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Sharing the Story of Local Food, Season by Season



the
MEATLESS
issue

FOOD DYES WITH FOOD WASTE | REFUGEE KITCHENS | BRUNCH COCKTAILS

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THERE'S NO TASTE LIKE HOME.

How One Cooking School Shares the Immigrant Experience

BY LISA ALEXANDER

I've always thought it would be pretty eye-opening to be invited into the home of someone who is from another country, another culture, and has another way of cooking and gathering around their kitchen table. Imagine not only being welcomed into someone's home and learning about their country's cuisine, but getting to join in on cooking, too. That's exactly what I had the opportunity to do through **The League of Kitchens**—a passion project by Lisa Gross, an artist and social entrepreneur who has long been fascinated by the ways food brings people together.

Lisa is the daughter of both a Korean immigrant and a Jewish New Yorker so, food-wise, she was raised somewhere between denjang-guk and matzoh ball soup. While still in school, she started the Boston Tree Party, an activist project that encouraged 70-plus communities to plant heirloom apple trees. After she graduated, she realized that she'd never learned how to make traditional meals from her

Korean-American grandmother, who'd since passed away. Wouldn't it be great to have a network of women from different communities who could teach you the important dishes, the ones full of memories, those wonderful, filled-with-love home-cooked meals?

The League of Kitchens has branches in New York and Los Angeles. Its instructors range from Rego Park, Queens to Borough Park, Brooklyn to Palms and Glendale in Los Angeles. In LA alone, you can take an immersion workshop in Armenian/Georgian food as well as a one in Indian cuisine. It's a unique way to step into the immigrant experience via the universal language of food, taste, cooking, and breaking bread. Intimate, emotional, experiential, and regional, it's also community-building and super fun.

On a recent Saturday, our instructor is Smitha from Hubli, the second largest city in Karnataka, a state

TRUE COLORS

Creating natural dyes from food waste

words: Madeline Crozier | photography: Heather Schrock | layout: Caryn Scheving

In food as in nature, color abounds. Natural dyes, made from food scraps that would otherwise go composted or unused, suddenly inspire creative opportunities that reduce food waste. They can replace synthetic chemical colorings in foods like frostings, icings and batters. They can also dye fiber such as yarn or fabric for clothing and pillowcases. And they can add color to DIY projects from paper crafts to home-made paints to Easter eggs.

Creating natural food dyes requires a willingness to experiment with ingredients to see what colors emerge. Here are some common food scraps and the colors they evoke. Visit EdibleLA.com for a "How To" guide when dyeing at home including safety tips and our favorite books on natural dyes.

ONIONS

Onion skins contain their own tannins, no fixative is required to dye fabric (see web story for details). There's no need to treat the fabric ahead of time. Yellow onion skins produce a yellow-orange color, while red onion skins produce a pale orange with pink undertones.

LEMONS

Chopped lemon peels produce a soft lemonade-yellow color. When using natural dyes to color frostings or icings, add the dye little by little to achieve the desired shade. A small amount of flavor often remains from the original food, so taste as you go.

BEETS

Save beet trimmings, peelings and tops to produce a rich, reddish-pink dye. The color produced from beets often fades over time in fabrics but serves well in short-term uses such as coloring Easter eggs, frostings or batters.



AVOCADOS

Instead of tossing out avocado skins and seeds, store them in the freezer.

Five or six avocados will create enough dye for smaller projects, but more scraps will encourage deeper color tones. Boiling the avocado skins and seeds draws out colors from warm peach to light pink.



SPINACH

Wilted spinach can span a range of shades from deep green to soft celery. Increasing the amount of spinach deepens the color. Natural ingredients from artichokes to herb leaves to grass can create green tones. To develop your own natural green dye, experiment with different combinations.



RED CABBAGE

When boiled into dye, red cabbage leaves create a deep purple shade. Dye made from red cabbage leaves is generally difficult to fix to fabric, but the fixative will help for short-term projects (see web story for details). This dye is ideal for coloring frostings or batters.



BLUEBERRIES

If you've picked more blueberries than you can eat, they can make a light blue or purplish dye, depending on the concentration of fruit. Experimentation is key.



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MAGAZINE





Moodbeli's Chilly Nights
Mushroom Immunity Latte

in southwestern India. The cuisine there is different from any other vegetarian Indian food I've tasted. During the afternoon, I ate things I'd truly never had before—all unexpected and delicious.

So, how does it work? From their website, you can scroll through their class schedule—we're doing a vegetarian Indian class—then you and five other people are sent the class location, which felt a little bit like getting the secret address to a supper club or a speakeasy. Smitha's apartment is in Palms, a highly diverse neighborhood on LA's westside, where you can hear Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati on the streets and in the stores.

