

**What kind of food do
you eat at an art festival?
How do artists use
food in their practice?
How do institutions
connect food and art?
Are museum cafes
the worst? How can
institutions serve as
hospitable places for
food to be shared? How
can art be nourishing?
Who is cooking the food,
and who is eating it?**

TBA FOOD PUBLICATION

This publication about food was created on the occasion of the 2018 Time Based Art Festival, in Portland Oregon.

Edited by Spencer Byrne-Seres and
Maria Isabel Saldaña Suastes.

The TBA Food Program was curated
by Spencer Byrne-Seres.

Special thanks to all of the
participants of the food program,
including, Carlos Reynoso, Abram
Bañuelos, Arlyn Frank, Salesni
Sundar, torri rubi, Stacey Tran,
and Jodie Cavalier. Also to Kristan
Kennedy, Erin Boberg Doughton,
Roya Amirsoleymani for guidance
and perspective. To Maria Saldaña
for conducting interviews, doing
research and helping shape the
publication. To our contributors,
including Artist Michael Bernard
Stevenson Jr. and Jessica Meza-
Torres. To Bill Boese, Eddie
Ershbock, Kasey Shun, Mat Larimer,
Avery Bloch, Shelbee Smith, Chris
Balo, and everyone who helped build
the Patio!

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This publication was printed by
Sunday Painter Press, Portland
Oregon.

INTRODUCTION

This publication acts as a portable wall text for the revamped food program at TBA. As someone always craving more context, I wanted to put together a collection of writing and conversations that inform and expand on what we have envisioned for how we commune and nourish ourselves during the festival. The Patio, no longer just the beer garden, has become an intentional space for food, conversation, and public dialogues. It is a backdrop for the community that is formed every year through the convergence of artists and audiences.

The Patio is inspired by the efforts each of our vendors puts forth to carve out space, whether through a pop-up taco stand, catering, or a brick and mortar restaurant. These spaces might be queer oriented, immigrant owned, vegan. They might be itinerant, constantly moving and changing form, or they might be fixed, countering the current wave of gentrification in North Portland. All of these businesses draw on powerful memories and experiences in crafting the flavors and feelings they serve. In addition to these interviews, we have included essays and poetry that document how artists are thinking and working with food in different ways.

This publication offers details, stories and information on all of the vendors we are working with for the Festival. Nonetheless, the best way to show support is to talk to Carlos, Abram, Saleshni, Deon, torri, and Arlyn. Eat their food, ask questions, show up to their pop-ups. As you navigate the festival, consult one of the excellent directories of POC owned restaurants for you pre-show meal, and remember to come hungry to the Late Night!

-Spencer Byrne-Seres

THE PROGRAM

TBA Food brings together chefs, cooks, and artists who make space for community and inquiry through their creative practices. This year, featured vendors will offer snacks and meals through our late night pop-up restaurant at PICA. This space forms the backdrop for The Patio—a space where artists and audiences gather throughout the day and night to relax, connect, eat, and drink. TBA Food includes a panel discussion on the intersection of art, food, and community, and a special edition of Portland's beloved Tender Table. TBA Food embodies PICA's commitment to social justice and local economy. We support immigrant-owned businesses and creative projects that offer a platform for underrepresented voices in the art and food industries, and invite Festival audiences to experience Portland's culinary landscape from new perspectives.

Where are chefs drawing inspiration? How do artists engage and utilize food, rituals, and meals in their practices? How do institutions support efforts to connect food and art? How can institutions serve as hospitable places for meals to be shared and nourishment to be found?

MEET THE VENDORS:

The Big Elephant Kitchen

Many years back, Fiji was a British colony where Indians were brought to farm sugarcane. Having lived most of their lives in Fiji, these farmers decided to stay there when their contracts were up. Because of this, the cultures of the Native Polynesian Fijians and those of the Indian immigrants eventually began to commingle, giving us Indian curry variants, with an islander twist. The Big Elephant Kitchen happily brings their home-cooked Fijian/Indian food to Portland. Their chef, also the owner's mother, cooks each dish using her homemade masala; they use all fresh ingredients, cut and ground right there in the restaurant.

Mija/Mija

Mija/Mija is heartfelt and humble latinx food project highlighting the beauty and layers of the foods they grew up eating en la casa. A plant based Puerto Rican-Mexican fusión that aims to build community by creating safe and enriching space for everyone, especially POC, LGTBQI+ and other marginalized folks. They believe in the magic of gathering over a meal made with love and intention, the comforting power of rice and beans and the ancestral knowledge passed down through salsas, pasteles and tortillas. A crew of badass xingonxs who want to feed you like their abuelitas fed them.

Mis Tacones

Mis Tacones is a contemporary taqueria that serves vegan tacos, tortas, and aguas frescas similar to taquerias that are popular in Baja, California, Mexico, or in working class communities in East Los Angeles. Creators Carlos Reynoso, and Abram Bañuelos work to preserve the traditions of their Mexican heritage. Their passion is to share their love of Mexican street food, making Mis Tacones a sustainable popup that also functions as a safe space for queer and POC communities within Portland, Oregon. Mis Tacones allows individuals to experience a traditional Mexican taqueria with authentic flavors that are cruelty free.

A CONVERSATION WITH SALESHNI SUNDAR AND ROSHANI THAKORE



For the past year, Salesdni Sundar, the oldest sister and owner of The Big Elephant Kitchen, has opened up her kitchen to local artist, Roshani Thakore. When they get together at 3940 North Williams Avenue, they share stories about immigrant family life, go on ladder quests, talk about patriarchal systems in South Asian and American cultures, debate shades of pink, make rotis, paint siding, speak in languages other than English, and some other things.

