

THE
EATS
ISSUE

The Food Avengers

SF's **hottest chefs** join forces for a superstar potluck



San Francisco

{ Where to Eat Now }

The State of Deliciousness

All you need to know about all you need to eat, featuring the Bay Area's **53** best new restaurants.

BY JOSH SENS

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La Boulange Goes Grande

Why baking visionary **Pascal Rigo** sold his empire (but not his soul) to Starbucks.

BY NINA MARTIN

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Salumerie's boudin blanc with piperade and sweet mustard on a pretzel bun

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EXCLUSIVE

Barbarians at the Feedlot

Hunting down the vegan misfits who bombed the bejesus out of Harris Ranch.

BY JAIMAL YOGIS

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Best Chef Awards

The Great Potluck

For almost 30 years, *San Francisco* has honored the chefs (and sommeliers and restaurateurs) taking the Bay Area to the next level. But why stop there? This year, we invited them all to a potluck to celebrate. Not surprisingly, there wasn't a dollop of spinach dip, the wine pours were generous, and the conversation was as hot as the handmade ramen were cold. SARA DESERAN posed the burning questions.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX FARRUGIA



Christopher Nestor's salmon; Dennis Lee's handmade noodles; Eric Kapor's cucumber and turnip salad

MEET THE GUESTS

The Best of the Best

These six dynamo chefs produce incredible food in the Bay Area's competitive restaurant world. In their own way, each is a bit of a maverick—and every bit of it—in a different kind of way. In a different kind of perseverance. BY PARR O'BRIEN



FOOD & DRINK
Christopher Kostow

You know a restaurant loves its chef when it closes for a couple months to give its kitchen—a place where diners rarely tread—a glamorous facelift. Last winter, St. Helena's **Restaurant at Meadowood** did just that for Kostow, who is rich in stars. He's a thinking person's chef, and his delicate California sensibility—one where ingredients meet technique right in the middle—is pitch-perfect. Not to mention he's only 36. Imagine where he'll be at 40. 900 MEADOWOOD LN., ST. HELENA, 707-935-3446



FOOD & DRINK
Anna Weinberg

Anna Weinberg, 35, has gumption. In 2010, the New Zealander took her first S.F. restaurant, South, which had suffered during the recession, and turned it into the popular, Franchy Marlowe 1 last fall, she and her chef, Jennifer Puccio, proceeded to tackle touristy North Beach—a red-sauce-or-die destination—opening **Park Tavern**, a bustling brasserie of the American, sort. Not only is it bringing in the locals but, as the industry likes to say, "it's killing it." 1650 STOCKTON ST. (NEAR UNION ST.), 415-995-2200



FOOD & DRINK
Ravi Kapur

If there was ever a case for impermanence, it's **Liholiho Yacht Club**, the pop-up that set chef Ravi Kapur, 36, free from the limitations of other kitchens—most recently Prospect, where he was the executive chef. Today the Oahu native sets up a mise-en-place of dried shrimp, tofu, and sticky rice, cooking up addictive honey-and-fish sauce-glazed quail and smoked octopus salad. It's a mashup of skilled cooking and an inventive take on the aloha spirit. 1000 THE BAY YACHT CLUB, 415-995-2200



FOOD & DRINK
Dennis Lee

With his first, more sophomore restaurant, Namu, behind him, what Dennis Lee, 32, is cooking at the four-month-old **Namu Gaji** in the Mission is fully formed: The menu is casual but precise—a place where ramen topped with 4505 hot dogs coexists with buckwheat gnocchi with black garlic and peas. Lee's strong point of view keeps diners on track, confidently introducing them to a whole new world that's neither Korean nor American but something much more dynamic. 162 DOLAN ST. (AT KISH ST.), 415-441-6265



FOOD & DRINK
Belinda Leong

Having logged nine years at Gary Danko, a year at Pierre Hermé in Paris, and a year at Manresa, Belinda Leong, 35, creates a kind of magic for **B. Patisserie** that's more classic than edgy. But that doesn't mean that her kouign amann pastry hasn't taken her to the level of a crack dealer. Celebrate: Along with baker-partner Michael Suas, she has a Pacific Heights brick-and-mortar patisserie and café on the way, slated to open at the beginning of 2013. 1100 CALIFORNIA ST. (AT FLOOR CRAWLER), 415-995-2200



FOOD & DRINK
Yoon Ha

Plenty of sommeliers can geek out about wine, droning on, hand inserted awkwardly behind back. But few can seamlessly meld into your dining experience like Yoon Ha, 44. In the hushed dining room at **Benu**, Ha is a ninja in the art of service. His deep knowledge about the wine (and beer and sake) he's pouring and the food that goes with it is parlayed in a way that's elegant yet unimpeccable. If doctors have bedside manners, Ha has tableside a figured out. 22 HERRINGTON ST. (IN THE HERRINGTON CITY), 415-441-6265

Q You're all an integral part of the Bay Area food scene right now. But let's play fortune teller: How are we going to be eating in five years?