On Saturday afternoon, the workshop participants are all women who are interested in food with varying degrees of expertise. There's a lot of talk about gardens and cooking and people like me, who try to follow a recipe, but can't resist the urge to improvise.

After giving us a chance to introduce ourselves, Smitha, a lovely young woman with a sleek bob and a traditional cream-colored kurta, tells us about the delicious snack on the table in front of us.

It's a typical breakfast meal. There's a bowl of

pressed rice redolent of chilies and cilantro and peanuts, a green cilantro chutney and adorable silver-dollar-sized pancakes that seem amazingly light. Before long, there's a lot of dipping and happy nibbling going on; you can sense right away that we all relax because we know we're in capable hands.

Karnataka cuisine, like many regional cuisines, uses spices to spark the flavors of the original ingredient. It's all about complementing and intensifying rather than smothering with a heavy sauce. There's no curry per se, but a very individual mixture of spices that changes according to what's being made. We're also talking a lot of pulses and beans, often soaked, and grains and dry chutneys made up of ground peanuts and sesame seeds.

Smitha, a software engineer, tells us that she went through an involved audition process before she was selected (only one cook is picked to represent each region). She was trained in how to handle and focus a group (like the chatty group of us). Someone also worked with her to help translate her instinctive cooking style into recipes as well as a very thorough shopping guide of the area's stores.

"And the workshop's very interactive," she says,

leading us to the kitchen table before handing knives over to us.

First up is junka, a chickpea flour curry. "Mushy and mashy," Smitha says, which doesn't come close to describing its unusual, nuanced deliciousness. Smitha first learned to make it in university and, depending on her mood, she'll freely change up the proportions and heat level.

After chopping ginger, chilies, onion, scallions, and garlic, we take turns adding them to the pot after scenting the oil with black mustard and cumin seeds. I'm especially wowed by Smitha's little steel box where round spice cups are arranged in a flower pattern.

"Every Indian woman has one of these," she explains, even as she puts a pinch of turmeric in our junka, and then another of cumin.

"You can make the same ingredients taste completely different depending on when you temper the ingredient with the oil, at what stage you add the spice, and for how long you let it cook," she tells us.

Smitha also has a nifty vertical rack that fits neatly next to the fridge when not in use. She pulls it out regularly during the class, unscrewing a jar and taking out fenugreek or white toasted sesame seeds. The racks also contain even more unusual things like moth beans ("they look like little moths") and a jar of translucent pressed rice.

Smitha has an arsenal of spices and ingredients constantly at her fingertips to flavor her dishes in all sorts of different ways. It's all so much more intuitive, personal, and creative than just following a recipe from a book or a website.

I also learn that tasting everything is half the fun. Before we fold in the chickpea flour, we feast on jaggery, a delicious caramel-tasting raw sugar, as well as umami-rich tamarind paste. Then, while the junka is steaming, we turn to the salad portion of our meal—this one consists of soaked moong dal beans, cucumber, onion, cilantro, and a sprinkling of grated fresh coconut. Smitha tells us that this kind of salad is often eaten with spicy dishes to balance the heat.

Our lunch would definitely not be complete without chapatti and roti, so we learn how to mix the flatbread dough from special sharbati wheat flour, rolling it out with some difficulty. It's much harder than it seems, at least to us. Smitha is a pro at this, of course; just watch her flip her chapati one-handed and try not to feel like a total klutz. Her mother and all her aunts were there when she first made them at age thirteen. As she says, making flatbread in India is a reflection of how someone is raised and it's very important to get it just right.

To finish off our lunch, Smitha shows us how to a flavor a savory lassi drink. Made from finger millet and buttermilk, it's spiced with chilies and fresh curry leaves. She tells us that it's a popular beverage in Karnataka and is meant to help keep everyone cool during those blazing summer months.

When everything is finally cooked—and the kitchen smells amazing, by the way—Smitha looks happy, content. Together



we set the table and sit down, ready to tuck into a delicious feast with lively conversation among a small group of new friends. Smitha has shared her culture, we've all enjoyed a unique experience and definitely acquired valuable tools to take home to our own kitchens. Mission accomplished.

As one fellow participant shares, "I was a little unsure about going into someone else's [home] kitchen—would it feel too intimate? —but I felt blown away by how good it felt. And Smitha was really generous and warm. I thought they couldn't have made a better choice in her."

Don't take my word for it—head to leagueofkitchens.com to sign up for your own experience. We did a vegetarian class, but there are many others to choose from. Smitha also leads a shopping trip for out-of-the-way and completely unique ingredients in Little India, Artesia. ♦

