

*At San Francisco's  
Bar Tartine, raw ingredients  
and ancient techniques  
come together in a*

# CAULDRON OF FLAVOR.

*Food editor Margo True goes  
behind the scenes at the  
most experimental restaurant  
in the West.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC WOLFINGER



# JARS OF POWDERS, LEAVES, FLOWERS, AND MYSTERIOUS DRIED SHAPES GLEAMED ALONG ONE WALL. ON THE FLOOR, VATS OF LIQUIDS BURBLED AND SEETHED. IT SMELLED LIKE CHEESE AND PICKLES, ROASTED CHILES AND FRESH CILANTRO, WILD AND BRACING.

IN 25 YEARS of writing about food, I'd seen a lot of restaurant kitchens, but never anything like the back room at Bar Tartine, in San Francisco. Nick Balla, the chef who'd invited me in to take a look, stood in the middle, holding hands with his co-chef and girlfriend, Cortney Burns, both of them smiling as though they were in Eden. This was the heart of Bar Tartine, their playground and workshop. Here they made just about every ingredient they used: pickles, butter, vinegars, spices, cured meats, and much more. None of this was touted on the menu. It was just how they wanted to cook.

As for dinner that night, I remember being thrilled by the sheer strangeness of the food. Smoked potatoes with ramp mayonnaise? Lemon-kamut pound cake with kefir cream and bee pollen? The flavors seemed to expand in all directions as I ate. And they had an unexpectedly energizing effect; after dinner, I felt like I was percolating. I'd never eaten food I liked so much but understood so little.

That was five years ago. Since then, the restaurant's reputation has grown. Nick and Cortney's recipes have appeared in magazines across the country. Their first cookbook, *Bar Tartine: Techniques and Recipes* (Chronicle Books, 2014), won national awards, and Morgan Spurlock featured them in his recent documentary, *Crafted*.

Their food is not to everyone's liking. "At least once a month, I get an email from someone who's furious and hated everything on the menu," says Nick. Yet nearly every time

*Previous pages:  
Assorted dried ingredients from the Bar Tartine pantry; smoked potatoes with ramp mayonnaise. Opposite: Cortney smoothes a whey-caramel cheesecake.*

I've been to the restaurant, it's been packed. Even in the Bay Area, where housemade ingredients are commonplace in restaurants, Bar Tartine is a standout. "No one does it to the extent that Cortney and Nick do," says Sam Mogannam, whose Bi-Rite Market is nearby.

Eventually, asking the waiters for details wasn't enough for me. I wanted to know how those flavors, and their bewitching effects, were produced. So I asked Nick and Cortney for a chance to be an unpaid apprentice in their kitchen—to see into the heart of the cauldron. And that was how, for a week, I plunged into an adventure in flavor.

## DAY ONE

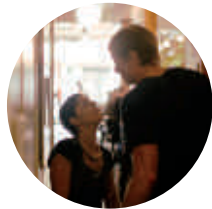
I'M NERVOUS. Although I've worked in a restaurant before, it was decades ago, in Houston—with a Texas-size kitchen. This one looks as cramped as a submarine, and it opens right onto the bar, meaning anyone sitting there has a view of the terrible mistakes I will probably make. Cortney immediately puts me at ease, handing me a soft gray apron from her stash. She's tiny, taut, and purposeful, and darts through the passageways like a minnow as she shows me around.

I'm fascinated by the glass-fronted fridges across from the service line. Some of the food in there is familiar, but mostly it's not: black garlic paste, blood orange vinegar, lima-bean miso, corn sauerkraut, and torpedo-shaped tanks of CO<sub>2</sub>.

Nick walks up, tall, loose-limbed, and a little shy. He starts pulling containers from the fridges. "Most of this is stuff we've already used. We like to save a little bit, just to see what it'll do." He pops the lid off some fiddlehead ferns, jade green coils in a thick anchovy sauce. "These were just awful when I made them about a year ago, but they got much better the longer they sat." He gives me a taste; they're surprisingly mild, like asparagus, but crunchier.

On the other side of the wall lies the project kitchen. The seething, slightly primeval room I remembered is now tidy and shipshape, although packed floor to ceiling with food in various stages of transformation. Boxy black dehydrators sit on the top shelf, extricating moisture from tomatoes, onions, even yogurt, concentrating their flavors and turning them into more powerful versions of themselves.





