

FOOD + WINE

The long reach of wellness

Asian Americans celebrate legacy of herbal & food traditions. Page 6



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A fortifying bean soup to tame the cold.
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INSIDE SCOOP



Great Gold

Great Gold in the Tahoe area uses 18-month aged Parmigiano-Reggiano on its crusts, such as its Carbonara pizza with guanciale, garlic cream and an egg.



Cayce Clifford

June's Pizza in Oakland showers crusts in the takeout box, such as this margherita pie, with extra cheese as a finishing touch.



John Storey / The Chronicle 2018

A pie at Che Fico, whose chef-owner David Nayfeld says: "I wanted the dough to be more like an incredible piece of bread than your typical pizza crust."

Pizza crusts front and center

Crust-first pies offer fluffy, chewy dough blanketed in an extra dusting of cheese

By Janelle Bitker

Pizza with shredded Parmesan lovingly dusted along its crust is becoming an increasingly familiar sight on Instagram. These pies look like they're surrounded by a fluffy ring of snow.

The chefs responsible for the micro-trend say the reasoning is pretty simple: Cheese + crust = good.

Craig Murli, whose blistered pies at June's Pizza tend to sell out within 30 minutes, said the cheesy wisdom came to him during his West Oakland restaurant's first day of business. He was making a pizza for a friend who happened to be very, very stoned. As a joke, Murli grated a bunch of Parmesan over the crust — and the friend freaked out with delight. Murli decided it was a great move for sober people, too.

Murli already knew he'd grate grana padano and pecorino Romano on every pie, so bringing the cheese all the way to the edges was a subtle variation that he began on June's second day in business back in March. He also reasoned that, as a takeout-only business, it makes sense to fill the edges of the square box with more cheese.

"When you finish eating, you can squish the crusts with leftover Parmesan and then you have this leftover cheesy bread," he said.

The first Bay Area restaurant to create a fervor over these cheese-dusted crusts is San Francisco's Che Fico, whose chef and owner, David Nayfeld, wanted to find some way of telling diners that they shouldn't leave their crusts behind when he opened the Cal-Italian spot in 2018.

"I wanted the dough to be more like an incredible piece of bread than your typical pizza crust that oftentimes gets discarded," he said. "So I wanted to signal to people this is something you need to eat — you need to at least try it because *this* is the experience."

He also recalled growing up watching pizza-chain commercials for cheese-stuffed crust, with actors diving into the crust first. *How cool would it be if Che Fico diners also went for the crust first?*

As Nayfeld notes with his cheese-stuffed pizza memories, cheese merging with crust is not exactly a new thing. The burgeoning Detroit-style pizza, recently popularized locally by Square Pie Guys and Cellarmaker House of Pizza, sees cheddar go to all four corners of the pan, creating crispy, browned edges — in other words, the best part of the pie. Pequod's Pizza, a famous deep-dish pizza spot in Chicago, is similarly well-known for sprinkling mozzarella along the edge of its cast-iron pans, creating a caramelized crust.

Ultimately, this particular style of Parmesan-dusted crust is specific to neo-Neapolitan pizza, artisan pies inspired by the classic Italian style but not beholden to it. Locally, that often means slowly fermented crusts that use a sourdough starter, creating a blistered, fluffy-yet-chewy experience bolstered by salty wisps of Italian cheese.

At Che Fico, the chefs brush the crusts with olive oil as soon as the pies come out of the oven and then finish them with a generous grating of Parmigiano-Reggiano, Pecorino Romano or Ricotta Salata, depending on the pizza.

"The alchemy of the blistered, charred, naturally fermented dough brushed with olive oil that's seeping into the dough and dusted with super high-

Pizza review

Soleil Ho reviews Pollara Pizzeria in Berkeley, page 4.

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ESTHER MOBLEY

WINE OF THE WEEK



Nic Coury / Special to the Chronicle 2019

The Field Recordings tasting room, seen here in 2019, is located in the Tin City complex in Paso Robles (San Luis Obispo County).

A white wine to please every palate

Welcome to Wine of the Week, a new series in which Chronicle wine critic Esther Mobley recommends a delicious bottle that you should be drinking right now. Last week, she highlighted a Cabernet Franc that smells like a California wintertime bike. Check for a new installment every Wednesday at sfchronicle.com/wine.

