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DANIELA LÓPEZ CAMINO

Tell me how La Fermentadora got started.

All of this started because I began asking myself questions about my eating habits. I was beginning to eat more vegetarian but I didn't know how to cook. I had to teach myself to cook and I really wanted to eat things that were different from what I had grown up eating. The food of my childhood was potato, lettuce, tomato. Not much else. So I started asking myself, What am I going to eat? What do I really want to eat? I needed to start incorporating legumes, vegetables and fruits into my diet. I started reading a lot, lots of youtube videos, lots of new recipes and flavors for me, and I discovered my space in the kitchen. I was working at a law firm. I have a degree in International Relations (laughs). I was looking for something else. I didn't like anything about working in an office.

What brought on that change from eating meat to going vegetarian?

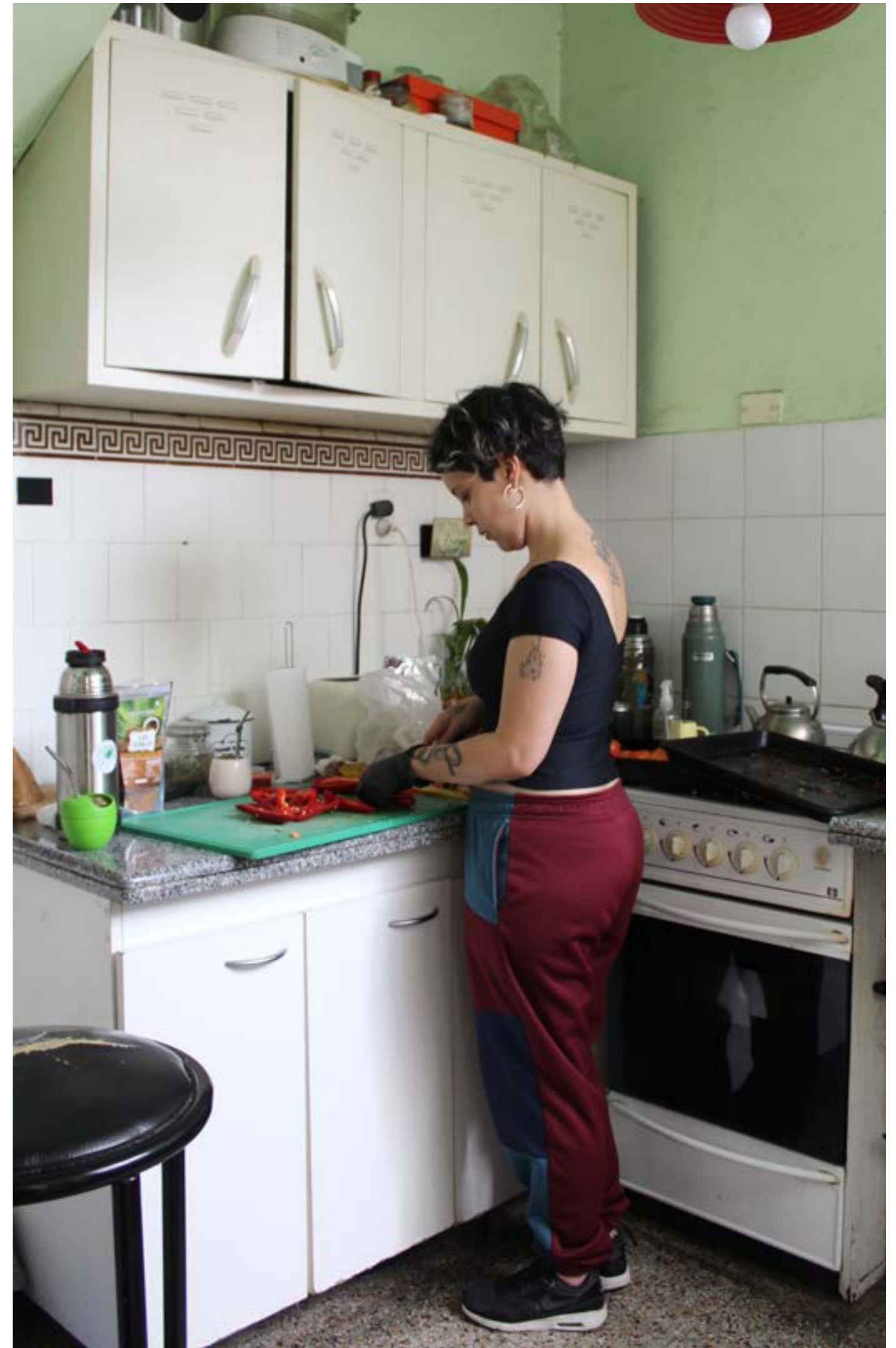
I was feeling bad and knew that something I was eating was making me feel unwell. It was meat. It just doesn't agree with me. Every time I ate meat it sat like a ball in my stomach. My digestion doesn't process meat well. I'd spend hours feeling really uncomfortable while my body processed it. So I said, fine, I'm going to stop eating meat. First I gave up beef, then I stopped eating chicken, then I stopped eating ham. I started feeling better consuming other things but it wasn't one day to the next. It was a long process of trying new things and slowly understanding that there were other things that I enjoyed eating.

