



Family Matters

Zoe Nathan & Josh Loeb on Family, Fairness and Food

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For a brief moment, I felt as if I had left Los Angeles completely. Having come from Downtown L.A. and now driving up the winding roads of Rustic Canyon (resting on the eastern end of Pacific Palisades and north of Santa Monica), the woody and lush vegetation permeating along the narrow road is something I could get used to. Until, of course, I am later welcomed by westside traffic at the bottom of the hill.

The stillness in the air coupled with the sound of furry critters climbing California sycamores, I am reminiscent of the many road trips to Big Bear Lake my family took during the holiday season. It was a tradition that would forever be cemented in my memory as a place where I discovered snow, a place for homemade *atole* (a hot, corn-based Mexican drink), a place where the daily grind was forgotten, and a place where my family was most united.

Back in the westside wilderness, I have been invited to meet Chef Zoe Nathan and her husband Josh Loeb, the minds behind some of Santa Monica's highly revered establishments including Rustic Canyon, Huckleberry Bakery & Café, Sweet Rose Creamery, Milo & Olive and their latest concepts: Cassia, a partnership with Bryant and Kim Ng highlighting Southeastern Asian flavors, and Esters, a local wine shop offering tasty bites and drinkable delicacies.

Nathan welcomes me into her home with a warm smile and hug before running off to the kitchen to check on her cornmeal cake with orange and cranberries (to later be enjoyed with Loeb's syphon-brewed coffee). The kitchen quickly becomes the center point with the couple's children making an appearance one by one: their oldest son, Milo (five years old), Tallula (two years old), and the newest member of the family, Felix (three months old). I briefly exchange a hello with Milo and Tallula before Milo runs off to read a book about dinosaurs and Tallula snacks on a homemade cupcake. Priorities I wouldn't argue with.

I huddle around the warmth of the oven with Nathan while we chat about the one thing that has been on my mind from the moment I drove up: family.



What were the holidays like growing up?

I loved the holidays. I am really, really close to my family, to say the least. The holidays were just family. We celebrated everything, we were like westside Jews. We love bacon and we love Christmas [laughs]. But for me, it was always all about the food. Scones for Christmas morning and I don't really remember anything about Hanukkah except potato pancakes, brisket, fresh apple sauce and roast chicken. And \$2 bills.

We were never the kind of house that we would dress up for anything; it was always really weird to me when people were getting their Christmas dresses. Everybody was always in pajamas, for everything. That's definitely how I run my family; it's a very casual group of people here. Maybe I need to be less casual because my children don't listen to me [laughs].

Are there any traditions you had as a kid that you have transferred to your life today?

An emphasis on family and getting together. And being as casual as you can be. My kids don't have on Sunday's best on Christmas morning. To me, it's always about the kids and it's about the parents being able to drink. I can do anything for my children if I have a cocktail in my hand.

Looking back on the year, what are you reflective about?

Something this year that we did that we're really proud of was we went back through all of the restaurants and made sure they were all actually organic or truly from the farmers' market. After doing that, it was like a real "come to Jesus" [moment] on the prices of everything; it's really expensive. It's unheard of in baking to use organic butter and organic yogurt. And impossible to find. For me to source [wholesale organic] cream cheese is the craziest thing.

With a newborn and two kids, how do you balance your life at home and the restaurants?

There is no such thing as balance. I think people who say they balance anything, they are not being very honest. It's probably not fair for the rest of us when we read it and we're like, "Man, that girl's got it together. Why don't I?" I definitely take the lead on the family and Josh takes the lead on the businesses, but that doesn't mean we don't have strong opinions on how the family goes or how our businesses go. We swap off.

We put our life first and we expect our employees to put their lives first. We never hire a chef or anyone with the expectation of, "This is your life, this is your be-all, end-all. Please give it all up." I think that's the norm in our industry.

I remember when Josh and I were dating for a month and half and he said, "Let's take a vacation!" I was like, "No, no, my friend, we don't take vacations." I dated chefs and you didn't take vacations. You were a pussy if you took vacations. And Josh was like, "No, we're taking a vacation, staying in a really nice hotel,





and having fun. We're going to work for our money and spend it." He has set the tone for our businesses, for our employees and for our home. It's something I very much appreciate.

As we've had more children and as I've learned how much I do love being a mom, things have changed. I don't work as much. I clock out, and when I am clocked out, I am clocked out with my kids.

In the beginning [of Huckleberry Café], our family was there. My dad was there with me all the time. As the kids get older, that feeling is going to be incorporated again. With Milo, he can come and help make bread for a couple of hours, and it's so fun. As everyone gets older, we can re-incorporate everyone.

How has being so close-knit with your family influenced the way you run a kitchen?

A restaurant is a family. It's very close. Especially with Josh being the guiding force of that family, he tries to make sure it does have some of the same ethos our family does. We really try to take care of them and that's why we get them health insurance. Right now, Josh is in this minimum wage battle, trying so hard to be able to pay the back of the house more money and trying to figure this out in a way that is more thoughtful. This isn't just a business; these are people to us.



In L.A., there are so many chef-owned restaurants now and that is the reason why people are fighting for this more thoughtful, evenly dispersed amount of money among everybody. These are people who deal with the whole system and appreciate the whole system. And I'd like to think we're at the forefront of it and we're really fighting to change what we see is terribly broken in our industry. To fight for what is right for them and to have them have enough money to buy Christmas presents. The norm in our industry is that people have two jobs because they don't make enough. That's not fair.