Chenin Blanc is the answer to so many wine questions.

What's a complex, high-quality wine that can consistently be found at affordable prices?

What's a wine that can appeal equally to a Chardonnay drinker and a Sauvignon Blanc lover?

What's a white wine that can actually improve, not just deteriorate, with age?

What's a wine that will pair well with a three-course dinner but also be pleasant to drink on its own, without food?

The answer to all of these queries: Chenin Blanc.

If you're new to this versatile, deeply rewarding grape variety, one excellent place to start would be the 2018 Central Coast Chenin Blanc from Field Recordings, a winery in Paso Robles (San Luis Obispo County). It's a mellow, refreshing wine that expresses some of Chenin Blanc's signature characteristics — crisp acidity, aromas of flowers and orchard fruits and a distinctive note that often gets described as “lanolin,” a sensation reminiscent of wet wool that I find very pleasant. Apples and pears tend to abound in Chenin Blanc, and in this wine I get an aroma that reminds me of applesauce.

It's a crowd-pleaser, the sort of wine I assume pretty much everyone would enjoy. For white wine drinkers who recoil from either Chardonnay's creaminess or Sauvignon Blanc's sharp herbal nature, here's a wine that splits the difference beautifully, balancing richness, freshness and fruit all at once. It's light enough to hold its own during cocktail hour but flavorful enough to be the bottle you open with a hearty roast chicken.

Best of all, it's only \$20. Affordability is one of Chenin Blanc's great virtues in California, where in recent years this grape has undergone something of a resurgence. Chenin



Esther Mobley / The Chronicle

The 2018 Central Coast Chenin Blanc from Field Recordings.

Blanc — whose most famous examples come from France's Loire Valley, same as Cabernet Franc, our previous Wine of the Week — was widely planted in California in the mid-20th century, but then fell out of fashion. Many of the state's older plantings were ripped out. Only in the last decade or so have winemakers in larger numbers begun elevating Chenin Blanc again to the status it deserves. (Some true believers, it should be noted, stuck with Chenin during the unfashionable years and preserved the old vines, like Napa's Chappellet and Monterey County's Chalone.)

Field Recordings' winemaker, Andrew Jones, has a knack for turning out unusual, surprising wines from the Central Coast. (He even adds hops to some of his wines and ciders.) Many of them are well worth trying. I would not classify this Chenin as unusual, though; it's classic. If it becomes your entry point into Chenin Blanc, your next step might be to try Field Recordings' single-vineyard Chenin from the Shell Creek Vineyard in Paso Robles. It's a step up in weight and complexity, and it's double the price at about \$40.

You can buy the wine at fieldrecordingswine.com or the following Bay Area stores: Wine Meats Cheese; Little Vine; Golden Gate Market (Sausalito); Zinz; Gus's Community Market; Farmstead Wine & Cheese; Cordial Bottle.

Field Recordings Chenin Blanc Central Coast 2018 (\$20, 11.9%)

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FOOD+WINE

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On the cover

Erin Wilkins reaches for a jar of herbs at her shop, Herb Folk, in Petaluma, which is holding workshops on holistic health care based on East Asian traditions. See story, page 6. Photo by Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

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SOLEIL HO

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Roman-style makes the cut in Berkeley



Pollara Pizzeria captivates with street food's airy crusts and toppings

When talking about Pollara Pizzeria, the operative word has to be “airy.” When bitten, the crackling crusts remind me of how it feels to pop a sheet of bubble wrap, bubble after bubble, the sound of collapse a reward unto itself.

In a town with plenty of formidable pizzas, Pollara sets itself apart by focusing on rectangular, Roman-style pizza al taglio, where customers traditionally order by the gram (here, by the ounce) and their slices get cut using scissors (“al taglio” means “by the cut” in Italian). Restaurateurs Kayta and Jon Smulewitz, also known for Oakland’s now-closed Dopo, opened it in Berkeley in September 2019, inspired by a fortuitous visit to the famed pizza al taglio spot Pizzarium while touring Rome. While Dopo’s menu was inspired by the foods of Jon Smulewitz’s Sicilian American upbringing, Pollara represents a new direction for the chef.

