EATER
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The People's Kitchen Collective's Radical Approach to Feeding the Masses

It's food for the people and by the people

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Photography by Nik Sharma

There's a strong sense of kinship that runs through the veins of the residents in the community of Oakland. And at a time when cultural differences across minority and ethnic groups are viewed with distrust in many parts of the country, Oakland chooses instead to celebrate them through inclusion and acceptance. But just like any other growing city, Oakland is by no means immune to the effects of change brought about by gentrification. Despite these challenges, it continues to fight the good fight through the actions of people behind social justice groups and organizations such as the People's Kitchen Collective.

Saqib Keval first created what was then known as the People's Kitchen in 2007, as a platform for immigrants and people of color to share their culture through food. At the same time, the project acted as a tool to empower the people in the local community, bringing them together despite a diverse array of backgrounds and customs.



Saqib Keval | Nik Sharma

Raised in the Bay Area by family of immigrants, Saqib understood the need for such a space based on his experiences following his experience staging at a restaurant in Aix-en-Provence, France. After he returned home to the Bay Area he noticed that neither his culture nor its food were accurately represented. Having now worked in a variety kitchens, Saqib noted differences in the way in which people were left behind— race and socio-economic status appeared to be common elements that reared their ugly head time and again, regardless of geography.

Thus it became Saqib's dream to create a political food space that would deal with issues faced by the community, by the community. So, in 2010, he held his first "pay-what-you-can" dinner at the La Victoria Bakery in the Mission District of San Francisco to draw attention to the problems brought about by gentrification. The dinner brought some one hundred and fifty families together, and further convinced Saqib that his social experiment promised hope and had the potential to make a positive impact by empowering people that might otherwise be left behind.

As a result of the people and customs it represents, The People's Kitchen Collective isn't just one dining experience that serves to celebrate tradition and culture through food— the group also attempts to bring about social change and justice, and simultaneously challenge norms. While some of these intentions appear simple, they raise important questions and shed light on the influences and remnants of colonialism in our everyday lives.

For example, why are some dining traditions considered "finer" than others? Why are forks and knives symbolic of a "classy" dining establishment while eating with your hands is often perceived as a more rural, and even tribal, skill? Through research and study, the team behind the People's Kitchen Collective has constantly sought to flip the present dining model by straightforwardly challenging these (and many more) cultural norms.



The Team

In 2015, Saqib met Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik and Jocelyn; and together with their efforts, the People's Kitchen became the People's Kitchen Collective. Sita, an artist and teacher at A Taste of Resistance at the California College of the Arts, wanted not just to make food look and taste delicious, but to build a dining experience that she could identify and

connect with, one that was no longer Eurocentric. A child of Indian, Japanese and Colombian heritage, Sita has used her multiracial and multiethnic background to guide her through this process of discovery and learning while she studies the food and traditions that helped give her family strength during their immigration journey and through the difficult times when they were isolated in the Japanese internment camps of World War II.



Jocelyn Jackson



Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik

The third member of the team, Jocelyn Jackson, has always been passionate about her commitment for social and environmental justice and has worked with the Peace Corps in West Africa and Southern India. In the true spirit, Jackson's work has been deeply inspired by the charitable works of the Black Panther Party, particularly their Free Breakfast Program for Children, a radical response to the war on poverty during the 1960s.

The Intention

To accomplish the group's goals, PKC hosts community meals, workshops, dinner series, and the free breakfast program that has served thousands of hot breakfasts. Before the start of every dinner at the People's Kitchen Collective, Jackson sings a blessing to bring the group together. The People's Kitchen Collective represents a way to support ethnic minorities while uplifting the local community. Every meal by design is centered around a political theme that involves months of planning and research by the team. "We want to honor the legacy of our ancestors," says Jackson. "Share those meals, those ingredients and remedies that heal us, those foods that bring us memories of warmth and love; we want to express the power of the diaspora of the people."

PKC has also been a way for the co-founders to battle cultural appropriation of food, including the recipes and the traditions they grew up with and experienced; the team is driven by a strong desire and need to preserve traditions. "As people of color, our recipes represent our histories of migration, displacement, enslavement and rebellion." says Keval. "As we lose our recipes, we lose parts of our histories, our connection to our past and the stories passed down to us from our ancestors."

"The goal of The People's Kitchen Collective is not only to fill our stomachs, but also nourish our souls, feed our minds, and fuel a movement." – PKC

Thus, two main elements that the PKC have worked to achieve at each event are **to bring the element of humanity** and **to decolonize the fine dining experience at the table**.

The movement continues to flourish, with accolades beginning to roll in. PKC was recently honored with the Kenneth Rainin Foundation Open Spaces award at the Center for Asian American Media at their CAAMFeast event, celebrating Asian American Culinary Achievement. Founder Saqib Keval will also participate in La Cocina's storytelling series, F&B: Voices from the Kitchen on the topic of race.

At its heart, Keval says, PKC is about using food to speak truth to power. Though the founders themselves are not immigrants, PKC also serves as inspiration for immigrants and other people of color striving to find community, while also critiquing the foundations of colonialism, imperialism, and systems of oppressions upon the U.S. has been built. For many, PKC also offers an opportunity for community pride, while preserving priceless origin stories and cultural artifacts.

Edited by Ellen Fort

From the author:

I had my first encounter with the People's Kitchen Collective at a pop-up dinner for celebrity Chef Marcus Samuelsson's book, *The Red Rooster Cookbook* held at Alena Studios, last October. As most pop-up dinners go, I sat at a communal table and broke bread with people I had never met and made new friends but this time there was something different. It was the way in which the entire dining experience materialized; here at this table emotion was conveyed not only through food but also through the power of words.

As we sat and took our seats at the dining table, we were greeted by a powerful and yet moving blessing sung by co-founder Jocelyn Jackson. The song was a tribute to all the hands through which the food and recipes had passed down through generations over time. Our food started to come out and Chefs Saqib Keval and Sita Bhaumik stressed on the importance of food not only serving as a source of nourishment but also a way for us to connect with our ancestors, an important component in any community's quest for social equality and justice. There was a theme here, one that I was quickly drawn to, there was a celebration of kinship, culture, and tradition narrated through song, story and of course, food.