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POLITICS & ACTIVISM

La Cocina's 'Voices from the Kitchen' Speak Passionately on Race



A full house of engaged audience members learn from Voices from the Kitchen. *(@JenBaxterSF)*

F&B: Voices from the Kitchen, La Cocina's latest storytelling performance on April 7 at The Swedish American Hall featured the impassioned words of more than a dozen chefs, poets, writers, historians and activists on the topic of **Race**. The evening started with food and drinks from both well-known chefs and a couple of graduates from La Cocina's Incubator program.

Some highlights from the two-hour performance:



People's Kitchen Collective: Saqib Keval, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik and Jocelyn Jackson inspired the crowd with their words and songs. *(Anna Mindess)*

Co-founders of the People's Kitchen Collective (PKC) Saqib Keval, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik and Jocelyn Jackson entered from the audience, while Jackson sang in a deep throaty voice, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest…until it's found." Then all three alternated with a barrage of wisdom: "We have so much fucking faith in the power of food to fix everything." "For centuries, food has been a weapon...keeping us stuffed and starved." "Food deserts are not a naturally occurring phenomenon." "Food is a strategy for resistance."



The PKC shared the story of the Black Panther Party's hugely successful Free Breakfast Program. *(Anna Mindess)*

As inspiration, they described the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for School Children program that began in Oakland in 1969 and in a few years fed over 100,000 children nationwide. It was so successful that it inspired fear in J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, who called it "the most dangerous domestic threat to national security." The PKC explained that while the state was trying to keep food out of the hands of black and brown children, the Black Panther Party viewed breakfast as an active tool of resistance. The breakfast program was revolutionary. And now there are free breakfast and lunch programs in schools. Why don't they come with a history lesson? they ask. Why don't we teach children the roots of that meal?

The three co-founders of the PKC then challenged the so-called "Farm to Table" movement to acknowledge that food does not magically make it from the farm to the table without the toil of people in the middle. It would be more accurately termed "Farm to Kitchen to Table." And why, they asked, should this food be enjoyed only in restaurants? The meal can't end at the table. It should be accessible to all people, so a better motto would be "Farm to Kitchen to Table to Streets." And they exhorted the audience to take this message out on the streets.



Bonnie Tsui showed some of the offensive names used for the supposedly "Asian salad" that is a mainstay on restaurant menus all over the country. *(Anna Mindess)*

Journalist Bonnie Tsui shared her quest to solve “the curious case of the Asian salad,” a dish cooked up by non-Asians, which is so common on a swath of American restaurant menus that we don’t even question its Asian-ness. The mystery stems from its raw vegetable ingredients, which are not traditionally served in China. In the popular imagination, adding soy sauce or sesame oil somehow transforms it to being “Asian.”

But Tsui’s issue with this ubiquitous dish is less with its supposedly “Asian” ingredients and more with the variety of offensive names with which it is labeled at places like TGIFridays, Cheesecake Factory, Rainforest Café, and Applebee's. She showed slides of menus with names like “Asian Emperor salad,” “Oriental chop chop,” “Mr. Mao’s” and “secret Asian man.”

Even though the subject is just salad, Tsui views the use of broad terms to reference an entire continent as stereotypical. The problem is that the words are a blind spot for white people who don’t consider themselves racist. And even with a bowl of salad, words do matter.



Members of the woman-led collaborative of people of color, Nourish/Resist, urged people to disrupt micro-aggressions. *(Anna Mindess)*

Three members of the woman-led collaborative of people of color, Nourish/Resist, encouraged audience members to check their language and privilege, "stay woke" and create safe spaces for stories of struggle and survival. They use food as a tool for resistance.



Culinary historian Michael Twitty shares stories from his childhood that ultimately led him to focus on preparing, preserving and promoting African American foodways. (@JenBaxterSF)

Culinary historian Michael Twitty, author of the award-winning blog Afroculinaria, recounted that as a kid, he hated soul food and hated being black, even though he was “the great-grandson of Jim Crow people.” If he didn’t like The Wiz, of course, he hated collard greens and chitterlings. He called okra “an instrument of Black medieval torture” and longed for fast food.