Like the best of artisan pizza, the crust is where Pollara excels. A pizza-maker once told me that for most pizza lovers, the toppings are the obvious thing to fixate upon. But it’s the crust that’s the most challenging to differentiate and talk about; it’s also the component that pizza cooks tend to work the hardest at perfecting.

Pollara’s is light, with a bulk that seems to consist of mostly air, but it’s not too fragile to hold its own against the toppings. Achieving that structure, characterized by a “honeycomb” of gaseous bubbles in the unbaked dough, relies on a specific methodology. Jon uses more water in his recipe and ferments dough in the fridge, as opposed to the usual warm spot in the kitchen. That combination of high-hydration dough and a 72-hour cold fermentation — both hallmarks of the style — lead to that lighter crust and delicate crumb.

It’s a deceptively lithe pie; it’s nearly as thick as many Detroit-style pizzas but far less dense. The rectangular pizza al taglio really seems like a fancy toast in disguise.

The cacio e pepe pie (\$32), an adaptation of the classic minimalist pasta dish, is a worthy vehicle for the crust. Usually, the pasta’s silky texture comes from a starchy mixture of pasta water and pecorino Romano. Here, that texture is echoed by a silken smear of house-made ricotta, which forms the bulk of the pie. The fine curds of the cheese have the same stupefying effect as high-end bed sheets, prompting you to close your eyes and sigh. You’re kept wide awake by the generous grinds of black pepper. The relatively mild base also makes the pizza amicable to other add-ons, if you are indeed a toppings-first kind of pizza lover.

But I’d recommend not customizing too much or you run the risk of overshadowing the crust with too many other flavors and textures. If you want something punchier, try the sun-dried tomato pizza. Ubiquitous in vinaigrettes, bagels and pastas in American restaurants and home kitchens in the 1990s, sun-dried tomatoes now have a retro-in-a-bad-way

feel to them. The sun-dried tomato pizza (\$32) at Pollara is a welcome update to a tired flavor.

The first taste impression pulses with the tomatoes’ concentrated savory and sweet notes; the bitter grassiness of fresh arugula, applied generously here, moderates that intensity. Ripped globs of mozzarella wash over the flavors without drowning them out. The pizza also comes without cheese in an even more intense vegan version, which I also recommend.

Though toppings aren’t always a pizzaiolo’s preferred way to show prowess, Pollara offers many compelling choices. Every day, the pizzeria sells about a dozen or more types of pies, which are displayed in a glassed-in, pre-baked lineup at the counter, looking like reams of patterned fabric. Squash blossoms cascade on top of one another in neat lines, and the variant fatty marbling of the pink-hued house-cured prosciutto would look just as lovely on a summer skirt.

On the red pizzas, the scant, baked-on tomato sauce provides the most subtle umami undertone.

Before the pandemic, you could order pizza the Roman way — scissor cut, and by weight — which made it easy to try many flavors. Now, you have to settle on ordering by the quarter, half or full pan, which is way less fun but more efficient and better for minimizing customer interaction.

Choosing just a few is just excruciating, but every pizza that I’ve tried at Pollara is outstanding. Pizzas are sold pre-baked and cold, with reheating directions included. You can also ask for your pizzas to be reheated on-site; there are plenty of spots in the plaza to eat, if you’re OK with sitting on a concrete partition.

But beyond the pizza, Pollara Pizzeria is so well-conceived that there’s nothing that I’d want to change. While I can’t wait to actually sit and eat in the high-ceilinged dining room, the takeout experi-

ence is still worth a trip. Everything fits together so poetically.

Alongside pies there are tart-and-bitter salads, essential additions to grab. A nest of petite arugula leaves (\$9), coupled with a simple, shallot-y dressing, provides the bite you need to offset the heavier tastes of the pizzas. For a more traditional pizza-night route, get the Caesar-ish salad of little gem lettuce (\$12), which gets a dusting of grana padano cheese and a sharp lemon-anchovy vinaigrette on the side.

The fried suppli act as substantial pre-cursors to eating the pie, too. The classic (\$3) is a ball of arborio rice stuffed with mozzarella and tomato, then deep-fried. The tomato gives each bite a surprising sharpness and depth, making the dish taste much more complicated than just any old fried snack. If you’re unfamiliar, imagine the best possible interpretation of a Totino’s Pizza Roll that still captures its pleasing gooiness with just a hint of grease.