- Roshani: So it is Sunday afternoon, at the patio of the Big Elephant Kitchen. This is Roshani, and I'm here with Salesdni and I've been working with her and the family for almost a year now, and we're in the middle of working on the mural that's going to be on the front of the building. And up until now we have had a lot of different conversations, a lot of different kinds of experiences. The Big Elephant Kitchen is owned by Salesdni, Deon...
- Salesdni: And Deepak.
- Roshani: And Deepak. And then Auntie and Uncle. What would you like to say about them?
- Salesdni: My mom pretty much cooks everything and my dad finds all of the stuff that we need. I wouldn't say random, but all the unique items that we cook, my dad goes out and finds out where he can find them and brings it back. He'll always go out and look for it, find it and bring it back. That's what my dad does.
- Roshani: Nice. So you guys have been in business for a little over a year. Since your mom cooks almost everything, I guess you're learning to cook now too, could you talk about the inspiration for the cooking and for the restaurant?
- Salesdni: So my mom's cooking comes from Fiji, which is where both my parents are from. A lot of the cooking is still Indian Curries but made with a Fijian flavor. So it's curries, but whatever things that they can find in Fiji as well, like what the masala is made from, so it's a little different. We use coconut milk instead of dairy so that's different.

Saleshni: How we started was my mom cooks big batches of food because we have a huge family, so she always cooks and my mom is an amazing cook. It kinda just happened that my brothers always wanted to have a business and do this so we just put everything together, it happened really fast. We thought about doing it in 2016 in September, by about October we had a building and everything was set up and then we opened in May, it was crazy.

Roshani: Can you talk about the atmosphere of your place? And the Fijian-Indian distinction which is really important - I hadn't had Fijian food until meeting you guys. It's all home cooked meals and I remember before we met I was researching and I read an article about how something that was important to you was having this be nourishing food but also affordable too?

Saleshni: Yes, so everything we make is exactly how we make it at home, we don't change anything so whatever I'd eat and make at home is how we cook it here, and of course my mom cooks it so it's exactly like it is at home. But our main thing is that I want someone that's wearing a nice suit to come in here to eat, same as someone wearing just sweats or even pajamas coming to get a to-go meal. That's always been our thing. I mean we're young in Portland and we're college students so for us to just be able to walk into anywhere at any point in time and be like, "Can I just get some food?" It's easy and it's simple to not have to be like, "I have no money left," after eating a meal. So we wanna have good food and people be able to be like, "Oh yeah, I can afford to eat here everyday." That type of thing and we do have a lot of people that come here everyday.

I didn't expect it when we first opened but now it's so many people. We have so many regular customers that come in and they know what they like and they'll call and be like, "Can



you make this for me today or can you make that for me?" And it feels nice that customers care or they'll come in and be like, "I want this, I want that, I want that." Or if one day I'm not here or my brother's not here, some of them come in and be like, "Oh wait, hey where's your sister or where's your brother, they're not here today?" It feels nice to know someone cares that I didn't serve them or wasn't here.

Roshani: Yes, you're so great at also knowing so much about people and developing relationships and learning about their lives... Wasn't there something where people stayed here longer than expected.

Saleshni: Yeah, on Google it says that people stay here an hour to an hour twenty minutes and then a lot of people always ask, "Why does it say that on Google?" Even my brothers ask, "Why does it say that on Google?" And because once I start talking to someone, it ends up being 30 minutes and before they know it they're like, "Oh, my lunch break is almost over. I have to run." But then they'll come back the next day and start over a conversation. When people come in regularly they become family. Yeah they're still a customer, they come in, they get food, they pay but it's more of family coming in visiting, I feed them, that type of thing.

Roshani: Yeah, which is really nice to have and I feel like you guys have been so open and welcoming to me and my crazy ideas and thinking about "Hey I want to know how you guys do your thing." So I'm also curious about, we've been working together for almost a year so how that has been for you... We're starting the mural now which is pretty exciting and we're getting a lot of good feedback from just the general public and your regulars which is nice.

Saleshni: Yeah, they love it. I have not heard a negative response about the color, everybody's like, "It's welcoming, it's inviting, it's bright." And we're not even done with what, not even one-fourth of it, and people are already into it.

Roshani: Yes, which is really exciting. Do you want to talk about our first meeting?

Saleshni: It was fun. You were like, "Oh I just want to learn how to do this or I just want to know," At first it was a little weird because you wanted to know stuff and I was just like, "Is she trying to steal my recipe?"

Roshani: (Laughing) Right! You gotta guard your secret recipes.

Saleshni: Is she from another Indian restaurant trying to spy on us? Is that what's going on here? But then later on we started talking and joking around and before I knew it, it's almost a year. I feel like it's been a good time. You just come in, we hang out and then you help out in the kitchen with random tasks.

Roshani: Yes, using the cleaver was fun.

Saleshni: It's been almost a year and we now may share some secrets...

Roshani: Yes, yes, little steps.

Saleshni: You've made Roti and Samosa, right?

Roshani: (Laughing) yes

Roshani: Yeah, what did you say about the Fijian samosa?

Saleshni: The seashell shape.

Roshani: The seashell shape. Yes, that's pretty great.

Saleshni: That's why each one is always different. We make all of them by hand. Well, my mom's always look the same but she's had years of experience. When my brothers and I do it, they're always odd-shaped but that's fine because no two seashells are alike.

Roshani: That's so great. You just made me think, so in a lot of South Asian families the daughters are doing the cooking or anything in the kitchen and it's very different in your family.

Saleshni: Yes, it's very different.

Roshani: In your kitchen, I have to say, I was a little shocked that Deon was cooking and very excited.

Saleshni: Indian boys don't normally ever cook. But my mom and my dad have always been like, "No, you have to be independent." It doesn't work that way. If you're going to eat, you're going to know how to cook your food. Not even cook it, when we were younger, since me and Deon are so close in age, I used to always do it for him so if it came down to cooking I'd just be like, "You know I'll do it." Because me and him are only a year and a couple months apart so I used to always be the big sister and do it for him. But for Deepak, he's younger and he's been around my mom more so he took it up pretty quickly on how to do everything.

Roshani: That's really great.

Saleshni: And he likes it a lot more than Deon. Deon likes cooking but for him it's more, "I'll only do it if I have to."

Saleshni: They're still brothers. I mean, we're family so we'll still joke around, we're siblings so that's one thing I hope people understand is that we're having fun while doing it so hopefully that shows.

