

# THE CREAM OF THE CROP



EDITED BY LAUREN BONNEY

From acclaimed Cambodian cuisine to Michelin-rated Mexican food, the East Bay's inventive culinary scene made national headlines this year.

**Admit it.** East Bay residents are pretty spoiled when it comes to eating out. With innumerable options for eclectic eats and an exciting food scene that is undergoing exponential growth, the local gustatory atmosphere has captured plenty of attention. This year, national publications and global award foundations have recognized, honored, and celebrated several of the area's best restaurants and chefs, reaffirming that East Bay gastronomy deserves more than just a cursory glance.

ANDRIA LO

ANDRIA LO



## CAMBODIAN RHAPSODY

*Chef Nite Yun of Fruitvale Public Market's Nyum Bai has taken the local food scene by storm—and she's just getting started.*

Cambodians have always loved to eat," says Nite Yun, chef-owner of Nyum Bai in Oakland's Fruitvale district. "If you look at old pictures, there's always food around and people are constantly eating."

What started as a pop-up four years ago has since turned into a celebration of Cambodian cuisine that's gaining national recognition. *Bon Appétit* recently hailed Nyum Bai on its Hot Ten list—a compilation of the nation's 10 best new restaurants of the year. The online food publication *Eater* also named Yun a 2018 Eater Young Gun, an accolade given to food industry up-and-comers.

A first-generation American, Yun moved to San Francisco at age 19 and was amazed by the city's diverse culinary scene. Yet, despite the wide range of eats available to her, Yun couldn't find any decent Cambodian food, and she really missed her mom's cooking.

"I started to learn how to cook out of a selfish desire to eat Cambodian food," Yun says, "but the idea [to start Nyum Bai] came to me when I was in Cambodia eating a bowl of soup—and it just hit me." The self-taught chef's eyes light up and her speech quickens when describing her aha moment: "I still get the same feeling now," she explains. "I didn't even know if it

was going to be a restaurant. I just knew I wanted to do something with Cambodia and its food."

Once ignited over that bowl of soup, her passion took off. She developed recipes by cooking from memory—often calling her mom for a list of ingredients and advice—and created a space that

.....  
**“Most people only know about [Cambodia's] genocide . . . but I want people to know Cambodia beyond that. The whole feel of [Nyum Bai] is light, fun, rock 'n' roll.”** —Nite Yun  
 .....

highlights Cambodia's Golden Era of the 1950s and '60s, when the country was undergoing a cultural revolution and Khmer rock music was king.

"Most people only know about [Cambodia's] genocide or Angkor Wat temple," Yun says, "but I

want people to know Cambodia beyond that. The whole feel of [Nyum Bai] is light, fun, rock 'n' roll—it's a celebration of good times ... [because] we are resilient and survivors."

That resilience is reflected in every dish on Nyum Bai's menu. Full of fresh herbs, salty meats, tangy and sweet flavors, and bold spices—while still remaining light and refreshing—Cambodian food combines the best of Thai, Vietnamese, and Lao cuisine (the entire region used to fall under the ancient kingdom of Cambodia, after all). The result is a deliciously unique and complex gastronomy. Take *kroeung*: a five-ingredient herb paste featuring lemongrass, shallot, garlic, lime leaves, and *prahok* (fish paste) that Yun swears she puts on everything because of its versatility.

"You grind it up, and the smell is so aromatic," she enthuses. "Put it in a stew, use it as a marinade, steam it, mix it with fish and create a dip, simmer it with coconut milk and pork fat. ... I could eat it all the time."

Despite her rapid and sometimes overwhelming rise to success, Yun isn't letting it get to her head. To stay grounded, she continues to look to her past for guidance.

"It's amazing how powerful memory is when you are cooking and sharing a meal, and how it makes people feel," she says of her experience. "It's cool that I get to do this."

While the young chef doesn't have any plans to expand yet, for Yun this is just the beginning. [nyumbai.com](http://nyumbai.com). —Lauren Bonney

## WHISKEY, GIN, AND MISCHIEF



After more than two decades spent perfecting his craft, St. George Spirits head distiller Lance Winters continues to reinvent the industry—without taking himself too seriously.

Read any interview with St. George Spirits head distiller Lance Winters, and you'll likely learn how the former home brewer got his start at the Alameda distillery by bringing his resume and a bottle of illegally home-distilled whiskey to St. George founder Jörg Rupf. But much like whiskey, Winters' tenure at St. George isn't so simply distilled, and his impact on the company continues to grow in complexity over time.

"The story of me bringing that bottle of

whiskey is a quaint, fun little story, but it's just the seed of the tree that's grown over the last 22 years," Winters says.

A former United States Navy nuclear power plant operator, Winters was a patron of St. George well before joining the team in 1996, when the then 14-year-old distillery primarily focused on making fruit liqueurs using California-sourced produce.