And as a final accompanying act, Pollara’s Italian-dominated wine list is worth perusing to take home a bottle. It covers a range of price points, from a \$28 sparkling wine to a rare, \$132 Sangiovese, with some fun natural wines in the mix as well. Drinks with a strong tannic finish, like the orange wines Pollara stocks, complement the cheeses and charcuterie that they make in-house. Check out I Cacciagalli’s Zagreo, made from the Fiano grape (\$40), which first exhibits a farmers’ market stand’s worth of stone fruit aromas before landing on a refreshingly astringent note.

I haven’t been to Pizzarium and can’t speak to whether Pollara has replicated it. The Smulewitzes, though, have clearly done their research on how to make an excellent pizza, and the care they’ve put into it is tangible with each crackling bite.

If you’re a crust-agnostic who tends to leave it on the plate, Pollara will make a believer out of you.

Pollara Pizzeria, 11:30 a.m.-7p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Takeout. 1788 Fourth St., Berkeley. (510)-529-4548 or www.pollarapizzeria.com



Pollara Pizzeria owner Jon Smulewitz, top, arranges the just-baked rectangular pies while boxes, above, await the goods.

Crust forward

These pizza makers defy you to leave the crust on the plate, page 2.



Pollara’s sells about a dozen or more



Photos by Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

...e types of pies every day, including the cacio e pepe (from top), prosciutto and margherita. Customers order by the quarter, half or full pan, and you can't go wrong.

HERBALISM



Reclaiming their legacy of wellness

Bay Area Asian American duo reconnects with ancestral herbal and food traditions

By Cathy Erway

Growing up, Adrian Chang spent a lot of time in his grandfather's Chinese apothecary in San Francisco's Chinatown. The small shop on Washington and Waverly streets, Superior Trading, closed two years ago, but Chang recalls the floor-to-ceiling drawers holding dried cicadas, twigs, berries, tangerine peels and even seahorses.

"My mom would always say I should take this or that for my cough, and I was like, 'Oh gross,'" says Chang. As an adult, he regrets that he dismissed his family's early efforts to educate him on herbal medicine and understanding food as medicine. His grandfather passed away about a year ago, "with this regret that his legacy didn't continue without him."

But now, Chang and Erin Wilkins, proprietor of Herb Folk, an herbal medicine shop in Petaluma, have teamed up to teach a series of live online workshops on Asian American herbalism and folk traditions — and with it, they hope to start reclaiming that legacy and their connection to East Asian folk traditions.

In their first workshop, held Jan. 9, Wilkins did a rundown on qi and the five elements theory in Traditional Chinese Medicine, then Chang did a cooking demonstration of dashi broth and winter root vegetable soup, explaining each of its ingredients' traditional medicinal associations along the way, such as kombu for purifying the kidneys in winter, and carrots for promoting lung health and the immune system.

Throughout the series, which will run through 2021, they're emphasizing the ancestral roots to concepts that have been popularized over the years through food and wellness culture, like fermenting and repurposing food scraps. Other classes will focus on Lunar New Year traditions, qi energetics and seasonal spring herbal medicine along with a cooking demonstration of Kola kanda, a Sri Lankan porridge simmered with medicinal herbs.

"Folk traditions have been carried on through oral tradition, through community and lived experiences," says Chang. "Then it becomes commodified and you lose that connection to all the people who birthed that wisdom."

He and Wilkins met in 2019 at a community supported agriculture, or CSA, event hosted by Radical Family



Farms, a Sebastopol farm specializing in Asian heritage produce, and they had discussed launching the project ever since. Their backgrounds already primed them: Wilkins, who has a degree in acupuncture and Eastern medicine from the Acupuncture & Integrative Medicine College in Berkeley, has been running a clinical practice in acupuncture for 10 years. Chang had recently returned to the Bay Area after 10 years living in Japan, Singapore and Sri Lanka, learning the cooking and folk traditions he now teaches from friends and family members who practiced them every day.

They bonded over their journeys in reconnecting with

their Asian American identity and decided to work these discussions into an educational series on herbalism and food as medicine. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, food and herbs can address imbalances in the body as it interacts with the seasons and environment, with some being cooling, like raw vegetables, and others warming, like ginger.