Until one day when his grandmother said, “we’re gonna make some lemonade” and started singing a song “lemonade, lemonade, made in the shade, stirred with a spade…” When he asked her about the song she told him it was a slave song passed down from her great-grandfather who was born into slavery. That piqued his curiosity and once he started asking questions, “the kitchen was filled with ancestors and I got to meet them.” He also learned the stories behind the iconic dishes.

“Chitterlings was the story of using the whole animal. People who had nothing could waste nothing. Collard greens represented strength.” When his grandmother said “we carried okra seeds in our hair,” he understood, that while seeds may not have literally been carried in hair, “they represent the seeds for everything we had carried in our heads and you couldn’t take that away from us.” So in teaching him about food, his grandmother taught him his own black history. As Twitty put it, “Teaching me not to hate my soul, but how to love it. “



Saru Jayaraman of ROC exhorts the crowd to take action to end low wages, unfair practices and segregation in the restaurant industry. *(Anna Mindess)*

In her talk, entitled "On Ending Jim Crow In The Bay Area Restaurant Industry," Saru Jayaraman of ROC United (Restaurant Opportunities Centers United) discussed her organization's goal to improve wages and working conditions for the nation's 12 million restaurant workers. She reminded the audience that while white men can earn $150,000/year as fine dining servers or bartenders, the majority of food service workers are the lowest paid of all employees.

Jayaraman also shared the shocking news that numerous surveys in cities across the U.S. have found that the largest race-based wage gap in the country is found right here in the Bay Area, where there is a $5.50/hour gap between white workers and workers of color. "We are better than this," she told the audience. "We think we are progressive, but we are not and we participate in segregation every time we eat out. Each of us has to take a part in changing the way we eat out."

Then she introduced noted chef, restaurateur and author Daniel Patterson, who is spearheading a project with other chefs to desegregate their kitchens and collaborate on the upcoming COLORS restaurant in Oakland. Located near the Fruitvale BART station, it will train hundred of workers of color. Patterson wants to create a model for standardizing hiring and promotions because "as long as there is implicit bias, you can train all the workers in the world but they will never get hired." His goal is to change the face of fine dining "until fine dining does not resemble Trump's America."



Stephanie Fields shares her stories of growing up in the rural South and discovering La Cocina, where she got support for her business Sugarfoot. *(@JenBaxterSF)*

One of the most compelling stories of the evening was delivered by Stephanie Fields, of Sugarfoot Kitchen, a "Southern comfort catering company," and a graduate of La Cocina. Her pepper jelly turkey meatballs were a standout at the pre-show food tasting.

Fields described her hometown of Henderson, North Carolina in the rural South, a place where the working poor are disillusioned and angry and 36% of residents live in poverty. In a town where 60% of the population is Black, she told us, “You can still call up the KKK for your daily dose of hate from Grand Wizard Mr. Bobbit (and she played his offensive phone recording to prove it). While her family often used the n-word in anger, Fields grew up with friends from both cultures.



Stephanie Fields' moist and flavorful pepper turkey meatballs were a crowd pleaser. *(Anna Mindess)*

She started her business through La Cocina’s incubator program in 2013 and plans to open her Southern restaurant in San Francisco’s Portola district this fall. But Fields confessed that a crisis of conscience almost caused her to close Sugarfoot just one month after she opened it. It happened when she read an open letter that Michael Twitty penned to Paula Deen after the uproar about her use of racist comments. He wrote, “We are surrounded by culinary injustice where some Southerners take credit for things that enslaved Africans and their descendants played key roles in disseminating.”

Fields stated, “I had to make a choice not to be “some southerner.” After reading Twitty’s words, she realized that there would be no Southern food without slavery and wondered if she could still claim the food she grew up on -- the okra, collard greens and cheese grits -- as her own. After doing research and talking to friends across race and gender lines, she decided, “I am Southern and I had to eat something.”

She also realized: “I cannot undo the pain, undo the shame and undo the history, but what I can do is acknowledge where this food comes from and I can be grateful and be kind.” “Empathy,” she added, “is being a member of a tribe that isn’t yours, but still is."

The next F&B: Voices from the Kitchen event will be on October 19 with the theme: ***Refuge****.*