



Saqib Keval

The Revolution in Recipes

Co-founder, People's Kitchen Collective

WORKS: Oakland / Mexico City | LIVES: Oakland / Mexico City

FIELDS: Culinary, Advocacy

Saqib Keval is a co-founder of Oakland-based People's Kitchen Collective (PKC), a for-profit, worker-owned collective. Launched in 2007, Keval envisioned a community-oriented gathering geared toward people of color and operating at the intersection of art, food, and activism. PKC has held large-scale dinners, free breakfasts, and museum installations offering food for thought in Oakland, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. Keval, who has a culinary background, divides his time between the Bay Area and Mexico City, where he co-runs Masala y Maíz, the kind of community-oriented restaurant he has long sought to open in Oakland.



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At its core, People’s Kitchen Collective (PKC) is a community-oriented organization in which food serves as a catalyst for discussion, education, and action around politics, cultural heritage, and social justice. It’s also a chance to cook communally and eat well among like-minded people.

For years, the People’s Kitchen has hosted volunteer-driven, pay-what-you-can meals for 100+ guests, mostly people of color. They’ve been held in Oakland and elsewhere at pop-up events in parks, restaurants, and art spaces to raise funds for local organizations. The dinners blend delicious dishes with music, art, poetry, activism, and good times.

Eating together, says PKC co-founder Saqib Keval, 30, is itself an act of resistance, a way to connect with people around culture and tradition. Keval’s family has roots in Kenya and northwest India. He grew up in a household that revered cooking for a large number of people by feel, rather than written recipes and standard cup measurements. The meals featured recipes passed down by his grandmother and other elders. “My introduction to food justice and food politics was

through cooking with my grandmother, it just wasn’t called that,” he says. “We didn’t refer to it as decolonization, it was just: ‘you need to know how to cook this Indian food that has survived 200 years living in East Africa.’”

Keval was raised in Sacramento and attended Humboldt State University in Arcata. He spent time during college in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France, where he gained hands-on culinary training in professional kitchens. That experience proved pivotal. “I’ve worked in a lot of fine dining restaurants. I want People’s Kitchen to be an alternative restaurant model that’s horizontal and community based, not abusive like [some] of the kitchens I’ve worked in, which are often hierarchical, super paternalistic, and racist,” he says.

For years, Keval has pursued his personal passion project while paying the bills working in Bay Area restaurants. “You see all of society’s ills and all of its systems of oppression playing out in restaurants,” he says. “There’s the split [in compensation/treatment] of the front of house and back of house. There’s the pricing of the food and whether or not it’s accessible. There’s the system of labor: the darkest skinned people in the



very back of the restaurant get paid the least. Those inequities are the driving force for me wanting to believe that through food, art, and activism, we can create something better.”

Keval ran PKC solo for several years with help from a large group of volunteers. Now, Keval works together with longtime volunteers Jocelyn Jackson, a lawyer, singer, and caterer who runs her own food business JUSTUS Kitchen, and Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, an artist, educator, and cook. Wearing multiple hats come with the food justice territory.

These days, Keval divides his time between Masala y Maíz, a culinary project in Mexico City, and the collective in Oakland. “I have been trying to open a community restaurant in Oakland for the past five years,” says Keval, who has been close to signing a deal on several occasions. “Unfortunately, given the current state of the restaurant industry here, the cost of commercial rent, and cost of living, I can’t continue trying [in Oakland] right now,” he says. “My goal is to build a community restaurant model in Mexico City that can be replicated in Oakland. There is a lot happening there that I hope to learn from and bring back to the Bay. This will always be home for me.”

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The food movement in the Bay Area faces many challenges, says Keval, often linked to finances. “Even though there is so much good work happening here, everyone is struggling—food justice groups and restaurants,” he says. “It doesn’t allow for a lot of innovative thinking around different models for a restaurant business. You don’t have the privilege of time.”



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Instead, Keval was approached to open a community-run restaurant while traveling in Mexico City with Mexican chef Norma Listman, his partner in life and work. The architects on the project specifically sought the pair out because of the way they fuse food, art, research, and politics. “All the things that have made those Oakland restaurant landlords and investors I spent years negotiating with nervous,” he says. In Mexico, on a shoestring budget, he is experimenting with ideas like a chefs-in-residence program in a space that champions art, advocacy, and an equitable work environment. “I need to know that a restaurant like this can exist. I need to see it in action.” Ironically, Keval says even though he’s slammed with a restaurant opening, he has more time to work on the People’s Kitchen Collective from afar because he’s not hustling three restaurant jobs and consulting gigs to pay Bay Area rent.

Still, since he decamped for Mexico City, he’s observed shifts in the Bay Area culinary culture that appear promising. The exposure of rampant sexual harassment in a local restaurant empire, as elsewhere around the country, signals that such abusers are no longer protected by privilege, he says. And he’s keeping an eye on partnerships between relatively new

restaurant chefs of color and seasoned veterans. “These are signs of hope that real change may be coming to the kitchen cultures of the Bay Area,” he says. “The economics of running a restaurant here remain difficult and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

How does Keval measure success for the People’s Kitchen? “If the volunteers working on the dinner feel like they had a hand in something important, that’s one measure. If people like the food, if the artists feel engaged, if everyone learns something and understands the narrative coming out of the kitchen and the politics strung through the different courses, that’s another. We’re using food as a tool for organizing, storytelling, and breaking down complex issues in an experiential, immersive environment.”

For Keval, eating together is a political act, the way to feed a revolution, a counter to the problems inherent in the food systems status quo.

The collective’s food rebel mantra is, after all, “fill the stomach, feed the mind, nourish the soul, fuel a movement.”
—Sarah Henry