Until recent years, Wilkins had compartmentalized her profession from her Japanese American heritage, interest in social justice and oral history, and other aspects of her life. She has since applied "Asian American" to her work and title as an herbalist, a small shift in language that she says

has been nothing short of revelatory.

"I learned about (umeboshi) in a very formal educational setting," says Wilkins, of the fermented plum that is said to aid digestion. "Then I remember, oh yeah, we ate umeboshi in our meals just casually because it tastes good."

Much of their teachings derive from Traditional Chinese Medicine. The holistic philosophy of well-being dates back to at least China's Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.), when the earliest written evidence of what was by then already a sophisticated system of medicine was recorded. Its principles are rooted in Taoism, and it has been practiced, with adaptations, in many

parts of East and Southeast Asia (it is an entirely different system, however, from Ayurvedic medicine practiced in South Asia, although both share a holistic approach).

Though their lessons derive from China, Chang and Wilkins are conscious of applying the term "Asian American" to their work to acknowledge that their approach is filtered through their Asian American upbringing — a collective experience that they believe transcends specific ethnicity. Chang is a third-generation Chinese American, and Wilkins is a mixed-race fourth-generation Japanese American, or yonsei. They plan to create a space that is inclusive of other Asian American





Photos by Jessica Christian / The Chronicle



Erin Wilkins, top, at her shop, Herb Folk, in Petaluma. Wilkins has teamed up with cook Adrian Chang, left, tending to his chickens at his Occidental home, for a workshop series on Asian American folk traditions in food, herbs and wellness. Orange peels, above, sit out to dry before being used by Chang. Left, from top: Jars of Chinese herbs line the walls of Herb Folk; an assortment of teas Wilkins and Chang use in their workshops.

backgrounds through group discussions, and hope to shine a light on the diversity of the Asian American community while acknowledging their own areas of expertise.

Their new education effort follows a decades-long, rocky passage in America for Traditional Chinese Medicine, which encompasses five branches of discipline, including qi gong (a body and mind exercise), acupuncture, herbal medicine, food nutrition and tui na massage (a therapeutic massage practice, thought to be one of the world's oldest). Until the 1980s, it was taught and practiced in primarily immigrant East Asian communities.

In 1974, Miriam Lee, a Chi-

nese immigrant in Palo Alto, was arrested for practicing medicine without a license. As a factory worker at Hewlett-Packard, she began to practice acupuncture for members of her community, which she learned from a master acupuncturist in her hometown in Shandong province. Demand for her services grew. It has been said that at Lee's first hearing, over 100 of her patients showed up to protest the arrest. Her trial led to the legalization of acupuncture in California in 1976, and Lee founded the Acupuncture Association of America in 1980 to promote its education.

In 1992, the National Institutes of Health established the Office of Alternative Medicine,

now known as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, to promote research and regulation of treatments practiced outside of Western European-based medicine. However, many of these ancient therapies continue to be scorned, feared and mocked in popular media and Western medicine fields.

"It's very difficult to reconcile these different explanations for health and disease," says Linda Shiue, M.D., a physician and director of a teaching kitchen in San Francisco. Having a cultural connection to Chinese medicine and folk traditions while only a clinical background in Western medicine practice, Shiue

says that food and nutrition are woefully underappreciated in the latter.

"I learned zero about food," says Shiue of her medical training. Yet, "half of premature deaths are attributable to our overfed yet malnourished society," she writes in her upcoming cookbook, "Spicebox Kitchen," a project inspired by recipes she would hand out to patients.

Throughout the '80s and '90s, Traditional Chinese Medicine underwent "a process of being exoticized or dismissed until it was found useful in studies and clinics," Wilkins says. It also became institutionalized in American colleges, where three- and four-year master's degrees can easily cost around \$80,000. Wilkins says part of the goal of Herb Folk and

her workshops with Chang is to make their services, and this knowledge, more accessible. The next two classes offered in the virtual Asian American Herbalism series, each two hours long, are offered as a two-part package for \$100, or \$50-\$80 separately.

But the workshops are about more than reclaiming these methods for the Asian American diaspora. They're hoping that it also builds a sense of community in the Bay Area around Asian American herbalism and folk traditions.