Roshani: Yes for sure and I'm curious about that because you have so many regulars and you've talked about how it feels like family for you. Has that been surprising?

Saleshni: We weren't expecting as big of a base, when we first planned it out and were putting everything together, making business plans. We were expecting that to be there in like at least another year cause a lot of people are like, "Your business isn't stable until the first three years." We've been open for a little over a year and we have a large customer base, people like coming here, people love us, everyone's hearing about it! We went to the Ilani Casino in La Center, Washington because of our janitorial business, and we were talking with the manager for the business and she asks my mom what's the name of our restaurant, and when we told her, she said that she's heard about it and have been wanting to try it out!

Roshani: Going back to your main business, how often does your menu change?

Saleshni: Every day, it's a different menu. We make nine different curries

Roshani: And you guys come in in the morning and prepare everything for your lunch special?

Saleshni: Yes, so everything comes in whole, fresh jackfruit, fresh papaya, fresh taro leaves comes in. I prep and my mom cooks.

Roshani: What's your favorite dish?

Saleshni: Deepak and I love the taro leaves. It's always been taro leaves. When we were younger, we weren't able to find it as easily so my mom would make it whenever she could get it, she'd find it and make it with coconut milk. So she would make it and then we would all come home on the school bus and then go inside and then just by the smell, we'd know what she made. And we're always like there's never enough because regardless of how much she'd get, the greens dissolve into a tiny portion so we would always fight for it - "I want more, I want more, I want more," but now we don't fight for it anymore. We still eat the same amount of taro leaves though. I know Deon gets tired of it, he says his favorite dish changes weekly. But for Deepak and me if taro leaves are there, we're going to have that!



I'M CONVINCED THAT SQUASH IS THE VEGETABLE OF ROMANCE

Keeping old friends while making new homes has taught me
more and more ways of loving.

Rjay sends me memes almost everyday and
Marissa stays up two hours past her bedtime to make up
for the time difference.

But I remember old, familiar ways of loving too—
that though quieter and maybe simpler, are also concerned with
longing and the great task of tomorrow.

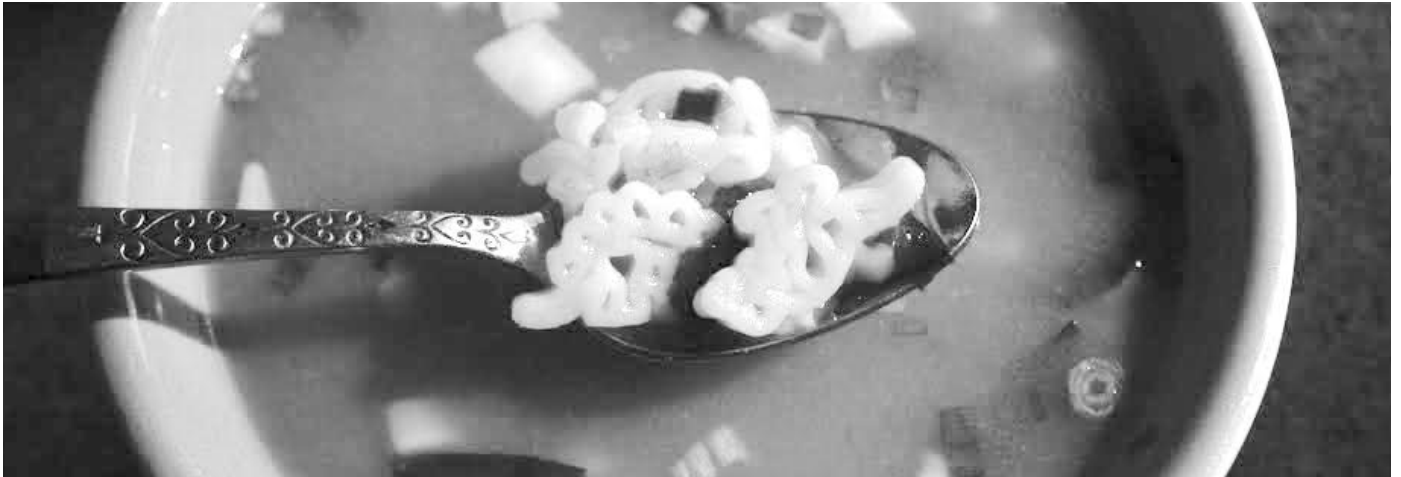
My dad tells me stories of how my mom burned
the first meal she ever cooked for him
and how he ate the charred squash anyway.
Love, for them, has been nourishment
and forgiveness.

I find comfort in knowing that, in the midst of it all,
we'll keep finding ways to feed each other—
that though I'll fuck up in different ways,
there remains, still the possibility of sharing squash.

– Jessica Meza-Torres

CONSIDERATION TO TASTE

BY ARTIST MICHAEL BERNARD STEVENSON JUNIOR



Eating out was a treat for my mother's family, an occasion that would happen only a few times a year while visiting her grandparents in Manhattan. When they did go out it would give her mother a night off from preparing dinner for six. I'm told that when visiting her grandparents they would always go to a Chinese restaurant, which inspired all kinds of emotions. Enjoying the food of another culture, a meal where everyone could get something different, a night where my grandmother could enjoy a meal without having prepared it, and best of all, no dishes!

Now, when my mother's family goes out to eat, the experience is chemically bound to memories of Chinese food in Manhattan. My own experience of going out to eat is well marinated in rituals specific to memories of sharing meals with my extended family. Uncle Jerry is bound to ask about the specials, listen intently, ask for a few things to be elaborated on, and then order off the menu making substitutions resulting in a dish of his own creation. Uncle Paul will likely order for his wife and two kids, a few things to share, and maybe something for the table. Later, when the food arrives, there's an expectation that uncle Charles will steal something off your plate without asking. Something he learned from his mother, who's too old now to steal without help, so she asks you to pass your dish across the table. At the end, everyone argues over who's going to pay.

