

FALL 2017

Issue No. 3

*edible*LA

Sharing the Story of Local Food, Season by Season

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season's must-haves

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GETTING A SECOND CHANCE AT L.A. KITCHEN

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ALFRESCO THANKSGIVING

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IMPERFECT BEAUTY

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**How one non-profit gives produce
and people a second chance.**

BY LISA ALEXANDER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLINA KORMAN



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icture yourself as a Seckel pear, clustered with your bros on a hundred-year-old tree in Sacramento County. The breeze kicks up the rustling, shiny leaves all around you. The sun bakes. Come nightfall, the nearby whoosh of the Sacramento River. Bright and early in the morning, pickers climb ladders to twist you off your branch and into a truck you go to be transported all the way to the Los Angeles Produce Market (lapma.org). Bounce, bounce, bounce along the highway. The following morning, the market hums with the cacophony of pallet drivers, chefs, supermarket and restaurant buyers, and even thrifty shoppers willing to buy in bulk for a deal. Only something's gone wrong—maybe you got burned on your side of the branch, maybe you got thrashed around in the back of the truck—because now you have a visible bruise at three o'clock, a small gash just under your stem, and your sweet, delicious smell causes a worker to slap a “ripe today” label on you. Uh-oh. Bagged, but unsalable, and cheaper to throw away.

Robert Egger, the founder of L.A. Kitchen (lakitchen.org), is doing his best to give you the second chance you so deserve. He uses donated imperfect produce to make free plant-based meals for Los Angeles area seniors and homeless - and that's not all. “The only way to fight hunger is with jobs,” Egger says, “so L.A. Kitchen runs a culinary job training program for kids aging out of the foster care system and older men and women coming out of prison.”

It's an elegant system and a very cool idea.

On a hot day in July, Egger meets me on the floor of L.A. Kitchen's headquarters. Occupying a roomy corner of a 60,000-square-foot warehouse between Chinatown and Montecito Heights, the kitchen is just blocks from Historic Route 66 as well as the food deserts of Monterey Park, Bell, Watts, Crenshaw, and Inglewood. The space is huge, spanking clean, and bright.

“If there's any place more important to instill change, it's here, at ground zero in LA,” Egger says, “You can draw people in with food, but then this simple metaphor— ‘this fruit has a little wrinkle on it, but isn't it wrong to throw it away?’—can make people feel

beautiful and useful just the way they are.”

Talking to Egger is like attending my own personal TED Talk. He’s passionate and bespectacled, with a neatly trimmed silver goatee. He also has some serious food-activist cred. Egger came from Washington, D.C. where he went from a successful career in the music business to feeding the homeless at his DC Central Kitchen (dccentralkitchen.org). Since its inception in 1989, Egger’s non-profit has given away about 45 million meals, made from food that would have otherwise been thrown out. The organization delivers fresh produce and healthy snacks to convenience stores in DC food deserts, sources ingredients from family farms for school lunches in low-income areas (they received the prestigious 2015 Golden Carrot Award), and runs a free summer meal program for at-risk youth. DC Central was one of President George H.W. Bush’s Thousand Points of Light (pointsoflight.org) and both Presidents Obama and Clinton volunteered there.

“There’s something so equalizing about standing next to a president prepping vegetables,” Egger says.

All of it was built on one simple idea: recycle unused food from restaurants and get it to urban food

banks to feed the hungry. Egger’s next aha moment came in 2002 when he was backstage at a speech and learned that at least half of the Meals on Wheels (mealsonwheelsamerica.org) in L.A. had a waiting list and, worse, the so-called silver tsunami was coming—at the stroke of midnight in 2006, the first of eighty million baby boomers would

cross the milestone of age 60.

That’s how Egger ended up here in LA, a city with one of the greatest concentrations of elderly in the country.