I have a really hard time imagining you in a law firm! How did you start moving into food as a profession?

I didn't want to work in an office. It was awful. I'd come home to my little kitchen and it was the only moment of my day that I really relaxed. A glass of wine. Cooking. That was my moment. When I was let go, I said no more: there was no way I was going to return to an office Downtown working nine hours a day. I started making vegan food from home and did that for a year in my tiny kitchen. It was very gradual, cooking and researching. I'd suddenly discover something like quinoa and that would lead me to another grain and that would lead to something else and over time as I incorporated more things to my diet the things I ate before weren't as appealing. Selling out of my house was a lot of work and very unorganized and hard economically. I knew that I needed a foundation. I got a job at a health food store and have been there for five years. During all this I decided to quit and will stop working there later next month.

How did you get started fermenting?

I was working at the shop but was still cooking. I did catering gigs with friends. I knew that there was something there that ignited something inside me but I just couldn't put my finger on it. I couldn't find the direction. One day I came across an online class about fermentation. I did it at home and was like wow what is this? That's how it started. I practiced. I made a million sauerkraut. Sauerkraut. Sauerkraut. Sauerkraut. I gave sauerkraut to everyone. All my friends. Everyone that



came into the shop. It was like that for about a year and a half. I was going out with this guy and he said to me Why aren't you selling this? And I was like What?! Sell it? He was a graphic designer and made the label and I started to sell and do small productions with whatever free time I had. I'd make a batch, wait a month and when they were ready they'd sell out quickly. It was like that for maybe a year and half.

What is it about the sauerkraut that does it for you?

There is something in the process that makes me feel good. I have a really difficult time focusing. I want everything now, everything quick. I'm always in the street, here and there, always moving. And with sauerkraut, I was suddenly dealing with something that took a month to make before I could try it. That was nuts to me. Preparing the sauerkraut is really quick and easy but to create the final flavor that I like, it takes a full month. There is something there that really pulls me in. And you don't need a kitchen or a lot of money. Obviously after reading and learning about the nutritional aspects and the probiotics, that was wild for me, with so little you can make this really powerful food. And I can do it anywhere. It's just cabbage, salt and your hands. And so I'd go to visit my sister in the United States and we fermented. I'd go to a friend's house in the country and we'd ferment. It's something that can be really easily shared. I started connecting with other people, building this little network. I always want to teach. People come over and I'm like, hey you want to learn to ferment? There is this really beautiful exchange that it allows that is the basis of ferments. It is this way of preserving food that has existed for thousands of years and it is passed from one generation to the next.

This project grew a lot during the pandemic, right?

When the quarantine happened, suddenly everyone was buying in bulk. And people wanted to buy my sauerkraut. Clients were buying double what they normally bought and I was running out of stock. I said to myself, I have to do something with this. Mariano is my roommate's brother. He came to live with us and was out of work because of the pandemic. I asked him if he could help, he was down and so I taught him everything and we got started. We are making 100 kilos of cabbage a month and have now started experimenting with salsas and kimchis because we realized that we needed to be able to sell stuff that could be fermented quicker. And we are still running low. Everything we make sells. We never have leftovers of anything. We know that at some point we are going to have to rent a space and move out of here. I'd love to do it now but it requires a lot of money to get started that I don't have. But I know it will come.

I don't think it's a coincidence that your project grew so much in the pandemic. There is this huge movement of independent projects that are bringing new ideas to the food scene from every angle. Ferments, bread, salsas, prepared food. I've been wondering a lot lately what is going to happen to this new culture when we start returning to normalcy and people have to leave their home kitchens and go legit.