These rituals have become uniform enough to predict, and through its repetition has generated its own social culture. I have a nostalgia for these experiences that I bring to any gathering around food. However, the

social dynamic of eating together seems to be dissipating as I grow older. My immediate and extended family gets together less as time goes on. The institution of "Dinner Time" no longer conjures the image of family sitting around a table at home, heads bowed for grace before the meal. People I know tend to eat out, on the go, and alone at home.

From time to time I'll share a meal with others. Usually during events I plan and facilitate myself. I can't say it's somehow everyone else's fault. I find myself with a schedule that doesn't include times planned to cook. I do breakfast pretty well, with a diligent smoothie shopping, prep, and consumption practice. Even with breakfast on lock it is out of the ordinary for me to cook a hot meal for myself more than once a week. Where has the institution of healthy home cooked meals gone? I'm embarrassed to say I'm simply not making enough time for it. A fortunate aspect of this conundrum is that we're all due for a meal sometime later today, or early tomorrow, and we can choose to incorporate material and social components that bring us health and happiness.

Artist first and foremost, I've brought many aspects of my "non-art" life into what one might traditionally describe as a studio practice. I consider everyday actions as forms of creation, and that each action, and all of its nuances, is similar to making a brush stroke across a blank canvas. In painting as the artist continues to make marks, the larger vision comes into focus for the viewer. When making art in a live context the function is similar. As individual decisions are made the shared experience takes

shape for the larger audience. When the audience is empowered to participate and are responsible for minor or major decisions it creates an inherently collaborative environment. This kind of art making is commonly referred to as social practice.

In developing a socially engaged practice, I naturally began to express using mediums that I am passionate about. For my practice, this way of thinking about producing artwork has crept into the kitchen and put its hand in the cookie jar. I am interested in exploring what it means to make food while considering various conceptual frameworks and working to co-create experiences inside and outside of the kitchen as part of my artist practice. As I develop a portfolio full of these kinds of projects I am noticing that even though food is a keystone to how the work functions, it is not always the most pivotal aspect of the finished work. When people gather around food I've made, they have a diverse range of experiences and emotions during the meal. Their experiences are informed by other guests, where the event is happening, and how it unfolds over time.

I've been referring to this tangle of circumstances, conditions, and possible parallel realities as the "social context" in which the meal is consumed. Social contexts are hyper specific, even when similar to other known instances. Unlike making multiple snowman cookies using a cookie cutter mold, in socially engaged contexts when most of the circumstances are the same as they have been before, one alteration may produce unanticipated results. Similar to when one is baking and doesn't measure the dry mix, it can produce

unpredictable baking conditions. So while I will at times explain observations I've made about one social context or another, the lived experiences I am describing may be interpreted differently by others who were there. Much like trying to assess if a work of art is good or bad, the decision is ultimately a matter of taste.

Tables for Two is a project that began early in my food oriented practice that occurs on Valentine's day. The first iteration took place in the lobby of Harder Hall, the art building at Alfred University, and the kitchen was operated out of the Moka Joka, a student run cafe, one floor below. Tables for Two was planned and produced in collaboration with Sierra Sparks, Stephanie Joan Arthur (Giera), Elizabeth Cote, Sam Sloan-Wiechert, Erin Hall, Jessie Simmons, Kait Boccardo, Kristey Palmisano and Devin Henry. The menu was a four course meal sourced from local farms and businesses served to multiple seatings of tables for two on Valentine's Day. The first course was a trio of cheeses and dips, the second a salad with a choice between dressings made by Sierra and myself, the third — spaghetti with a tomato and eggplant sauce, and finally a half chocolate waffle topped with raw milk honey vanilla ice cream.

For couples, Tables for Two was an opportunity to experience something unique together. Service began by seating couples at a table in our makeshift dining room for the evening. Guests were given water and handed a menu to look over describing the four courses. Each course was brought out only after the one before it was finished, allowing couples to enjoy the space we had created for them. The meal finished with a "receipt" which was actually the names of the artists involved, almost like credits rolling at the end of a movie. I know for sure that three of the cou-

ples in attendance that night are still in romantic relationships. A longevity that I claim no responsibility for, but instead view the meal as a garnish to a much longer recipe for love and happiness.

In the first iteration of Tables for Two, my gaze was on the front of house experience, failing to consider the experience of the service staff. Despite being unconsidered, the mood among the service staff was upbeat and jovial, whizzing around each other to get the food made and on the table. This was an unexpected outcome as up to that point most of the work I had done relating to food all of the cooking was by me alone. Currently I consider the entire process between farm to table to be part of the social context surrounding a meal, including who is participating, at what point, and what is their experience like. Social contexts exist whether they are considered or not. Failing to anticipate something does not prevent it from happening or from contributing to the broader experience. The opportunity to be intentional about the conditions in which something occurs exists as long as one is aware of it. Either way is fine, for me one way is not better than the other, in fact I am often trying to leave aspects of large coordinated events totally unplanned opening the door for fun surprises like the tenor in the kitchen that night.

The second iteration of Tables for Two happened on Valentine's Day 2013 in Inverness Florida at Amy Lovett and John Messer's home in collaboration with Stephanie Joan Arthur (Giera) who collaborated on the first iteration. The experience was memorable enough for Stephanie that she was inspired to share it with friends and family from the community she was raised in. The third and most recent iteration of Tables for Two was designed to engage and cre-

ate more specific social contexts than its predecessors. During the 2018 Valentine's holiday (belated), I prepared a four course meal for Emma Colburn and their son Ray. The entire meal was vegan and designed to entice the palates of both mother and son. The event poised to be a poetically precise iteration of Tables for Two resulted in interesting outcomes that were unanticipated in the menu planning phase.

The meal occurred in the Colburn home coinciding with both bath and bed time. I prepared the meal while watching Emma and Ray live their life undisturbed by the need for food. A moment that, were I not present, would require one or both of them to concern themselves with the preparation of dinner. In lieu of cooking the meal themselves, or one of them alone, they were both able to enjoy the time and space before and after dinner together. Ray enjoyed a leisurely bath before being gingerly dried by his mother and getting dressed for dinner. Also attending the meal was Raphael, a Ninja Turtle doll that I had altered for Ray.

