowl and stir in the mirin.
4. Place the clean short ribs in a heavy bottom pot on med-high heat and spoon the onion and pear puree over the meat. Place the carrot and the other onion around the short ribs and sear on med-high heat. Continue to cook until golden brown.
5. In a medium bowl, combine soy sauce, minced garlic, brown sugar, a heavy pinch of Korean chili flakes, and ground sesame seeds.
6. Add the soy sauce mixture and 5 cups of water to the pot, give everything a good stir, then cover and bring to a boil.
7. Turn the heat down to low and simmer for 2 hours or until the vegetables and meat are cooked through and you can easily pierce through them with a fork. Allow to cool in the liquid, then remove the short ribs. Continue cooking the liquid over med-high heat until reduced by half.

*for the dumpling dough:*

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 lb high-gluten flour, sifted
- 2 ½ cups boiling water
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- ½ tsp baking soda

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine all ingredients in a stand mixer with dough hook attachment on medium speed until it all comes together.
2. Wrap the dough and allow it to rest for at least thirty minutes or overnight, then roll it out into a thin sheet.

### ASSEMBLY / TO SERVE:

1. With two forks, shred the braised short ribs and fold in roughly chopped cooked vegetables, then fold in 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley and 2 tsp chopped fresh thyme.
2. Begin to roll the dumplings by cutting the sheet into little squares, about 3 inches by 4 inches.
3. Place mixture into a piping bag and put a small dollop in the center of each square. Spritz the edges with water, then roll until the seams can be pinched closed.
4. Sauté in hot oil and serve. ♦