NICK AND  
CORTNEY  
MAKE NEARLY  
EVERYTHING  
IN THEIR  
PANTRY, AND  
THOSE IN-  
GREDIENTS  
ARE OUTRA-  
GEOUSLY  
ORIGINAL.



Nick reaches into one of the dehydrators and heaves down a crusty pan of roasted-pepper purée. The spicy, fruity smell makes my head swim. As a teenager living in Hungary, Nick loved the pepper paste sold there, and that memory is what he's working toward with this purée. "We came up with the idea of fermenting it to make it sour, and then drying it, and now we'll age it to make it sweeter. After six months, the flavor will totally change." The peppers were grown for them by Full Table, their favorite farm, from seeds Nick found in some prized paprika he brought back from Hungary.

This is part of why Bar Tartine's food tastes so different. Plenty of the top restaurants in California use custom-grown fruits and vegetables as well as local meats. But Nick and Cortney make nearly everything in their pantry too—not just the basics

like ground coriander, but also outrageously original creations: yogurt powder, charred eggplant spice, fermented honey, sunchoke oil.

**A FARMER**, one of several scheduled to deliver this morning, has just carted in a crate of knobby celery roots. These become my first job.

For the next 2½ hours, I separate leaves from stems, carve off the hairy skin and rootlets, and cut each bulb into ¼-inch cubes, meant to be folded into a sauce for spaetzle that night. Halfway through, one of the line cooks stares at my cubes and picks out a few. "These are flat." Ugh, so they are. I remove all the flatties, shrinking my Done pile.

At 3 p.m., it's time for the daily lineup, when Nick and Cortney talk through the menu with the cooks, at top speed, in what sounds like code. It's a fire hose of information. I struggle to make sense of not just the ingredients—fermented green walnuts? strong katsu dashi?—but also how their flavors fit together. Later, one of the servers admits to me that she has to be careful not to tell the customers too much. "Otherwise their jaws drop open."

Afterward, it's a relief to be doing something useful: shaving the rind off pale pink heirloom watermelons, for pickling, and then cutting up the fragile fruit. "Wow, it's so sweet!" says Cortney to Nick as they eat dribbly pieces. "What should we do with it?"

"Juice?"

"But I'll have 60 gallons!" Apparently that's way too much.

"Ferment it?" She agrees. It'll become watermelon soda.



Back in the project kitchen, Cortney is trying to make cheesecake without refined sugar. Neither she nor Nick are antisugar zealots—he says he’ll eat 2 pints of ice cream in a sitting. They just don’t think it’s interesting. “Like white flour, it’s flavorless and doesn’t make us feel good,” she says. Customers are often puzzled by what she calls her “sort-of-sweets,” but they’re designed to glide smoothly from the savory menu rather than break off into a jangly, sugar-saturated experience. They’re part of why eating here is restorative rather than exhausting.

Tonight Nick works the pass-through, where dishes land for inspection before going out into the dining room. Standing next to him is great, because he keeps telling the cooks to feed me for educational purposes. I try a crunchy cone of sprouted lentils in a swirl of puréed beets, a take on an Indian

*From far left: Dried mugwort; Cortney and Nick; chick-pea purée seasoned with coriander, fennel flowers, and more; dried Bulgarian banana chiles and pickled green walnuts.*

street snack. It’s completely different from the next bite, black cod in an electric green chile broth. And yet they’re connected, shaped by the same forceful imagination. Countless times, Nick and Cortney have been asked what kind of food their restaurant serves. “We dread the question,” they write in their cookbook. It is by nature a confining one, and they are much more interested in exploration. “We serve the food we want to eat.”

I also get to taste the spaetzle, sauced with celery-root purée and topped with a poached egg and salmon caviar. For a moment, I think my celery-root cubelets didn’t make the grade. But there they are, hiding among the noodles, giving a subtle crunch to the dish.

In the project kitchen, it’s butter-making time. Bar Tartine’s butter is creamier and denser than store-bought, with a gentle tang. Leah, a line cook with her hair up in a Rosie the Riveter bandana, starts with cream that’s been mixed with kefir grains, microorganisms used in Eastern Europe to ferment milk into a yogurtlike drink. She whips the cream in a stand mixer until, suddenly, clumps of butter form. After draining off the buttermilk, she squeezes the butter handful by handful to force out the remaining liquid, tossing each bright yellow chunk into a giant bowl until they’re piled as high as her head. Then she stands on a stool to massage salt into the butter. It takes her a couple of hours to do all this. I’m amazed that she doesn’t cramp up. “People don’t understand why we charge for butter,” she says. I tell her that the kitchen should install a butter-cam.