The meal began with a turmeric falafel accompanied by roasted red pepper hummus and cucumber sauce. Next up was miso soup with dinosaur pasta, followed by fried tofu cut into dinosaur shapes and layered on a bed of mashed potatoes, with a broccoli and asparagus forest arranged behind them. Finishing off the meal was a chocolate avocado mousse sweetened with honey and topped with blueberries and a sprig of mint. I really went out of my way to push the food into an arena that would satisfy a litany of criteria: vegan, healthy, fun, interesting, colorful, animated, playful, and challenging. While I believe I succeeded in the goals I set, I can't tell if the menu was the most captivating part of the evening. While Emma did say it was the best meal they ever had in their home, other aspects Emma shared about the experience include it being nice to be able to relax and enjoy an evening with their son before, during, and after dinner.

Audience to the meal, I actively noticed the time Emma was referring to. It was bathtime uninterrupted by pots boiling over in the kitchen. It was a meal at home allowing time to change into fancy and playful attire. It was a meal attended by imaginary (real) friend and toy Raphael while the artist who co-created it (him) was cooking dinner in the kitchen. It was a meal that did its own dishes while storytime gently lulled Ray and his full belly to sleep. These are certainly





ingredients that were a part of this meal but they are not things you can taste. It was with these discoveries in particular that I began to see how social contexts form around the meals I prepare.

Tables for Two has always been about lavish menus and contexts imbued with the intention to produce a space for lovers to love each other. That said, the qualities surrounding the food in this project, and others, also happen naturally during meals outside of an art context. They are qualities that I am trying to reproduce by emulating the format of breakfast, lunch, dinner and everything in between. But the magic of weaving people together around food exists in far less exotic circumstances than the ones I create. Recently while participating in a reflection on the King School Museum of Contemporary Art summer program, one of the campers commented that their favorite part of camp was going to McDonald's.

They went on to say that when at McDonald's, it gave all the campers a chance to meet each other in a fun informal setting. They were able to play and joke around without the pressure of predetermined activities in a place that all the campers were familiar with and excited by. While McDonald's is not the most exotic place, it allowed the camp cohort to begin to relate to each other more deeply, building a foundation for collaborative projects moving forward. The social context surrounding the meal is something to note particularly while the meal was not particularly of note.

I was fascinated by the comment's blunt honesty because it's an example of spotting the power of food to bring people together in the wild. A wild that isn't dependent on the extravagance often associated with something worthy of three Michelin stars or aiming for inclusion within the canon of Art. The contexts I am drawing forward here make no attempt to claim responsibility for everyone's good time but instead might inspire one to consider the two things as enhancing each other. While many of my projects use the menu as an opportunity to create an exotic context for participants to consume and socialize around, there are just as many instances where the quality of the food is not the focus.

Don't get me wrong, I am listening quite intently as my uncle Jerry interrogates waiters about the food on the menu as if he's that over conscientious couple in Portlandia asking whether or not the chicken being served is local. A lot of my food culture and practice is related to learning about food from farms, seeing where produce grows and how animals live. Through my experiences with food I have come to value the social contexts around it equally if not greater than the list of ingredients, though they are always related. An interesting social context can be just as nourishing as the meal, and while neither should be neglected, one is often available when the other is not.

As an artist, chef, and living breathing human being, I can't stress enough that healthy nourishing foods and the social contexts that surround

them, are available to everyone who eats. For those of us living with levels of privilege that allow for more than one meal a day, there is always another meal around the corner. With awareness of this privilege we can plan who we wish to share food with, or be open to sharing a meal with whomever is near the next time we're hungry. If we follow this exercise to its natural conclusion, the guest(s), the occasion in which to gather around, and the menu for the meal can all be tailored to appease specific thoughts, needs, ideas, and desires.

I implore anyone who finds these words resonating with them to think of someone they care about, someone you know but would like to get to know better, or someone you barely know but think is cute and invite them to share a meal with you. To be successful, invitations to desired guests must be extended intentionally and overtly as it is presumptuous to assume one is invited to partake in a meal, even when food is on the table in front of them. You can go to a favorite restaurant, grab a bite at the nearest food cart, or cook something that ranges from simple to elaborate to make together or prepare alone and serve as a treat. Once an invitation is extended, every choice contributes to the meal and the social context surrounding it, setting the stage for a unique and memorable experience for everyone at the table.

MIS TACONES:

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CARLOS REYNOSO AND MARIA SALDAÑA

*Carlos is one of the owners of Mis Tacones who agreed to delve deeper into the history and intention behind the pop up he runs with his partner Abram Bañuelos, and where they see the future of their business. In addition to co-editing this publication through an internship at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Maria is completing her Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art at Willamette University.**

Maria: What's behind the name, Mis Tacones?

Carlos: Because we're queer, it's either My Big Taco or My High Heels. My partner, Abram, wears heels to the pop ups. Not all the time, but he wears heels. Abram likes to dress up a lot, so he sometimes will roll up in heels. It's cute, but I tell him honestly, don't overdo it. He would do that for the queer dance parties, he would roll up in huge, Stiletto heels. He looks cute, but, it's like, within an hour he's dying. I can't help you anymore. I'm like well, yeah. You're wearing these huge shoes. He found these wedges and he's comfortable in, so he's happy. Often he'll wear them around. That's the idea behind the name.

Maria: What is your inspiration for Mis Tacones?

Carlos: I think multiple things. Actually, I was talking to my friend, Emiko, who runs Food Fight up here, the vegan grocery store. I honestly think the main inspiration was actually suffering. I feel that Portland is a very white city, and there's not enough POC space up here. I grew up in Los Angeles and I'm actually an immigrant. I immigrated from Baja California, Mexico, so brown space has been such a part of my identity and upbringing. Not having that here in Portland, my partner and I suffered. We built Mis Tacones from missing home, and not having taqueria. That's kind of what Mis Tacones is. It's kind of like a community taqueria.