Ravi Kapur: I think there's a move toward more personal cooking. I think everyone can agree to that.

Dennis Lee: I define authenticity as personal cuisine. It has nothing to do with ethnicity. People come to Namu Gaji and think it's Korean food. And it's not, really. And Koreans come in and don't think it's Korean—a mentality that seems to exist only in the immigrant community.

Christopher Kostow: Yeah, people here now have the courage to go do their own thing. That, I think, is a distinctly Californian thing. We're the most entrepreneurial place in the world. Think of all the businesses, inventions, and advancements in technology that happen in California. I think it's very much evident in the food world, too.

Kapur: Also, I think people are going to freak out because they're eating so much pizza.

Q The city is famous for its restaurants, but it also makes it tough to open them. Why?

Anna Weinberg: I'd like the city to work more with restaurateurs to make it easier to run a restaurant here. It's darn near impossible! I mean, I'm on my fourth restaurant—in fact, I'd say everyone at this table would be considered successful—but let me tell you, it's so extraordinarily hard to make a living doing this. I'd like the city to acknowledge how important restaurants are. Food is one of the top tourism draws.

Kostow: I bet most professionals here would say the same thing. It's not really easy to do much in San Francisco.

Weinberg: Oh, I'd say the billionaires moving into the Twitter building are pretty happy about things.

Q You don't have to read Yelp to know that this is a pretty opinionated group of diners here. What are they like to cook for?

Weinberg: I think the public has taken ownership of the food scene. And they believe they've taken ownership of your restaurant.

Kostow: They don't put themselves in the chef's hand, but rather go at it with →

Christopher Kostow is late. Just because he's earned Meadowood three Michelin stars (as many as, ahem, that other Napa Valley guy, Thomas Keller) doesn't mean he has a driver. Or better yet, a helicopter. In this talent-saturated region, even the brightest stars have to sit in bridge traffic.

Kostow's headed to Cookhouse in North Beach, the pristine kitchen and dining space that this magazine has commandeered for the day, where Park Tavern's Anna Weinberg is already putting her hostess skills to use, passing around her restaurant's now-famous deviled eggs with bacon and pickled jalapeños.

All of the guests pretty much know each other. Ravi Kapur of Liholiho Yacht Club chats with Namu Gaji chef Dennis Lee (a dead ringer for a young, Korean American Laurence Fishburne), while Lee assembles a slippery okra salad tossed with even more slippery mountain yam. Pouring me a taste of Scribe pinot noir, Benu sommelier Yoon Ha, the most soft-spoken of the bunch, mentions a bottle of 1983 Chave Hermitage Rouge that a guest shared with him not long ago. "You know when you meet someone and you go, 'This is it? There was nothing missing from that wine.'" He sighs like he's talking about the love of his life, which he might well be.

Kostow finally arrives, schlepping a huge slow-cooked salmon up the stairs, along with a battalion of prepped ingredients in neatly labeled plastic containers. To top the fish, the needle-nose tweezers come out, as do obscure ingredients that, until now, seemed more compost than chic: the gelatinous insides of green tomatoes, unripe peach slices, beet stems, fresh grapevines that have been blanched and "vac'd in verjus"—until his salmon, now a riot of color, looks flamboyantly delicious.

Because let's not pretend: With pastry chef Belinda Leong's picture-perfect raspberry-vanilla tart for dessert, and Kapur's salad of cucumber and fermented turnips to start, this isn't your everyday

potluck. Based on the smart (and smart-ass) banter already being fueled by the first glasses of Högl Grüner Veltliner, it won't be the usual dinner conversation either. It's time to eat.





this critical eye. When you're a kid, you collect baseball cards; here you collect restaurants—"I've been there, I've been there." I've been to tables where I say, "How is everything?" And they sit back in their chair as if they're judging *Iron Chef*.

Belinda Leong: Restaurants or not, San Francisco is already a righteous town. It is righteous. I mean, everyone here has a really distinct point of view, which is great, but it also makes people feel like they can walk into your restaurant and be like, "This is not what I deserve."

Q: But at the same time, this is a great town to be in for food. I think one of the best.

Weinberg: Well, the positive side of this is when somebody adopts you and feels like they're part of your success. I have guests who have every celebration of their life with us. They're way more loyal than guests that I had in New York, where no matter what, they'd piss off to the next hotspot.

Q: So what's the compulsion to stay in the Bay Area?

Kapur: Because we're suckers. But we have a passion.

Lee: For me, what I think is great about San Francisco is that it's not difficult to make an impact. The dining community is hungry to see new things happening, whereas in L.A. or New York, there are a lot of preconceived notions. Here, if you want to do your thing, you have a good chance of doing it. Even if it's esoteric. And then there's the access to ingredients.

Kapur: Yeah, it's always ingredients.

Weinberg: But sometimes I feel like if the server tries to educate me any more about the origin of their fucking carrot, I'm going to kill them.