All day long, I’ve tasted ingredients I’d never known existed, like Hungarian honey truffle, a white, downy globe that’s almost saccharine-sweet, and crystalline ice plant, whose thick stems and buds taste like oysters. And now, at midnight, I help pack up a vast bowl of what looks like tar and smells like a bonfire. I’m not far off: This is Bar Tartine’s version of the Mayan concoction *chilmole*, made from charred Padrón and green bell peppers that are then puréed, dehydrated, and mixed with charred onions and garlic. I drive home, my hands stained dark orange.

## DAY TWO

**CHAD ROBERTSON**, the owner of Bar Tartine as well as San Francisco’s Tartine Bakery, hired Nick in 2011. (Nick and Cortney will become owners of Bar Tartine by the end of this year.) Robertson couldn’t get enough of the food Nick was making at Nombe, a Japanese-style pub in the Mission District. As he writes in the introduction to *Bar Tartine*, “Nick’s menu was a study in contrasts, in extremes, really, of the most flavorful kind”—elegant clear soups alongside rustic grilled tripe and spicy chicken wings. A few months after Nick started at Bar Tartine, Cortney arrived. “She could do anything and everything, and better than everyone else,” Robertson writes, from butchering whole animals to making cheese. Pretty soon she was co-chef, and the two of them were taking the kitchen where it had never gone before.

Both chefs grew up in the Midwest, in families of Eastern and Central European heritage, with good, solid, from-scratch cooking. Over morning coffee in the empty restaurant, they tell me how they both traveled overseas early on—Cortney to Tibet for a year of college, plus India and Thailand; Nick to Budapest for high school, then to Japan, apprenticing at fish factories and noodle restaurants. By the time they came to Bar Tartine, they’d each cooked at restaurants in

the Bay Area for several years and were both fascinated by food “projects”—the kind of traditional preserving and processing techniques they’d seen in their travels. “I’ve always loved anything that involves *potschke*, which is Yiddish for taking a lot of work to do something,” says Cortney. “I’m a *potschkelyer*. If it takes all day, I’m totally happy.”

## SO MANY OF THE FOODS—PICKLES, SAUSAGES, SODAS—DEPEND ON BACTERIA TO TRANSFORM THEM. TO BE A COOK HERE IS TO BE A MANAGER OF MICROBES.

When they began cooking together, says Nick, “it was like two galaxies colliding, with swirls and particles everywhere.” They’re both laughing. “We’d have 100 pounds of peppers coming in, and I’d buy carloads more stuff,” says Cortney. They were so fired up by each other that they couldn’t stop cooking. “We’d be making sausage till 5 in the morning.”

At the afternoon’s cooks’ lineup, Nick reinvents a salmon dish off the top of his head, but his eyes are locked with Cortney’s the whole time he talks. The cucumbers will be chunked, not sliced, and broth will be involved. “It’s going to be like a—”

“Soup-salad,” says Cortney. He nods.

For the next few minutes, they share sentences, figuring out what to do with excess pea shoots. They’ll add them to roasted carrots. Peas and carrots, Bar Tartine-style.

“We have a lot of in-progress stuff on that speed rack in the basement too,” Nick says. “Maybe something amazing will come out of it. A lot of our best food is circumstance, fate, and what’s available.”

Ten minutes later, he’s hauled two dozen contenders from the rack and is rummaging through them, looking for potential. Pickled baby eggplant: too tired. Out. The salmon caviar is expiring, so instead he’ll mix butter and *bottarga* to go on the spaetzle tonight. He finds some chicken-skin cracklings and starts popping them in his mouth. “This is like gorp for me. We should braise these.”