Maria: Right.

Carlos: Growing up in Baja California, I'm from Mexicali. That's where I was born. It's close to the border, so there's a lot of amazing street food. I have family all up and down the peninsula of Baja California. The street food is the heart of the culture down there. Not having that here, we suffered...

Mexicali has such a really interesting history. By the border, it's actually pretty diverse. Not as diverse as other parts of Mexico, like, D.F. is way more diverse, but because a lot of people, that's their last stop before crossing over, sometimes they don't make it. They just stay there. There's diversity there. There's a really big Chinese population. I wouldn't say huge, but there's a pretty big Chinese population there because also a lot of Chinese families, communities will go to Mexico. They would actually be in Mexicali before they cross over to



the US. Mexicali is known for Chinese restaurants, which is interesting. My family, whenever we go to Mexicali, my mom is like 'ay, quiero comer comida China.' Isn't that weird? That's what it's known for. It's interesting because it's a fusion. Yes, it's Chinese food, but it has a Mexican fusion to it too. A long time ago, when my grandma was still alive, she went to the cemetery where my grandpa is buried and we did the Dia de los Muertos ceremony. In that cemetery, there's an entire, huge plot dedicated just to the Chinese population and it was huge, very beautiful. That's Mexicali. My dad always tells me this too. During prohibition, Mexicali had a lot of beautiful saloons. A lot of money was put into these saloons and people would travel from all over. They'd come from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and go all the way to Mexicali to drink. It was these really fancy saloons. They had tunnels too. This is really elaborate. I'm like damn. It's really cool... It's difficult, trying to build community here in a very white city. It's hard. So We built that out of suffering. We cook a lot. We're both vegan. I've been vegan for about seven years. He's been vegan for about four or five years. We were like you know what, we make this great food why don't we just do it like a pop up? For me, I see veganism as a very elitist thing. I wanted to make it like hey, my family can go out and enjoy it.

Maria:

Enjoyable.

Carlos:

It's affordable and it's approachable. I'm talking about seven years ago. Now it's changed a little more. Seven years ago, when you thought of veganism, you thought of Whole Foods Market and everything is extremely expensive and it's not approachable. For me, I wanted to be approachable. I wanted it to be good. I wanted it to be familiar. My inspiration comes from my own heritage. The way my uncles, mis tios, would cook, the carne asada with beer, the lime, the charcoal ... All that is what we put into our protein, which is seitan. My partner would make seitan because it mimics meat really, really well and it absorbs flavor really well. We realize with seitan, when you cook it, it absorbs all the flavors como carne asada, like the beef. We pour the oil, the cerveza, the limon, similar to the way my family would make the

carne asada. All the different flavors are the way my mom would cook her meals, tacos, and the way my uncles or family members would cook doing carne asadas. Just taking inspiration from the taco pop up taquerias from Baja California, and we just watched them and how they cooked. That's what I enjoy the most. For example, whenever we've done a pop up and we have had Mexican families that aren't necessarily vegan, and they try it, it's like it's familiar. This is good. It happens to be vegan, but it's still good. It tastes like something I would eat. Going back to what I said earlier about it being pretentious and unattainable. We want to break away from all that to make it attainable for people.

Maria: When I was researching Mis Tacones, I saw a lot of pictures. I was thinking ... I don't know. When I started looking at the pictures, I was thinking is this really vegan? It looks so good. I'm like they look comparable to what tacos look like.

Carlos: That's where we're at. That's why seitan is so perfect because it does look like beef. We've done events where we've fooled kids, where little kids would come and have no idea that it's vegan. It's cute. They like it because it's good. It's good. It's vegan, but they like it.

Maria: What are some unexpected outcomes since you've started your business in Portland?

Carlos: I think all the outcomes have been really successful, really positive. We started this as an art project, as an art type of thing. We never thought it would get so big. We get offers all the time. We turned down an offer on Friday because we just couldn't do it. My partner and I both work full-time jobs. It's just grown a lot. Every summer, we get huge events, or huge people, huge bars or festivals reach out to us and because it's just me and my partner and one staff, one friend that we have to help ... We have community support, but to run a pop up in a food truck is a lot of work. We don't have the capacity. We just can't do it. My partner and I both work on Fridays. We've called out. We'd used all of our PTO (Paid Time Off) from Mis Tacones, the majority of it because it's a lot of work. It's like we just can't do it.

Maria: In researching, I saw that your menu is really simple. It's just three tacos. What is the intentionality behind that?

Carlos: I think the reason why we kept it simple ... We have tortas now too. We have tacos, tortas, and aguas frescas. The reason why we kept it simple was because to us, we wanted it to be rotating. Tacos is what we always have, and every swap we'll throw something in like seasonal or just rotating different ideas. I'm going to be completely honest, from the very beginning, the reason why our menu was so small was because when we first started vending, we didn't have a car. We literally bought Ubers going to different gigs or different pop ups that we would do. We were limited as to what we could bring with us, so we had room for the tortilla press, we had room for the steamer for the protein. We would go from the commissary kitchen ... Sometimes we wouldn't even have that. We would get picked up and then we'd go to our event, and then we'd

haul everything back to our house. It was a nightmare, but that's how we did it. We didn't have a car, but we had that passion.

Maria: Just lugging everything.

Carlos: It was crazy, but we wanted to do it. We really did. It was fun. It was fun even though it was really, really hard, it was still a lot of fun. That's where that started from. Once we did get a car, and it started picking up momentum, the small menu, pego, it took off because it was simple. I felt that people are like the less is better for them. For example, we did tortas this summer. It worked. We don't bake our pan. My partner is more of a baker than I am, but it's still a lot of work to make bolillo. It's crazy. It's a lot of work. We get our vegan tortas, bolillo from Dos Hermanos, who is phenomenal. Everything else, we make completely from scratch. It honestly came from the struggle of having very limited space...

Maria: How do artists engage and utilize food, food rituals, and meals in their practices?



