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FRANCIS LAM

SWEET LIFE

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Two L.A. chefs explore the world, street (food) by street (food), and put together one wild brunch.

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Their Los Angeles restaurant, Street, is just weeks from opening, and Susan Feniger and Kajsa Alger are living the dream: wrangling with contractors, getting permits, and reporting break-ins. So this weekend, they're unwinding by trashing Feniger's house—breaking cupboards, warping wallboards, burning holes in the upholstery. The crash and bang of professional cooking does not enter the home quietly, and these two are cranking out recipes, testing and tasting and retesting them for their menu.

"Tomorrow we're testing food and beer; Sunday it's Champagnes, liquor, and food," Alger told me with military precision when I met her. Then she smiled. "It always sounds so organized when I talk about it. But when we're three cocktails in, not a lot of food happens."

I'm up in the hills of L.A., in Feniger's home, learning how the two partners decide what goes on the plate and which plates go on the menu. Because a menu is a funny thing. When you're at the table, with a drink in your hand and hunger in your belly, its purpose is obvious. For a chef, however, it might be a statement of vision or a document of her past. For the kitchen, it's a plan for how to use precious space and manpower. For the accountant, it's all numbers: What's going to sell well enough to keep the lights on? As chefs and owners, Feniger and Alger have to look at every dish from all of these angles, and so, as with all your favorite movies and all your favorite records, lots of ideas get left on the cutting room floor.

Like the hot dogs. A street-food-inspired restaurant should have some hot dogs on offer, right? So Alger did some research, which is to say she ate 42 hot dogs in one brutal day in Chicago, and followed that up with a 30-dog day in L.A. She and Feniger then developed enough hot dogs to occupy a whole section of the menu, only to realize (eventually) that, you know, people might not want to come to your restaurant and spend more than \$2.50 on a hot dog. So they ditched them. The lesson: When writing your menu, be sure that you know your price point and your clientele's perception of value. And, apparently: Be ready to sacrifice your life for your restaurant.

The hot dogs were a dalliance they thought better of. But sometimes they'll fall a little in love with something even if they know they shouldn't. Alger takes leaves of collard greens and carefully cuts circles out of them while Feniger chops piles of limes, chiles, dried shrimp, coconut, and ginger and pulls out bowls of roasted peanuts and tamarind caramel made earlier. The Thai Bites are becoming unwieldy, each component crowding the cooler in its own container. And I imagine the poor pantry cooks, every time an order comes down, having to whip out all this stuff and arrange it neatly in ramekins as Alger was doing. Feniger smears a collard round with caramel, wraps it around the fillings, tries one, and offers it to me. Her eyes widen with excitement behind her Bunsen Honeydew glasses, and her words purr and gear up before being blurred out. "Ffffffabulous!" she says. It's sweet, sticky, salty, sour, hot, and wild; crunchy and cool and sharp and round. It's crazy, and it shows on my face. Alger nods. "It takes up too much time and

space, but it's worth it. We'll just have to drop two or three things from the menu so we can keep this one on," she says.

But it's not always the needs of the restaurant that dictate a dish. Sometimes, a dish can dictate the restaurant.

Twenty-five years ago, before she had four restaurants, before she had cookbooks and TV shows as one of the Too Hot Tamales, before she had managers and accountants and assistants, Feniger was just a young chef visiting a friend in India. He took her to a small village, where women offered them a dish of tapioca, chewy and sticky, festooned with pungent spices and *neem* leaves. It wasn't delicate, it wasn't pretty, it wasn't anything like the French cooking that she had trained for and maybe even understood. But in that moment, with those people, it was everything she wanted to eat, the most serendipitous and yet fundamental of shared experiences.

So when she decided that she wanted to see if she could go back to scratch and start a new restaurant on her own, without the whole apparatus that she and business partner Mary Sue Milliken had built up over the years, Feniger went back to India. She ate from 8 a.m. through midnight for 14 days, until she came back to that village. Those women were still there, making that dish, and Feniger decided Street would be where she would share those memories, those flavors you find when in a community that is not your own but that, with a bite or two, might become a little more so. "The thing with street food," Feniger says, "is that it's not food created for carts or trucks. It's food that came out of someone's home." No wonder, then, that people take their street food so personally. It's iconic; it's their culture.

"But how do you make sure your dishes are true to those cultures?" I ask. The easy answer is that Feniger and Alger called in ringers, experts who could train them in the flavors and techniques of cuisines they didn't know firsthand. But it's bigger than that. Alger is thoughtful, excited and challenged by this question, and finally says that the lines she won't cross are felt rather than delineated. They made Korean-style dumplings, for instance, flavored with cilantro. They loved them but couldn't find any cilantro in Korean cooking, so they dropped them, too. "The more we learn about these cuisines, the harder it gets," Alger says. "At first I might think, 'Let's do a stir-fried noodle dish.' And then we'd cook with a master who shows us twenty different variations, and all of a sudden something called 'stir-fried noodles' just sounds so amateurish. So we pick one and learn to nail it and it looks and tastes and sounds great, but now the kind-of-lame dishes we had penciled in next to it on the menu sound totally ridiculous."

But there's one dish they feel they've nailed for sure. Alger draws me to the stove and shows me a bowl of tapioca balls soaking in water. She fires up a pan, gets some ghee good and hot, pops some spices and chiles, and stirs in the starchy pearls. "When I first tried to make this, I was trying to chef my way through it too much," she says. It was looking too gluey, so she tried to sear it with high heat, but it became weirdly chunky. For this dish, she had to learn to cook against her instinct, to let it ride the way Feniger suggested, to let it get mushy, sticky, tacky. Alger hands me and Feniger spoons. It's like chewy butter, heat and cumin and grassy herbs. "Prrrrretty nice," Feniger says. She takes another bite. "Mmm! That's rrrreally good."

The women pause to notice the sun going down, the light so low, so directed, so yellow and beautiful. We go outside to take a break and marvel, and Feniger's cat Squirt takes advantage of our distraction to nuzzle her nose right into a big bowl of bacon. They start to freak out. Then they stop and look at each other. "Do you ... care?" Alger asks.

"Well ... as long as we're not serving it to patrons," Feniger laughs. There are no health inspectors in the living room. This isn't Street food quite yet.

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