

SPRING 2018 Issue No. 5

# *edible*LA

Sharing the Story of Local Food, Season by Season

## THE MEATLESS ISSUE

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PLANT FOOD AND WINE

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APERITIVO COCKTAILS

...

OUR FAVORITE AVOCADO RECIPES



# PLANT POWER

THE INNOVATION AND SOPHISTICATION OF  
FOOD THAT MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALAN GASTELUM



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lant Food and Wine occupies its own white building on Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice, graced with a colorful butterfly mural, a garden filled with rare herbs, an organic wine program, and an outdoor cooking center with two big, green ceramic ovens that resemble giant emu eggs. The patio out back is pure, dreamy, and effortlessly chic—southern California at its most enviable, complete with trailing sweet peas, twinkling lights, dogs welcome, and both vegans and neighborhood foodies noshing away. On the day I visited—Valentine’s—the kitchen buzzed with palpable electricity through the lunch crowd and into dinner service.

“That’s Okinawan sweet potato,” the chef de cuisine tells me, as he notices me crushing over a bowl filled with a bright violet puree. I soon discover that each ingredient at Plant Food and Wine has been chosen to serve a clear, defined purpose, with nutrition and flavor being top priorities and not just an insignificant coincidence.

A vegan kitchen seems a little bit different—half cook space, half lab—filled with concentration, color, and the life-affirming buzz of innovation. Then there’s all the paraphernalia: upstairs, the row of dehydrators for the flax crackers; the taps for kombucha (it’s Conscious Kombucha from Santa Barbara); and the Pacojet—a sophisticated emulsifier that churns frozen blocks of base into the silkiest ice cream—to name just a few.

On one station, a pastry chef mixes the pistachio and chickpea crust for a beet tart. Nearby, Scott Winegard, the executive chef, messes with a vat of sour cherry sauce, giving it that final tweak with fennel, black garlic, and pepper, to get it just right. On the counter, the lunch plates pop up in quick succession: a spicy udon soup with a flawless crisp of seaweed, a hunk of Lodge bread with a smear of vegan blue cheese, and salads decorated with feast-for-the-eyes edible flowers. Everything that passes under my nose is the definition of Instagram-worthy, not to mention wildly delicious.

Scott—tall, bearded, tattooed—is also a musician. He has performed all over the world as bassist and founding member of the band Texas is the Reason—their 1996 album, *Do You Know Who You Are*, was included in *Rolling Stone Magazine’s* “40 Greatest Emo Albums of All Time”. After Scott traded in his guitar for chef’s knives, he cut his teeth in the industry before joining his future culinary soul mate, Matthew Kenney, at Pure Food and Wine in New York. Then, in a bold move for a seasoned chef, he staged at Noma in Copenhagen—also known as one of the world’s best restaurants—for a single formative summer.

“I was immediately attracted, like a magnet, to what [chef] Rene Redzepi was doing— foraging, pickling, little portions. It was all about what grows. I really connected to that,” Scott said.

Now at Plant Food and Wine, the ingredients are the stars. As Scott tells me, having come from New York, the Santa Monica Farmers’ Market was truly a revelation.

“Every time I go, I’m looking for something that grabs me—that cool heirloom cauliflower or that bean I’ve never seen before,” he said eagerly. “A lot of times, we’ll get the list from Rutiz Family Farms and they’ll tell me they have lettuce, fennel, and kale, but I go around to the front and they have these fantastic parsnips— then I think about how I’m going to put those on the menu. Everyone at the farmers’ market goes that extra mile to know who you are. Literally the second week I went back, the farmers remembered me, asking, ‘What are you up to?’ ‘Did you try this?’ ‘They have amazing berries over there!’”



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Scott's not only happy to be away from the east coast competition and cold weather, but he loves the community of chefs out here in LA.

"It's a brotherhood...take Alex Phaneuf and Or Amsalam [from Lodge Bread Co]. They came over in the beginning, brought some of their loaves, and we just sat here, eating bread and talking. It felt like we'd been friends for years," he said.

Matthew Kenney, CEO and face of the company and restaurant group, has been named one of America's Best New Chefs by *Food & Wine Magazine* and was twice nominated Rising Star Chef by the James Beard Foundation. He and Scott aren't interested in being the next vegan fine dining temple—the focus here is a little bit different. As Scott tells me, "We want to be market-driven, whole foods. We want to be scratch." His model for Plant Food and Wine is basically the Chez Panisse of Venice—a mecca for responsible food, done right. He's also proud that, in the three years they've been here, they've bridged foodie heaven with a neighborhood joint where people can get what they want, well made and nutritionally sound.