Carlos: For me, I'm going to go back to educating communities about street vending. That's part of my identity growing up. As an immigrant, my family we crossed over to see my family illegally. We would be at the border for hours waiting to cross over. Sometimes we'd be there for a long time because crossing the border is very stressful. My family, as a young kid, was the street vendors. I would eat the mangoneadas, churros, tacos, tortas, all of that. My mom would buy me street food. It was stressful and we would eat to ... It was comforting. Crossing the border, especially when you're illegal is one of the most stressful ... It's hard. It's really difficult. Normally how it would go, it was my dad who was a citizen or had a green card, would cross over first. He would be waiting for us on the other side. My mom and my sister, we would cross walking because it was easier that way. It would vary. We'd either drive over or walk through the border. It was stressful. I feel like my mom would hide the scariness of it somehow. We were kids. She would hide it in a way, she made it fun for us so we wouldn't be stressed out even though it was very stressful. If they would take us, this was in the 80s and 90s, and if we were detained, my mom would have no way to tell my dad. My mom would buy us street food. She would buy us churros like I said. For me, street food is ... I love it. When I go back to visit Mexico, Baja California, I try everything that I can because I'm vegan. For me,

as an artist and trying to express my culture to different communities, I want to educate people about street food. The aspects of it, the importance of it, how it builds community, how it sustains community. That's to describe that question I guess.

Maria: Based on that answer, do you think that Mis Tacones is always going to be a food truck...

Carlos: Yes, definitely. My partner and I talked about that. We don't want to go the brick mortar route. If we were in Los Angeles, we would be a taqueria because when you go down to East Los Angeles, anywhere where there's a lot of brown people in that part of the city, you will find a taqueria. It has tables, a painting, a generator, lights, and tables. That's the authentic way that you would find a taqueria. You can do that because it's sunny all year round so you can pull that off. These people profit off of that, just having that simple set up. Our setup is simple as well. It's literally a generator, tables, steam trays. It follows that very authentic type of taqueria that you would find either in Los Angeles or in Mexico, Baja California. But, because in Portland it rains, we want to be able to operate all year round. We wanted to do a trailer truck. A trailer truck which would pop up the side, we have the drinks. We would have tacos, tortas and we would add more stuff to our menus, but keep it very simple to the street food culture. We just drive around the city and pop up like that.

Once we actually do have bigger space, we're always going to keep our menu always very limited, very small. It's the idea of street vendor. When you're packing up everything in your car and driving off, again you don't have that much space to have all this ... You don't have a fryer with you. You don't have a freezer with you. You are making what you have right then. Keeping that street vendor mentality where it's: *tenemos esto*.



PLATANO RISING: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ARLYN FRANK AND MARIA SALDAÑA



Maria Saldaña: What is your inspiration for Platano Rising ? Where are chefs drawing inspiration?

Arlyn Frank: I would say that I started cooking because I lived so far from home, I'm from the Dominican Republic. So, there's not one Dominican restaurant, no one else but me is cooking Dominican food. So what it was for me, the inspiration specifically for the dishes, I would say is just the stuff that I had growing up. Stuff that just makes you happy, brings those happy memories of my family going to the beach. So, it's like a lot of, I call it, Afro-Caribbean street food. Just like a lot of stuff that we would go out and someone would be selling it in the streets.

Maria: Like trying to make a home out of living here? How long have you been in Portland?

Arlyn: Definitely, the food is very sentimental. That's where I get the recipes from. What I wanted to do is recreate some sort of happy island memory.

[Laughter]

Maria: That's beautiful. How do artists and chefs engage?

Arlyn: The thing is that, at least myself, I don't know if all chefs do it, hold that weight, but for me cooking is my artistry. What I put on the plate is my form of art. Something like, the concoction, the actual cooking and putting together something very unique, all these different ingredients. You feel like it's your gift or, y'know, your form of expressing yourself. So it's the same, like when you draw a painting, the feelings that you feel while you're creating and putting all this imagination in a canvas, at least to me, it's a very similar process, but then at the end people get to taste it and eat it. Food is like, ingredients are my instruments to create. One thing that is very cohesive it's something that brings a unique experience to someone. Food is such a sensory experience. You got the taste, you

got the smell, you get the visual. I don't know if that answers the question.

Maria: Yeah, that's fair, it engages all the senses like any art would. I mean even thinking about taste. The nourishing is extra.

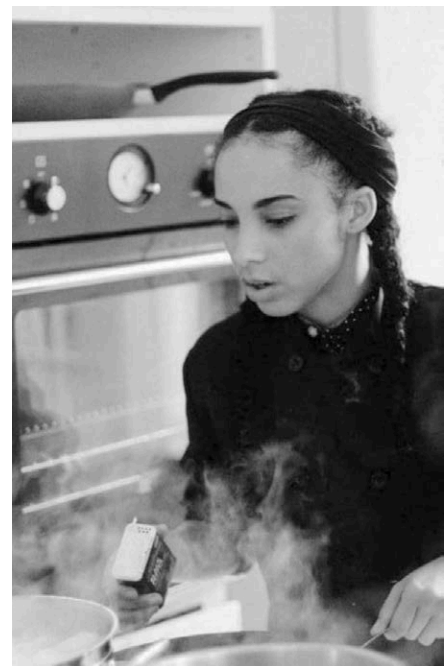
Arlyn: Exactly, sometimes I say, when a food is done, a lot of people say that their favorite part of food is eating it. But to me, it's like sometimes, I enjoy the process so much that when the food is done I get sad. The same thing, food is just like any other form of art in the sense that it brings people together. I like to think that I've done a lot of events that have been very art oriented, art galleries, things like that. Community oriented, so I always feel like the food just compliments whatever else is happening.

Maria: I'm curious as to how Platano Rising started and where you started popping up?