I don't know. I think it will be a while before things begin to really normalize. There are a lot of things that arrived with the pandemic that aren't going anywhere. When all this passes, and I think that will take a long time because the pandemic is not over, things will be very different. Maybe the government will start messing with everyone and make people go legit and I don't think that is necessarily a bad thing, but the government has bigger fish to fry right now and what we are seeing right now is about survival. There are a lot of projects that have been birthed from pure necessity. Everyone started doing something. The other day, this guy came by the shop to buy some hot sauce and was like yo I started making sourdough! He's this dude that works in film and he doesn't want to step on a set ever again. I don't know what is going to happen but I do know that a lot of people have woken up and see the conditions that we live in, that we work in, and it is going to be very difficult for people to take a step back.

I think it is really opportune that we are talking about sauerkraut and fermentation as this way to preserve food, and to think of this moment that we are living in as a sort of fermentation. Like we are in the middle of the process getting ready to become chucrut (laughs) What would you like to preserve from the pre pandemic world and what would you like to preserve from this moment and take into the future?

Speaking for me, a cycle has completed. I loved working at the shop. I know a lot of people because of that place. But I realized that what I need in this moment, for me, is to change the way I work. It's not a moment for hierarchy and that dynamic of boss and employees. The pandemic brought that. The restaurant world, jeez, everything fell apart. It was really obvious what was going on but now it's out in the open and clear that there were a lot of people that were not being protected by this system. For me, this has been a push forward in me genuinely seeing that I was destroying myself working so many hours and so many days and I had to say, wait a minute. For who? For how much? Why? If I can do all this for myself. I said, no, all this needs to go down this other path. Of course, this comes with a lot of fear too. It's not easy to take that leap and leave a steady source of income which wasn't much but it was there and bet on another quality of life based on doing what you enjoy. And I recognize that I am incredibly privileged to have this experience. I look around and I know there are so many people that are miserable right now, who don't have enough work or have none at all. Everything is just one crisis after another for them and I'm over here like, wow I landed on the other side of the pandemic. I get to leave my house everyday, I have three times the work, more money. I mean, do we all realize that there are people sleeping in the street? There are people who don't know what they are eating tomorrow. And there are also a lot of people out there helping too. Doing everything they can to help other people. So many things have happened in this and you'd have to be made out of stone to tell me that you haven't had a moment of real reflection, like no way, it is impossible to not be touched by what is going on. The thing is whether we act on it or not.





IS BUENOS AIRES READY TO TALK ABOUT VEGETABLES?

“Wait a second.”

My eyebrows bunched together and I took another bite of pizza. I examined the slice carefully and let it sit, pushing against my cheek for a second before swallowing and asking my wife, “Something about this one tastes different, right?”

She stared back at me, glass of red wine in one hand, a half finished slice in the other, “I think this one has cheese on it.”

It was last Saturday night and we were on the rooftop terrace of Mauro Busquet Moriconi, half of the duo behind FF Pizzas, a closed door take-away pizza shop birthed during the pandemia. He had just inaugurated a wood burning oven and we were there to taste test. Without realizing it we had eaten three vegan pizzas: cucumbers and oyster mushrooms drenched in lemon over beet sauce and punches of dill, a Shanah Tova special with smoky eggplant, zaatar, white chucrut, bright mint leaves and spritzes of cashew cream, and roasted tomatoes with sharp bites of cilantro and Daniela López Caminos’ infamous almond ricotta, which she spends a day peeling, giddily tuning out as she pops the skin off a kilo worth of almonds. What snapped us out of a joyous free for all was the Jardin Secreto, or Secret Garden, a pie topped with red sauce, pickled onions, edible flowers and a mix of bubbled and browned mozzarella and funky goat cheese.

Pizza in Buenos Aires is a religious experience for many —pizzerias are followed with the same fervor as a soccer team and their value is often measured in the quantity of cheese stacked on top. The average vegan pizza follows suit, swapping out mozzarella for starch heavy cheese substitutes. “Our idea was never to make a vegan anything. Pizza is my favorite thing to eat and when Mauro would make pizza I was always throwing weird stuff on top. When we are making new pizzas, we just start playing around with flavors and cheese is another ingredient to mess around with,” explains López Camino.

There is nothing new about vegan food in Buenos Aires but only recently has it begun to look like this. Beginning last year, cooks across the city noticeably adopted more plant-based foods, both in omnivore projects like FF as well as an ever increasing number of proudly herbivorous restaurants. The common link is a newfound culinary sensibility aimed towards exploring the flavors of vegetables and grains that runs against the dominant current of filling stomachs with soy milanesas, seitan steaks and lentil burgers.