"We kept at it, listening to the neighborhood. People wanted a veggie burger, so," Scott said, "Okay, we'll give you one, but it's got to be a really good one." And hardcore vegans can still come for the full-on chef's tasting menu experience, though the menu is no longer exclusively raw. And that brings me to the Big Green Egg ceramic grills in the backyard.

"Zero to 500 degrees in less than 10 minutes. Fantastic," Scott said. "We're putting oak in here, and pecan that burns down to embers. I love the smoke, the fire, the smell. Just now, we've added an avocado tikka to the menu and I'm using these for the potato bread." He plops the plump, risen dough onto a pizza stone. "You can char sweet potato cakes in here too, and mustard greens cook up [so well and] not at all bitter."

While developing a vegan menu, one school of thought is to find substitutes—using coconut meat and cashews to mimic dairy in ice cream, for example, in an attempt to produce something familiar, something that people are already comfortable with—but Plant Food and Wine is after something different. Here, the plant is the star, and nothing stands in for animal products. By using herbs and plants like oxalis and red mustard, as well as juniper and sumac infused oils, they're using whole, fresh ingredients to create truly plant-focused dishes. As Matthew explains, "We don't use fake meats, we barely use any soy products, we only have a little tempeh in one dish in all of our restaurants. You won't find cans or soy products or seitan. It's all about the plants—and highlighting them." They do use nuts to make cheese, but he clarifies, "the idea is not to emulate or copy cheese, just to recreate the experience of cheese—that salty, fatty, fermented flavor that is so irresistible. We want to capture the spirit of it," he said.

I'm sitting with Matthew at his favorite table, with a clear view of the door. Neat in his black hoodie and jeans, I learn that he bikes to work and that both he and Scott are cat lovers. Matthew has Rumble, a Maine Coon that stretches out like an accordion, and Scott has Toshi, a long-legged Rex, who famously goes for walks on the beach and hangs out in the restaurant garden.

Brimming with ideas and a creativity that's practically



Scott Winegard, executive chef, at the farmers' market. Photo by Adrian Mueller.

palpable, Matthew teaches me about their wine program—all small-batch, boutique California wineries, vegan and sustainable with unique varietals meant to balance and complement this particular cuisine.

Plant Food and Wine is just one of many plant-based concepts in their growing worldwide empire. The group has a dozen (and growing as we speak) other locations in such exotic locales as Bogotá and Bahrain. Shortly after I spoke with Scott and Matthew, they jetted off to Australia to open a new restaurant, Alibi, in Sydney. A “vegan 7-Eleven”, called New Deli, on Pacific Avenue in Venice will be next. It’ll be a place “where you can get frozen, organic vegan pizza and ice cream, a really beautiful coffee program, paper products, [fresh juices], and wine,” Matthew told me.

Abbott Kinney has become ground zero for the culinary revolution of the westside, spearheaded by Travis Lett’s juggernaut of Gjelina, Gjusta, and Mtn, and only challenged by the Rustic Canyon Family of Restaurants in nearby Santa Monica, with their Cassia, Rustic Canyon, Esters Wine Shop & Bar, Tallula’s, Milo and Olive, and Sweet Rose Creamery. The Venice Renaissance has its own character, though: beachy, maverick, rascally; not just farm-to-table, but wild-to-table, and studded with fiercely individual chefs. Evan Funke added a new, delicious wrinkle with Felix and now there’s room for Plant Food and Wine to morph into a neighborhood mecca of conscious, sustainable food.

“I think that’s the thing with Chez Panisse,” Matthew said. “It opened with a vision but grew into a temple of a certain type of gastronomy and here, this too, is so much more than a restaurant.”

“I want people to realize that this style of cuisine is better for them, our planet, our bodies, the animals, and it’s better tasting because there’s no competition between your health and what you’re putting in your body,” he said. “You don’t have to eat lunch here and then diet tomorrow.”



He’s right, of course. Think about it: the Thanksgiving meal and the turkey coma that follows; the holiday binge and the New Year’s diet, expectedly abandoned by Valentine’s Day; the pint of ice cream after a break up. As a culture, we relate to food in a deeply emotional, perhaps unhealthy way—something that Matthew and Scott aim to change.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, chef de cuisine Jason Wood segments Cara Cara oranges, pitching in. The crust is rolled out for the beet tart, with its agave and sumac, curry, and pistachio. The Okinawan potato puree is ready to swish on the plate under hearts of palm, citrus, and avocado. The almond ricotta gnocchi are lined up in rows, to be paired with sautéed beech mushrooms and that mysteriously delicious cherry sauce—and yes, it’s hard not to wonder why all food can’t be this beautiful and nourishing.

Stay tuned. This is the future of food. ♦




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