Arlyn: I always share with my friends, it's a tough job market. I'm almost 32, I've been working since I was 14 and I've just kind of worked from job to job to job to job and I've worked as a waitress, I've been a cook, I've done all kinds of work within restaurants but there's just not enough job security. Then when I came to back of the house, it's like, you put so much work for somebody else's company. Cooking is really mentally and physically taxing, and it doesn't pay. Most cooks if we get tipped, we don't get paid. Y'know, we don't get paid vacation. We don't get maternity leave. We work in general for very low wages. One day I was like, wow, I wanna make something for myself. I wanna put all this energy all this time, all this sweat into something that can grow and can be mine. That's mainly the reason. If it were for me I would work for other people, it's way easier to work for other people than for you to do your own company. Anything that goes wrong falls on you as a person but, yea. In terms of time, if you want to have a little bit, create something for your own livelihood. Platano Rising got its first opportunity because my closest group of friends are all activists. They're all people who do really cool stuff all around Portland. A lot of them would receive grants. What happened was whenever they had an event, for example, my first contract was with a series called 'Black Femme Series'. All kinds of talks, expositions, exhibitions that all revolved around being a black femme. My friends would say 'we have a little bit of a budget for food, you're a black femme, let's collaborate together!' I would help promote their event. People also come out more when they know that there's free food somewhere. I did a couple of Ori art gallery openings, I did the food for NXT LVL's Brown Girl Rise events.

Maria: I'm just personally curious about how you navigate your audience's dietary needs, and whether that be vegans or vegetarian along with this idea of feeding people.

Arlyn: Well honestly, when I first began, I had that prejudice because I come from what is considered like a third world country. I have that prejudice with people with dietary restrictions. Because in my country it's like, you eat what you find. What do you mean you have an allergy or you are a vegetarian or you're vegan? Like, this is all we got. So at the beginning, unfortunately, because that's not a good way to think about it, I had



that mentality. I was really just cooking whatever I wanted to cook and if someone couldn't eat it I was like: too bad! I'll be completely transparent about that. A lot of chefs, they're that way too. You spend so many years learning how to cook meat. And then you wanna throw me, like, some kind of quinoa I've never heard about and that's the trendy thing now and what everybody's eating. Like damn, but I know how to roast a whole pig! So when I first started I was not catering to any kind of crowd other than the people that eat anything and everything. But also just in general it's the cuisine of my country. I try to cook with a lot of integrity. So I cook with a lot of my food. I'm not putting sugar. I'm not putting msg. I cook as much as possible from the ground up. I try to pick the things that are organic, no antibiotics in a lot of stuff. I felt like I was doing enough.

Maria: Most of the work!

Arlyn: It comes to a point where if I love my friends as I say I do, I have to be mindful to the things that they consider ethical, the things that they consider important. With time I've become a little more open to it. And I mean at the end of the day, basically I had to adapt. I had to change out of 'if this is important to the people that are important to me, it should be important to me too.'

Maria: When did you start being interested in cooking and food?

Arlyn: Contrary to what people think, I didn't grow up cooking. Like, when you're, like, a latina chef, everybody thinks that you were in your village with your mom cooking and they, like, romanticize it. But I've always been a tomboy so I didn't want to be in the kitchen growing up. I would always be like: I wanna play Nintendo, I wanna be outside with the boys, I used to skateboard, I did not want anything to do with anything that was domestic or anything like that. I started cooking when I went away to college. It was about 9 hrs away from Miami. I was in Tallahassee. Dominicans, it's such a small community. It's not rare to find yourself in different parts of the United States where there's no Dominicans so I started getting in the kitchen because I wasn't finding the food of my culture or my childhood.

Maria: Was there pressure for you to learn how to cook?

Arlyn: Oh yeah. My country is one of those where if the woman doesn't know how to cook you have no value. So much is placed on your ability to cook, clean, keep yourself groomed. Everything that you are revolves around catering to a man. That's how it is. So I definitely wanted to steer clear from that. And it's something that y'know now I cook but I still don't really believe in that. It's ironic too though because now that I do it for a job it's like women are the minority in the kitchen. You very seldom come across other women chefs, especially minority chefs. When you look at the kitchen you see women doing simple prep but usually the head chefs are men, which is very messed up. It's a very male dominated industry. Because at home the woman has to cook but the respect, to be the person who is respected in the business, you have to be a man. It's very twisted.

FOOD PROGRAM EVENTS

TBA Food Panel

Saturday, September 15th at 12:30pm (15 NE Hancock)

TBA food vendors Big Elephant Kitchen, Mis Tacones, and Mija/Mija in discussion about the intersecting economies and politics of contemporary art, immigration, identity, and local food culture. Moderated by Jodie Cavalier, PICA Public Engagement Coordinator.

Tender Table

Saturday September 15th at 5pm (15 NE Hancock)

Tender Table is a series of stories about food, family, and identity told by femmes of color and nonbinary people of color. For each event, storytellers prepare a dish connected to the experiences they've shared. Audiences are invited to listen generously, spend time communally, and sample the food.

Stacey Tran is a writer from Portland, OR currently based in Providence, RI. She is the creator of Tender Table, a storytelling series about food, family, identity. Her writing can be found in BOMB Magazine, The Brooklyn Rail, and diaCRITICS. She is the author of Soap for the Dogs (Grama, 2018).

Salimatu Amabebe is a visual artist and vegan chef based in Portland, Oregon. Amabebe runs the food and event company, Bliss House, hosts weekly Vegan Nigerian Pop-Up Dinners, and is the creator of Black Feast – a monthly vegan pop-up that celebrates black artists and writers through food. Amabebe is also the co-founder and artistic director of Kiri Collective – an artist collective that holds events and exhibitions centering people of color and their work. Amabebe's work focuses on the intersection of food and art, drawing from family memories, recipes, and the exploration of the body as a means of both artistic expression and consumption.

Laura Tran is from NYC, born and raised by Vietnamese refugees. She co-owns and manages XLB, a Chinese restaurant in Portland. She received her BS in Women & Gender Studies from University of Oregon. Along with her partner, she co-directs Meadow, a creative space for women, lgbtqia+, gender non-conforming, and/or POC artists & writers. She supports diverse expressions of creativity and discovered her own in the kitchen. You can visit her at www.xlbpd.com.