The main kitchen is huge. On one side, a long line of recycled pico de gallo containers are being filled with ruffles of emerald lettuce. On the other, chicken salad studded with carrots and celery is stuffed into buns. There’s also a packaging station where sweet potato purée is sealed into trays. Industrial shelves hold bagged pears and stacks of kale. A blackboard displays the list of today’s deliveries to places like the Korean Senior and Community Center (ksccla.com) and the Union Rescue Mission (urm.org) on Skid Row. On the menu is a big salad with soba noodles, grilled eggs, vegetable pot stickers, and spiced seaweed. And those bagged pears!

“We see what we have,” says Chef Jamel Mayrant, a take-charge guy adorned with a gold nose ring. “We go

**“THE ONLY WAY TO FIGHT HUNGER IS
WITH JOBS,” EGGER SAYS.**







over ingredients. We all come together to figure out what can fit... let's say an eggplant and a radish...it may not be a recipe just with those things, but we incorporate those ingredients," he says.

There's definitely creativity involved here. The chefs have to be quick on their feet and brimming with ideas. Mayrant tells me that internet search engines and social media help too, as well as collaborating with the other head chefs. "They can look at the stuff and already have recipes ready to go." As we talk, he and the volunteers mix huge plastic bins of strawberries and cut plums for fruit cups. The smell rises, so sweet and floral that I want to jump in and help.

Next I meet Warner Finley, an enthusiastic soon-to-be Empower L.A. graduate with a dream of going to France and training in a professional kitchen there. Finley was living in a halfway house at a homeless shelter when his caseworker told him about Empower's culinary job training program. Now he's finishing up his internship and working as a caterer.

"Cuts. Sauces. Equipment. Sauces. I learned a lot," Finley says. "And the thing about this program, it's like a family, too. Most of my classmates are from institutions and I can see the life changing in them as they come through these rooms."

In their Culinary Olympics last week, he made chicken parmesan with pasta and homemade tomato sauce. "I could have saved the pasta water, though, and poured it on top," he said. "See, that's what I've learned!"

Egger tells me it's the word on the street that he's most proud of. L.A. Kitchen has a program where federal judges refer men and women who come here to work as an alternative to sentencing. "It's this idea of saying - whether it's parole officers or judges - that we have a whole bunch of people who are willing to make L.A. Kitchen work."

Robert Reams cooks at STRONG FOOD, L.A. Kitchen's social enterprise that purchases imperfect produce to manufacture healthy products, upstairs. Reams came to the job from a halfway house after being released from

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prison. Both arms sleeved with tattoos, he seems quiet and sure of himself. A graduate of the culinary school, he makes apple and beet chips as well as fresh, preservative-free baby food. STRONG FOOD employs graduates to create products and then uses the revenue to fuel the other L.A. Kitchen programs.

The most important thing is to get the word out that all of this food is available - plant-based, and nutrient-rich. That's why L.A. Kitchen is also partnering with health providers like Kaiser Permanente (kaiserpermanente.org) and Martin Luther King Hospital (mlkcommunityhospital.org), so that doctors can literally write a food prescription for their diabetic patients: 'eat healthy...for free!'

This is a food moment, Egger tells me. People are upset about food waste, people are upset about what's in their food, and people are upset about unemployment and hunger. What we need to ask is, "what is community?; what is connectivity?; what does beauty look like in this new world?" Even for the pear-shaped among us.

Or, as Warner Finley says, "That's one of my dreams, to give back to people in need. Not only am I changing my life, but I'm changing their lives, too." ♡



WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

- Take your kids to Family Friendly Kitchen Prep sessions on weekends.
- Dance and dice at a Disco Chop Party.
- Throw a Shared Plate dinner party. An anti-fundraiser fundraiser, it's a citywide weekend of dinner parties October 6-8th, 2017. Anyone can throw one and every dollar raised goes to L.A. Kitchen.
- Volunteer in the Teaching Garden during spring and summer months.
- Join in on the kitchen prep, open to volunteers Monday through Saturday.

For more info:
sharedplates.org and lakitchen.org/events