Q: Speaking of, this spring Thomas Keller was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "With the relatively small number of people I feed, is it really my responsibility to worry about carbon footprint?" Do you think that it's your duty to educate your diners about the idea of sustainable and local?

Weinberg: I don't know. I'm torn. I went home to New Zealand for my sister's wedding, where it's always been seasonal or local, and you can't make margaritas because you don't have the ingredients. I'm kind of a global economist—

Lee: It's an individual decision. But what you don't want to see is restaurants blowing smoke up your ass so that they can charge you more money for it.

Kostow: The follow-up to that article said that the first priority needs to be to create a sound business, because that in turn creates a network of sustained support for farmers. The one problematic thing about the whole discussion was that it was said that it's not my job as a chef to make the world a better place. I think everyone can agree that it's probably your job as a person.

Kapur: Oh yeah, I think that's everybody's job, as a human being—

Weinberg: Today, if you're opening a restaurant and calling it market-driven and seasonal—of course you are. What else would you be? That's not a category anymore.

Q: Chris and Dennis, your restaurants have their own gardens and farms. Dennis, you made these ramen by hand. Do your patrons expect you to do it all?

Kostow: If you have to design every plate, raise every pig—it can become self-defeating. I no longer have to dig every hole and plant every seed, like I was doing in the beginning. But people don't know the difference



between "I have a garden," meaning "I have a flower bed out front," and "I have a garden," meaning "I have three acres." Some of it is, like, marketing bullshit.

Lee: Well, for me, it's really just straightforward, because there are ingredients that I want that are unavailable, and that's why we created the farm.

Kostow: And it creates a culture—like,





PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER WOOD/CORBIS OUTLINE; WINE: POPSICLES

when we started the garden, or whatever project we're doing, you incorporate your younger staff. You create, like, a zeitgeist, a feeling and a sensibility of things that you're not going to get by calling in orders.

Weinberg: Well, that's true. But sometimes I feel like we're being super-indulgent by letting cooks make charcuterie at Park Tavern. It's a waste of time, in my opinion. It's like, you know what? I can buy better product down the street. It's not our core strength, and it takes a lot of time.

Yoon Ha: When people ask us why we don't make our own chocolates at Benu, [chef] Corey [Lee] tells them, "Because we get the best. And it allows us to not dilute our efforts."

Q OR, here's another trend: pop-ups. Belinda, you've done one at Flour + Water Ravi, you have Liholilo. What are the benefits and the risks?

Kapur: Well, part of the art of a pop-up is that you don't want to convey to the guests, like,

"Hey, this is just a pop-up!"

Leong: After working in the back of the kitchen, my pop-up let me interact with my customers for the first time.

Weinberg: I think it's a brilliant idea because so many people open restaurants without testing their concept. Restaurateurs were never smart enough to do it before. We all just thought people would love it. Really?

Kapur: You know, there's a lot of hardship, but it's not as hard as running a restaurant on a daily basis, by any stretch of the imagination. Though I think I'm in a different position than some people, because I've been in the industry for so long. I'm getting to really enjoy the cooking side of it right now. But if you're going to prep for 80 and 40 people show up? You just fucked yourself. You're not even going to break even.

Leong: For a while I was working at the restaurant and doing the pop-up. I had the craziest hours. After finishing Manresa at midnight, I would start baking at, like, 1 in

the morning to, like, 7 or 8, then do my delivery to Four Barrel in San Francisco. Then drive to Los Gatos by noon. I slept, like, two hours a night. Ask anyone at Manresa—it was the craziest three months ever. But I had to do it.

Lee: When we opened Namu Gaji, every day felt like a pop-up.

Kapur: I was just talking with Dennis about how I went to [his first restaurant] Namu when it opened. I've just seen his growth, and what people don't realize is the day-to-day fucking hustle. To readjust, reinvent yourself, and troubleshoot as you go. Because people are probably saying, "Oh, Namu Gaji on 18th and Dolores, they must be making so much money, you know?" And you know, "The dude is busting his ass!"

Q Trucks. Love them or hate them—if someone asked you to start one, what would you sell?

Ha: Grilled cheese sandwiches.

Weinberg: Popsicles.

Lee: I would do french fry-encrusted 4505 hot dogs. It's like a corn dog, but instead of the batter, it's chopped french fries. They sell them on the streets in Korea, and we made them for the SF Chef's KIP after-party last year. They are awesome.

Q Let's top this conversation off with a little booze. What's your go-to drink?

Kapur: Well, it depends on where you are. But probably a Green Point. It's, like, rye whiskey, yellow Chartreuse, and bitters.

Weinberg: Gimlet on the rocks with a splash of grapefruit juice.

Leong: A simple Hendricks and tonic.

Ha: You know, I only drink wine, but I do like a Moscow Mule.

Kostow: That's what I was going to say! How about a Talisker scotch on the rocks?

Lee: Jameson or Bushmills. It's like, if you're gonna come visit me at the restaurant, you better bring a bottle. ☺