During the series' first workshop, students could participate in a Zoom chat feed, and some expressed revelations on how they'd grown up with these ideas around food and medicine without fully realizing it. One student in attendance, Christine Su, said family members would dispense notions of

Traditional Chinese Medicine, often in the form of scolding or cooking advice. But the underlying principles behind why some foods were thought to be cooling, while others were warming, had eluded her.

"It's so moving to me to hear how nature-based our medicine and food is, growing up immersed in the idea that Asians live in cities," wrote Su, an activist and founder of the agricultural start-up PastureMap.

That sense of community is something that Chang has craved since moving to Sonoma County with his husband

four years ago. He says there is very little Asian American community in the region — even though Chinese and Japanese Americans have a deep history there. Now,

due to the pandemic's social distance-mandated, screen-dominated lifestyles, he has enjoyed connecting with people from around the world interested in his cooking and knowledge, which he shares on his Instagram account, My Kitsune Cafe. And he has found inspiration in like-minded people of all backgrounds who are embracing their ancestral folk traditions.

"There's this misconception that Asians are super exotic at home, and when they leave the house they aren't, and in fact we are all of it at the same time," Chang says. "I think being able to normalize that concept is very empowering."

Cathy Erway is a food writer, author of "The Food of Taiwan" and "Sheet Pan Chicken," and hosts the podcast "Self Evident." Email: food@sfgchronicle.com

Herb Folk

Herb Folk, 117 Washington St., Petaluma. Find the class schedule on the Herb Folk website, www.herbfolkshop.com. The next classes come as a two-part package for \$100, or \$50-\$80 separately.

REPERTOIRE

A bean soup for right now



This easy pinto bean soup adds masa dumplings, called chochoyotes.

Jessica Battilana

Fortify yourself with this simple soup that adds little masa dumplings

By Jessica Battilana

Maybe you, like me, loaded up your pantry in the early months of the pandemic. Maybe you attempted to relieve the tedium of cooking every meal by mail-ordering some fancy comestibles to see you through — a fancy jar of Sichuan chile crisp, a special bottle of olive oil or, perhaps, some heirloom dried beans. The pandemic is not over, but with spring on the horizon and the distant glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel, it's time to clean house.

Because while some foodstuffs improve with age, most do not. Spices go stale, flour gets musty, beans, long-removed from the fields in which they grew, take longer to cook, stubbornly resisting tenderness. We don't know what will happen tomorrow, but we know we need dinner tonight, and this pinto bean soup with chochoyotes, little masa dumplings, will clear out some of the things in your pantry while fortifying you for whatever comes next.

Everyone's an expert on the best way to take beans from dried to soft, so I'll teach you my method and leave it up to you to figure out what you want to do. We are home a lot now, and many of us own pressure cookers or Instant Pots, so really there is no excuse for not trying this recipe with dried beans, rather than canned. (But if you do go for canned, you'll need 7 cups for this soup.)

I soak my dry beans in water to cover overnight. The next day, I drain them and add fresh water to cover, then bring them to a boil. I cover the pot, then return it to a 250 degree oven, and cook the beans until they are tender. Once they're

tender, I generously salt the bean cooking liquid, then let the beans cool in the liquid so they absorb the seasoning.

One of my favorite pieces of bean advice comes from chef Liza Shaw, the owner of the sadly now-shuttered Merigan sub shop, who said that you should taste five beans to determine doneness and, if you're chewing them and wondering if they're done, they're not. One batch of beans I cooked recently took an hour in the oven. Another took three. I'm sorry! I realize this is annoyingly vague for some home cooks but, hey, that's how it is. I'd start checking them at the one-hour mark and go from there.

If it seems like I'm going on a bit about beans, that's because it's very hard to make a great bean soup without great beans. But once you have the beans ready to go (yes, you can make them days ahead and store them in the fridge in their cooking liquid) the rest of the soup is a snap. To a base of cooked onions and garlic I add a can of diced tomatoes, puree the mixture, then return the puree to the pot in which I cooked the vegetables and cook it down

until it's thick and concentrated and beginning to stick to the bottom of the pot. Then it's just chicken stock and beans, cilantro and lime.

