

FOOD FOR THE SOUL

ZOE NATHAN CREATES SPACE FOR
NOURISHMENT IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

BY ERYNNE ELKINS PHOTOS BY DAVID YOUNG-WOLFF



YOU CAN TASTE THE LOVE GOING INTO YOUR FOOD

I am at the bustling Huckleberry Café & Bakery on Wilshire in Santa Monica. Within seconds of sitting down at a wooden tabletop cheered by a vase of freshly picked ranunculus, I'm greeted with a burst of energy. It's Zoe Nathan, and she's right on time for our interview. Dressed in an apron, white T-shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of black Converse sneakers, her outfit conveys a hardworking pastry chef and cool mom. Jovial in spirit, Nathan starts off our conversation by telling me that she finds comfort in the organized chaos of the café chaos because she knows someone is in charge. When I ask her who that somebody is, she quickly responds, "Me."

Nathan's calm confidence in the midst of this energetic hive of activity may indeed have been shaped by the influence of generations preceding her. "My grandma lived life in a really loud and awesome way." She then adds how her mom turned day-to-day living into an art form. Joyfully, Nathan continues to explain how she looked up to her mom and grandmother when she was growing up. "They always had people around them and it created community." When I ask Nathan how she would like the customer to feel in the café space she's created, her face softens and she imparts a sense of generosity through her words, "Order too much, sit too long, give yourself some time and space to be here – like when you're at your mom's house."

The dining experience at Huckleberry Café & Bakery feels comfortable, lively, and relaxed. "You taste (the) love going into your food," Nathan says, as I survey the rows of oven-baked loaves that line the shelves above a counter neatly filled with delectable pastries. Flaky croissants, donuts piled high, slices of lemon cornmeal cake, and brownies topped with baked-in giant chocolate chips are front and center. I also take note of Nathan's staff, a very happy bunch. They're a well-oiled machine, regularly gliding by tables to deliver plates of poached eggs over market-fresh vegetables, smoked salmon platters, and bowls of 'Housemade Granola' to eager tables. All the while, they chat animatedly with diners and coworkers.

There's an energy of "making (and) creating something," and people can feel it.

While Nathan may personify the life energy of Huckleberry Café & Bakery that she co-owns with her husband, Josh Loeb, the couple also owns three other dining spots in the neighborhood. This is no small feat considering each establishment is pretty busy on any given day of the week. An acclaimed restaurateur and pastry chef, she is also mom to two-year-old Milo, whom I meet not long after our talk. A gorgeous cherub with brown curly locks and rosy cheeks, I notice that he's also dressed in black Converse sneakers.

As someone who values a quality dining experience and applauds good cuisine, I appreciate Nathan's sentiment of infusing food with her passion for the craft. I order the Free Range Chicken Curry Salad Sandwich with Arugula on Fruit and Nut Bread (\$11.50). The Nut Bread is a delicious combination of textures and tastes: there's the sweetness from the plump raisins, some crunch from the toasted walnuts, and the fragrant smell of cinnamon. It stands up equally to the peppery greens and aromatic carried chicken filling. As I savor every bite, I can't help but think of the energy and enthusiasm that went into making this meal.

In addition to Huckleberry Café & Bakery, Nathan and Loeb run the aforementioned three sister restaurants: Rustic Canyon Wine Bar and Seasonal Kitchen, Milo & Olive, and Sweet Rose Creamery. Although the four dining spaces have distinct personalities and menus, just like a family, they help each other out. Milo & Olive makes four daily bread deliveries to Huckleberry Café & Bakery; Sweet Rose Creamery delivers the ice cream for Rustic Canyon's dessert menu. As a restaurateur, Nathan's vision is to keep growing and keep feeding the economy by creating more jobs. "We always want our restaurants to reflect our life." Thus, the name of their restaurant, Milo & Olive, is named after their son Milo; Olive is for the daughter the couple plans to have one day.





HER FACE LIGHTS UP AS SHE DESCRIBES THE SUBSTANCE OF THE BOOK.

I had noticed a chalk and cork board at the café handwritten with: “Everything we serve is made by hand each morning starting at 4 a.m.!” With such an active and hectic work schedule, I ask Nathan how she manages to do it all. Referencing her husband, she beams, “He’s my number one. Generally if we have to work, we work together. (And) if we’re not working, we’re just together.” Finding the balance also required some introspection on her part. “Before I had a son, I just worked. But once I became a mom, it became clear. I just had to take a really good hard look at my life and figure out what I wanted to be like as a mom and as a restaurateur. Now I work maybe three to four days a week as opposed to working six to seven like I used to.” With all that that her mom and grandmother have passed onto her, I was curious to find out what Nathan is passing along to her son Milo. “I try to show and teach him the importance of generosity.”

Being generous with others and with your work is one thing; being generous with yourself, however, can be a tough concept for any multitasking woman to embrace, let alone implement. But Nathan confidently replies, “I know when I need to take a break.” It was from that place of knowing that the idea for the Huckleberry Breakfast cookbook was conceived. Nathan invested time in drafting it when she took a break to spend more time at home with Milo. It’s evident that she’s enthusiastic about this project; her face lights up as she describes the substance of the book. She says it’s not “cute” or “fluffy” but will be comprised of recipes that she’s tried and tested over time on others. With the help of her sous chef as well as Loeb, Nathan is excited to share this offering with the world when the book debuts in 2014.

When it comes to connecting with the world, Nathan is social media savvy and when asked how she feels about Instagram, Nathan blurted out, “I’m obsessed!” In addition to enjoying sharing recipes with others, Nathan recognizes and appreciates the benefit of social media for other chefs. “It’s so fun to see what other people are doing. We don’t get out at night. We’re always working.”

As a new mom, and with Mother’s Day on the horizon, I couldn’t help but ask Nathan how she now marks this occasion. “It’s still my mom’s day,” she says, adding, “(My mom is the) most important person to me (and I am) more thankful for my own mother.” Mmm. Food for the soul and words to live by, indeed.

Follow Zoe Nathan on @ZoeNathanLoeb

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