### DAY FOUR

**THIS MORNING** Caitlin, a turbo-charged sous-chef, explains the spicy ginger ale-type drink on tap at the bar. It begins with microbe-laden kefir grains. Add them to water, along with fresh ginger and molasses for them to eat, and they start producing CO<sub>2</sub>—fizz—along with a mild, creamy tang. They do the same thing in milk, feeding on the lactic sugars there. So many of the foods made in the project kitchen—cheeses, pickles, sausages, sodas—depend on bacteria to transform them. Fermentation deepens flavor. It can also make food more nutritious and probiotic, which explains why even vast meals at Bar Tartine have left me

feeling fizzy. To be a cook at Bar Tartine is to be a manager of microbes.

An earthy smell engulfs the project kitchen. Norberto, a soft-spoken Argentine here for a three-month apprenticeship, is making a vinaigrette with black garlic, whole heads turned ebony from days in the dehydrator. It tastes like licorice, but smokier, and the aroma is so powerful that sometimes the neighbors come over to see what’s going on.

Meanwhile, Nick is searching for a way to boost the flavor of his tomato jam.

He unearths a jar of strawberry preserves, its age uncertain. “Don’t explode,” he whispers. It unscrews without a hiss, and he shakes it into the tomato jam. Often, an “active” jar like this strawberry one will end up as fruit leather, an example of which Nick hands to me: a supple strip of blackberry-apricot. It’s so intense, it gives me goosebumps.

Afternoon comes, and I’ve destemmed small mountains of oregano, lemon balm, and anise hyssop. I’ve twisted the sticky husks off a boxful of cape gooseberries, trying not to squeal as earwigs crawl out of them. Then I tackle sumac. I’ve known this tangy Middle Eastern berry only in its ground form. This sumac comes as whole branching clusters that look as though they’re from an alien planet, bright red and slightly greasy. It takes four of us hours to rake the berries from the branches with a fork.

### DAY SEVEN

**AT TODAY’S** cooks’ lineup, Nick updates a sous-chef who’s been out on the menu changes. I’m finally catching on, recognizing each dish’s basic architecture, understanding its flavors. It reminds me of dance class long ago, when I had two left feet—until suddenly I didn’t.

Cortney has finished the cheesecake, the recipe she’s been working on for days. The magic ingredient: potatoes, blended into the cheese mixture for smoothness. For sweetness, she spoons on a caramel sauce made from reduced whey, full of natural milk sugars. Instead of a bottom crust, which would get soggy, she’s formed an almond honey *tuile*—a thin, lacy cookie—into a cup that she places over the cake. It’s so flavorful and clever that it more than makes up for the sweetness of the traditional version. “It’s dessert meets cheese course,” Cortney says.

In the afternoon, Caitlin leads me and two new waiters through a document called “Bar Tartine Techniques and Overview,” which explains the principles behind their cooking. It’s full of surprises: Chicken, for example, is poached in chicken stock and kombu (kelp), to make both meat and stock extra flavorful. No ingredient goes unexamined at Bar Tartine. Each adds to a kind of culinary alphabet. When they cook, Nick and Cortney communicate something original, in a language that’s entirely their own.

What will they do with Bar Tartine, once they own it outright? I ask them. “We’ll just evolve it a little bit,” says Nick, “more toward vegetables and maybe the Middle East.” They’re also planning, down the road, to open an Asian-focused restaurant and a commissary, where they’ll do all their preserving, with a tiny restaurant built in. “We’ll always keep changing,” Nick says. “We always want that freedom.”

Tonight I work the cold station, helping Norberto put together the sweet-potato salads

and plates paved with pure white lard. This is when I learn that there's a world of difference between the stiff hydrogenated stuff in plastic tubs and this soft, freshly made delicacy, topped with sweet white onion and expensive Hungarian paprika. I also learn, the hard way, to tuck in my elbows and drop down vertically when I reach into the fridge under the counter. If you bend like an L, any cook charging past will knock you over.

*Black garlic and lentil soup (recipe on sunset.com, along with others from Bar Tartine).*

It seems as if every customer in the place is ordering the potato salad tonight. Even though I've been watching this dish go out all week, I can't seem to master it. First I make the salads too small, then too big ("Those are *huge!*" Courtney says to me as she swings by), then finally just right. Hours go by like minutes. The arcane combinations start to make sense to me. Briny green walnuts and fennel? Of course, because the walnuts taste remarkably like olives—a classic with fennel. The avocado and sweet potato give this otherwise crunchy salad its mellow, creamy base. It clicks. I get it. And suddenly it's closing time. ☺