Alongside pizzas topped with edible flowers and homemade chucrut are restaurants like Sampa, a vegetarian grill that cooks everything over a charcoal fire, like roasted pumpkin tossed in curry with smacks of coconut, and Sacro, a high-end vegan restaurant with a global inspired menu that includes kimchi dumplings, cauliflower barbacoa and panisse served with citrusy artichokes. Both opened last year and were immediate hits. “We were surprised that the vegan pizzas sold so well,” López Camino continues, “They are usually our best sellers. It’s obvious there is a demand for this.”



FRUITS: 1. Abricot. — 2. Orange. — 3. Mandarine. — 4. Pamplemousse. — 5. Bigarade. — 6. Bergamote. — 7. Citron. — 8. Citrus. — 9. Grenade. — 10. Coing du Japon. — 11. Kaki de Mexic.
 12. Kaki Japonais. — 13. Kaki d'Espagne. — 14. Kaki de Wisconsin. — 15. Figue violette. — 16. Figue blanche. — 17. Figue noire. — 18. Noix.
 19. Pastèque. — 20. Melon d'eau. — 21. Melon Cantaloup. — 22. Melon d'Inde. — 23. Melon de France. — 24. Melon de Perse. — 25. Melon d'Espagne.
 26. Chayote. — 27. Aspergille. — 28. Aspergille verte. — 29. Aspergille blanche. — 30. Aspergille noire. — 31. Tomate. — 32. Tomate cerise. — 33. Tomate. — 34. Tomate. — 35. Tomate. — 36. Tomate. — 37. Tomate. — 38. Tomate. — 39. Tomate. — 40. Tomate. — 41. Tomate. — 42. Tomate. — 43. Tomate. — 44. Tomate. — 45. Tomate. — 46. Tomate. — 47. Tomate. — 48. Tomate. — 49. Tomate. — 50. Tomate. — 51. Tomate. — 52. Tomate. — 53. Tomate. — 54. Tomate. — 55. Tomate. — 56. Tomate. — 57. Tomate. — 58. Tomate. — 59. Tomate. — 60. Tomate. — 61. Tomate. — 62. Tomate.
 FRUITS DES PAYS CHAUDS: 26. Feuille. — 27. Caroube. — 28. Figue de Barbarie ou Figue d'Inde. — 29. Ananas. — 30. Annona. — 31. Annona. — 32. Annona. — 33. Annona. — 34. Annona. — 35. Annona. — 36. Annona. — 37. Annona. — 38. Annona. — 39. Annona. — 40. Annona. — 41. Annona. — 42. Annona. — 43. Annona. — 44. Annona. — 45. Annona. — 46. Annona. — 47. Annona. — 48. Annona. — 49. Annona. — 50. Annona. — 51. Annona. — 52. Annona. — 53. Annona. — 54. Annona. — 55. Annona. — 56. Annona. — 57. Annona. — 58. Annona. — 59. Annona. — 60. Annona. — 61. Annona. — 62. Annona.

The mental switch to plant-based diets centered around the plants themselves has been arduous — a complicated identity restructuring that runs counter to everything that the country represents. The history of the nation has been intimately connected to the production of cattle since the Spanish arrived in Rio de la Plata in the sixteenth century and grazing land was used as the excuse to extend the frontier. Livestock was everything to the Spanish settlers and the indigenous Querandí frequently targeted cattle, both to protect the natural resources that the animal's presence destroyed and to strategically cut the settlers' most important lifeline. For nearly two hundred years, the government and the indigenous communities engaged in a back and forth, with national territory absorbed to fuel an industrializing agrarian economy met with retaliations from native peoples to drive cattle off of land.

When Argentina gained independence from Spain in the early 19th century, the political policy towards the indigenous tribes transformed into assimilation or extermination, as the young government set out to claim valuable land in a continent where national boundaries were quickly being drawn. This came to a head towards the turn of the same century, when Mapuche military leader Calfucurá invaded settlements along the Atlantic Coast in northern Patagonia, taking 200,000 cattle with him. The official response was the Desert Conquest, a ten year military campaign led mostly by army General and eventual President Julio Argentino Roca to exterminate indigenous peoples across Patagonia.

Although a narrative construction was built around the idea of a desert, it was no desert at all. The territory south of the Rio Negro was incredibly fertile land and the growing republic knew that ownership meant power in the region. The characterization as a savage, empty expanse in need of taming was essential to building the gaucho mythology as cattle became synonymous with advancement. Cattle ranchers and landowners shaped the nation's economy and pushed Argentina into its 'Golden Age', a period of roughly four decades of massive sustained economic growth. While many historians have recharacterized the Desert Conquest as genocide, the subsequent Golden Age is often looked at fondly. Cattle production and beef consumption is a symbol of patrimony that molds societal standing, economic policy and cultural identity. Today, Argentina ranks number two in beef consumption per capita: the average Argentine consumes 120 pounds of beef annually. Despite the country also being a leader in global production of cereals, grains, fruits and vegetables, the relationship with those products is noticeably absent from the collective psyche.