Since then, Winters has helped grow St. George into one of the country's premier craft

distillers, creating a lineup of award-winning whiskeys, gins, vodkas, amari, and other spirits coveted by top bartenders and home imbibers alike.

"I have a great ineptitude at expressing myself through different media, but distilling is a place where I finally found my niche for expressing myself," he says. "I make spirits that express a feeling or sensation for me, and I want to put them in front of people because it's the way I can most intimately share a piece of myself."

From a gin distilled to reflect the mountain terroir of the Bay Area, to a New Orleans-inspired coffee liqueur, to an überfunky and polarizing agricole rum Winters refers to as the "Rick James of rums," the distillery's releases

push boundaries while retaining Rupf's ethos around sourcing quality ingredients. And the food and drink industry has taken notice of St. George's definition-defying approach, with Winters garnering three consecutive James Beard Foundation nominations in the Outstanding Wine, Beer, or Spirits Professional category over the last three years.

The St. George team consistently keeps its fans guessing about what might be coming next. While the majority of the industry seems focused on pushing out the freshest, weirdest, or most "craft" spirit, Winters—alongside fellow head

"I make spirits that express a . . . sensation for me, and I want to put them in front of people because it's the way I can most intimately share a piece of myself."

—Lance Winters

distiller Dave Smith—is instead returning to his whiskey-infused roots. The distillery is launching a new take on its earliest iterations of the spirit: the Breaking and Entering Bourbon, released in October.

Thievery-inspired whiskey—and frequent references by coworkers to his status as an "evil genius"—aside, Winters promises his penchant for troublemaking doesn't run deep.

"I'm not evil . . . at least, I hope I'm not. But I am mischievous," he admits. "I do like getting into trouble."

The dark side? Probably not. The dark stuff? Thankfully for whiskey lovers everywhere, the answer is still yes. [stgeorgespirits.com](http://stgeorgespirits.com). —Kristen Haney

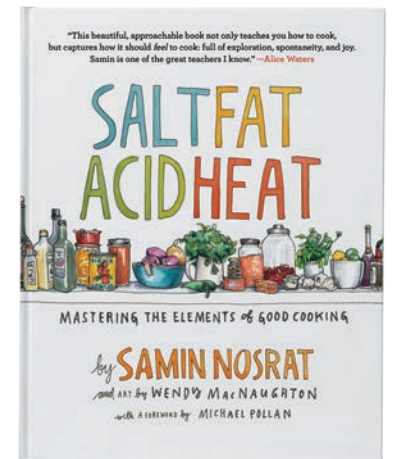
## TACO-BOUT TASTY



Tacos Sinaloa has been attracting crowds with its authentic Mexican fare for nearly two decades. Founded by Guadalupe Bueno, an immigrant from the Mexican state of Sinaloa, the food-truck-turned-restaurant serves up monster-sized burritos and mouthwatering tacos—plus house-made aguas frescas. The offerings grabbed critics' attention, and in 2018, the taqueria garnered its second Bib Gourmand award from the *Michelin Guide*. But the honor comes as no surprise to those who've dined at the brick-and-mortar spot on Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue and at the East Oakland food trucks. Whether you order salsa-laden tacos stuffed with succulent shrimp, juicy carnitas, or flavorful carne asada or take on a burrito bursting with delectable meat or seafood—you can't go wrong. [facebook.com/tacossinaloaberkeley](https://facebook.com/tacossinaloaberkeley). —Alejandra Saragoza

## MASTER CLASS IN COOKING

Award-winning chef. Best-selling author. Teacher. *New York Times* columnist. Netflix star. Berkeley's Samin Nosrat wears many hats. The Chez Panisse alum earned critical praise for her debut cookbook, *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat: Mastering the Elements of Good Cooking*, which won the 2018 James Beard Foundation Book Award and the Julia Child First Book Award from the International Association of Culinary Professionals, among other accolades. Nosrat has since developed *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* into a documentary cooking show that began streaming on Netflix in October and follows her as she travels to kitchens around the globe. The self-described "champion of the home cook" hopes to teach people how to think about cooking, rather than just providing the steps herself. [ciasamin.com](http://ciasamin.com). —Rachel Orvino



## SOUL-STIRRING FOOD

Acclaimed Oakland restaurateur and *Top Chef* contestant Tanya Holland has long been lauded for her innovative, flavorful soul food—such as her famous buttermilk fried chicken and cornmeal waffles—which has drawn droves of diners (including celebrities) since she opened Brown Sugar Kitchen in 2008. Earlier this year, the esteemed *Michelin Guide* honored her restaurant for the first time on its 2018 Bib Gourmand list. Though Holland shuttered the flagship eatery on Mandela Parkway in August, a new location (as of press time) is expected to open in Uptown Oakland by late November. The latest iteration features the same high-quality Southern fare and welcoming atmosphere of the original, with the bonuses of a dinner menu and a full bar. [brownsugarkitchen.com](http://brownsugarkitchen.com). —A.S.