The chochoyotes — masa dumplings — are equally simple, but they add welcome flavor and ballast to the soup. If you can get fresh masa near you, you can certainly use that, but masa harina is great, too. The most common brand is Maseca. The dumplings are just masa, water, some type of fat and a bit of baking soda. I've used vegetable oil in the dumplings (good), bacon fat (better) and lard (best), but all work, including olive oil.

While not all recipes for chochoyotes include baking powder, I find it makes the dumplings a bit more tender. I tried cooking the dumplings directly in the soup, a streamlined method I really hoped would be great. It wasn't. Instead, I cook the dumplings in simmering chicken stock. They first sink, then float; once they're floating, cook them for one more minute. Remove and reserve the dumplings, then use that chicken stock in the soup. When the soup is done, the dumplings are folded in to warm through.

Now, where once there was only a bag of dried beans, some dried spices and the end of a bag of masa, there's a big pot of soup.

The pantry may be emptier, but bellies are full.

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Pinto Bean Soup With Chochoyotes

Serves 8

- 1 pound dried pinto beans
- Kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 large white onion, diced
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and smashed
- 1 to 2 tablespoons minced jalapeño chile (from 1-2 chiles)
- 1 teaspoon Ancho chile powder
- 1 (15 ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 cup masa harina
- 1 tablespoon lard, bacon fat or vegetable oil
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- ⅛ teaspoon baking powder
- 4 cups chicken stock
- 1 cup loosely packed cilantro leaves, finely chopped, a few leaves reserved for garnish
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice, plus lime wedges for serving
- Cubed avocado, for serving
- Crumbled queso fresco, for serving

Instructions: The night before you plan to make the soup, put the beans in a large bowl and add cold water to cover by several inches. Let stand at room temperature overnight. The next day, pour off the water and transfer the beans to a Dutch oven or other heavy oven-safe pot and add fresh cold water to cover by 2 inches. Preheat the oven to 250 degrees.

Bring the beans to boil over high heat, then cover the pot and transfer to the oven. Cook the beans for 1 hour, then uncover and sample five beans; if they're tender, remove the pot from the oven and generously season the bean cooking liquid with kosher salt. If they're not, cover and continue cooking, checking the beans every 20 minutes, until they become tender. Transfer the beans and their cooking liquid to a large bowl. Let the pot cool slightly, then wipe clean with paper towels.

Heat the oil in the Dutch oven over medium. Add the onion and garlic and a generous pinch of salt and cook, stirring, until the onions begin to brown, about 6 minutes. Add the jalapeños and chile powder and cook for 2 minutes more. Transfer the onion mixture to a blender, without cleaning the Dutch oven. Add the tomatoes and their juices and process until pureed. (Alternately, if you have an immersion blender, you can add the tomatoes and their juices directly to the Dutch oven and puree the mixture directly in the pot, then proceed with the next step).

Return the Dutch oven to medium-high heat and add the tomato puree and cook, stirring frequently, until the puree thickens and darkens in color and begins to stick to the bottom of the pot. Remove the pot from the heat.

In a medium bowl, combine the masa, ½ cup plus 3 tablespoons water, lard, kosher salt and baking powder. Mix with your hands until a smooth dough forms. Roll the dough into small balls, each the size of a large marble, then flatten each ball slightly. With the tip of a finger, make a small dimple in each dumpling (this will help it cook through).

In a medium saucepan, bring the chicken stock to a vigorous simmer. Add the dumplings and adjust the heat so the chicken stock is gently simmering; if the stock boils too vigorously, they can break apart. The dumplings will sink, then float to the surface. Once they float, cook for 1 minute longer. With a spider or slotted spoon, transfer the dumplings to a plate or baking sheet.

Pour the chicken stock into the Dutch oven with the tomato mixture and stir to mix. Stir in 5 cups of the cooked beans, then bring to a simmer over medium heat. Working in batches, puree the soup in the blender until smooth (alternately, if you have an immersion blender, you can blend it directly in the pot). Return the pureed soup to the Dutch oven, season to taste with salt (it will likely need a lot) and stir in the cilantro, the chochoyotes, and the lime juice and heat over low until the dumplings are warmed through.

Ladle the soup into bowls and top each with cubed avocado, queso fresco and cilantro leaves, with lime wedges alongside.