Joaquin Ais and Pablo Moroni are the two biologists behind Ciencia y Gastronomía, an Instagram page and educational consultancy project that seeks to expand the knowledge of local plants and their culinary potential. The duo gives botanical seminars that attract both professional chefs and home cooks that are interested in the exchange between gastronomy and botany. Ais explains, "Most people know how to distinguish different cuts of beef and understand the difference between muscle, tendons, fat and the best ways to cook each cut. When it comes to the green world, however, how many people are able to distinguish between the different types of fruits or differentiate the organs of the plant?" This question constitutes the cornerstone of the pairs project.

Questioning the relationship between food and the natural world is becoming more commonplace and a conversation around industrialized meat has forced itself into the national discourse as the country begins to unpack the environmental realities of their culture defining economy. Beginning in January, the fragile network of wetlands in the neighboring Santa Fe province have been on fire, largely to clear land for ranching. As of August, nearly 100 thousand hectares had been burned and 200 thousand hectares were under ash. In July, the Ministry of Foreign Relations and International Trade announced a potential deal with China to export 9 million tons of pork annually. The announcement caused acidulous debate across the country between environmentalists and neoliberalists.

What we are seeing is the beginnings of a paradigm shift in food culture and its relationship to an

environmental and ethical awareness. A shift in ideology that seeks to break down and rebuild a societal and economic framework half a millenia in the making. And as the dining scene matures, not only in its relationship to food and ethics, but just as importantly, to its closeness to ingredients and flavor, cooks are deconstructing a food narrative that is deeply connected to meat and profoundly disconnected from fresh vegetables and grains, even for those who have long since eliminated meat from their diets.

All over the city, projects like FF, Sampa and Sacro are popping up, offering flavors exotic to the porteño palate and redefining what it means to eat vegetables. Like minded projects whose vanguard style are camouflaged in dishes of the popular imagination are emerging as well. Together, in focusing less on replacing the texture and flavor of meat and more attention to examining the ingredients and the flavors they can manifest, they are forging a new food scene and widening the possibility of incorporating a new consciousness around consumption habits to a larger audience.

Inés La Torre started selling vegan takes on national dishes from her home in 2016. Palta, the regional word for avocado, built its legion of followers around comfort foods like milanesas, raviolos and empanadas. About a year ago, she joined forces with her partner Alejandro Cohen at Rumen, another homegrown project that fuses plant-based dishes with a strict fermentation-forward ideology. She explains her shift as both consumer and cook, "At first it was a lot of replacing. If I can't eat meat, then what can I eat? If I can't eat cheese made with milk, what kind of cheese can I eat? We had this amazing milanesa made of seitan that we made ourselves. We realized it was just gluten dusted with more gluten and it made no sense to make it with this new philosophy we were adopting."

The new philosophy sits between valuing the natural flavors of vegetables and cereals and imitating those of non-plant based foods with strict natural processes. The duo is focusing heavily on a line of cheeses sold with sourdough breads or stuffed inside lima beans or oyster mushroom raviolis made with fermented dough. "A lot of cheeses on the market are made with starches and flavored, a lot of nut-based cheeses do the same. We are more interested in understanding the cheese-making process and using nuts and natural bacteria and fermentation to capture that flavor or texture."

On a shelf crammed amongst cookbooks and spices sits a bottle of tofu fermented similarly to a Chinese chao. It is normally tossed onto pizza although when I tried it alone, it resembled something close to a feta, crumbly and slightly pungent. The tofu is made from organic soybeans by a local artisan, reflective of where the scene is headed, less isolated and more interconnected, Cohen concludes, "We want this to be as local as possible and thinking about what systems we contribute to and what small businesses we support and help grow."

ERIOBOTRYA JAPONICA

I grabbed the fruit when no one could see.
 My fingers spilled the heat of its nectar
 To a wild deeper than we can know
 Beyond the ants and the roots of these trees.
 Golden, it breathed
 Green, it sowed.
 And oh how it tasted.
 Honey and vinegar and never ending.

--

Now these hands fall into the deep
 They speak and the feet follow.
 The earth feels heavy
 But these trees still give fruit
 That tastes of honey and vinegar
 And time that never stops flowing.

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The sun returns to my eyes
 Full, golden and green.
 And I would do it all again.
 Cherish my soil, cherish my earth
 And give fruit to those who can see.

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