## THE THAI THAT BINDS



The owners of Danville's Thai House, who treat diners like family, earn top honors for their exquisite food.

What started as young "puppy love" in Thailand, Marysa and Sam Sendee's relationship—which turned into a life-time partnership after the two married and then moved to San Francisco in 1999—has, through hard work and dedication, become an American success story. In addition to raising two children, the couple is now celebrating 15 years as the proprietors of Thai House in Danville, a restaurant that radiates a sense of homey charm like no other in the East Bay.

Sam's stunning lemongrass lettuce wraps, arranged like petals with a red radish flower in the center, echo the eatery's welcoming decor throughout its three tiny dining rooms—a sure sign that Thai House, tucked away on Rose Street, was originally a family home.

The spaces are tastefully ornamented with artifacts retrieved from the couple's yearly sojourns back to Thailand, and the tables are set with tall, elegantly folded napkins. Sam put "100-percent effort into Thai House," Marysa

says, by decorating the restaurant and making the most of the tiny kitchen. (One day, the Sendees plan to return to Thailand for good, so you must visit before this treasure vanishes.)

Having regularly earned Bib Gourmand status from the *Michelin Guide* since 2011, Thai House is currently the only restaurant in Contra Costa County or the Tri-Valley to be so recognized. Indeed, Sam's cooking impresses from start to finish. Those lettuce-wrap appetizers—fragrant with lemongrass, cilantro, and toasted coconut flakes; crisp with finely minced celery and onion; and chock-full of delicate shrimp and tender chicken—arrive lightly glazed in a sauce expertly balanced between sweet, sour, and spicy. The seafood pumpkin curry, spicy chicken and prawns,



“We take care of everybody [at Thai House]. We love them. We give them what they want.”

—Marysa Sendee

piquant pork with eggplant, and practically anything with Sam's stunningly good basil sauce are all must-tries at dinner. Don't be shy about taking extra helpings of the aromatic rice served from an elegant terrine, but do be sure to save room for the signature dessert: sticky black rice with Thai custard.

The real secret to their success? "I have no idea," Marysa first says when asked why Thai House—in such a hidden location—has prospered. But after a moment's thought, she adds, "We take care of everybody. We love them. We give them what they want."

Perhaps it's as simple as that. [thaihouseca.com](http://thaihouseca.com). —Nicholas Boer

## MICHELIN MAN

The East Bay's most decorated chef, James Syhabou, notched another major accolade when his Oakland restaurant Commis—currently the only Michelin-starred restaurant on this side of the Bay Bridge—landed a second star in the vaunted restaurant-review organization's 2018 guide. The honor further cements Oakland's status as an emerging dining destination and comes as a boon to its Laotian community: Commis is one of the only Michelin-starred eateries in the world serving Laos-influenced cuisine. In January, Syhabou also released his first cookbook, *Hawker Fare: Stories and Recipes from a Refugee Chef's Isan Thai and Lao Roots*, which earned rave reviews from the likes of the *Los Angeles Times* and *Food and Wine*. [commisrestaurant.com](http://commisrestaurant.com). —Virginia Shannon



## TASTES OF THE LEVANT

Chef and restaurateur Reem Assil has been on *Diablo's* radar since she opened her beloved flatbread bakery in Oakland's Fruitvale neighborhood in 2017, after her take on Arab street food gathered a following at East Bay farmers markets. Reem's California, which serves breakfast and lunch Tuesday through Sunday, reached national attention this year when *Food and Wine* writer Jordana Rothman picked the Syrian-Palestinian spot as one of the 10 best restaurants of 2018. Rothman was dazzled by the delectable flatbreads, tahini, and shakshuka, each complemented by ultralocal produce. Meanwhile, Assil's culinary star continues to ascend—with the help of celebrated restaurateur Daniel Patterson—since she launched the innovative Dyafa in Jack London Square earlier this year. [reemscalifornia.com](http://reemscalifornia.com). —Peter Crooks



## BEYOND ORDINARY VINO

Adorned with paperback novels stuffed between its well-selected array of bottles, the cozy Ordinaire wine bar and shop in Oakland made it on *Esquire's* 21 Best Bars in America list. It's a perfect Northern California pick, as Ordinaire serves natural wines—made with grapes that were grown organically and fermented without chemical additives except for small amounts of sulfites. "Natural wine is alive," owner Bradford Taylor told *Diablo* in September. "There's a certain energy to it that doesn't exist in conventional wine." Taylor's understanding of these elements has created a connection with the bar's loyal customers, who flock to Ordinaire's weeknight and Saturday-afternoon tastings and occasional pop-up restaurant events with Bay Area chefs. [ordinairewine.com](http://ordinairewine.com). —P.C. ■

