

# Chefs struggle at intersection of food, politics

By Justin Phillips

At Jardinière restaurant in San Francisco, customer receipts currently feature a small note below the signature line, subtle enough that some diners might miss it. The fine print reads: "Immigrants make America great! They also cooked and served you dinner this evening."

The small political gesture from chef-owner Traci Des Jardins acknowledges the importance of immigrant labor in the restaurant industry. Similar messages have popped up on receipts at restaurants throughout the Bay Area, including Tawla in the Mission and Zuni Cafe in Hayes Valley.

Away from the kitchen, Des Jardins sits on the board of La Cocina, a San Francisco non-

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# Restaurants struggle for political balance

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profit business incubator. She also works with a number of hunger relief organizations. But in the upscale dining room at Jardinière, as well as her five other San Francisco restaurants, the chef prefers to keep her political leanings from infiltrating her dining room.

"I think the politics and food situation overall is very tricky," she said. "There's a big part of me that thinks politics shouldn't come into it."

In recent months, chefs and diners alike have been forced to grapple with the intersection of food and politics, and the restaurant industry is venturing into unfamiliar territory, marked both by staunch political stances and apolitical abstention.

Earlier this month, a bar named Coup opened in New York City, with plans to give 100 percent of its profits to organizations that may be in need of funding under the current administration, such as the American Civil Liberties Union or Planned Parenthood.

While there are no San Francisco food or drink destinations with Coup's extreme business model, many restaurants and bars have donated

portions of their profits or run nightly specials to benefit organizations like the San Francisco Immigrant Legal Education Network and the Human Rights Watch. Others have run themed specials during political events like the Women's March or Day Without Immigrants.

Stephanie Fields, owner of Sugarfoot, a pop-up restaurant and catering company, is vocal about her political leanings, which in part oppose President Trump's stances on immigration. Fields regularly shares her thoughts on social media; amid her photos of Sugarfoot's grits and eggs are posts denouncing racism, misogyny and xenophobia.

The chef is currently working to secure funding for a brick-and-mortar location, and she is already planning to register Sugarfoot as a sanctuary restaurant once it opens.

"I think, in part, that the sanctuary restaurant sign will let people know when they enter those doors, the B.S., hate and ugliness stops there," she said.

Fields paused for a few seconds and added: "But I don't want it to be confrontational."

More experienced chefs like Adam Sobel, head chef at the



Noah Berger / Special to The Chronicle

**Traci Des Jardins, active in politics away from the kitchen, seeks to avoid it with diners at her restaurant, Jardinière.**

Mina Test Kitchen in Cow Hollow, note that there are financial risks associated with saturating a dining room with political content.

Food, in Sobel's eyes, is a form of escapism, and it is better for business to keep the experience untethered from weighted political issues.

"If a Republican sits at a table and sure, we may not share the same beliefs, but you can't keep someone from dining at a restaurant. That's still a paying customer," Sobel said. "This is a hospitality business, and that's what we focus on."

Based on 2017 projections from the San Francisco Travel Association, tourists will spend \$9.22 billion in the Bay Area this year, nearly 3 percent more than the \$8.98 billion in 2016.

The Mina Group has fine dining outposts not only in blue states such as California and Illinois, but also in red states such as Wyoming and Florida, where residents vote along more conservative lines.

Sobel said he has had conversations with his staff about how they would handle potential interactions with the president and his administration. While Sobel chose not to go into specifics, he said their feelings about the country's political state are shared openly behind the scenes.

The goal, he added, is to not let them influence business practices in a way that would offend potential diners.

"There's so much competition in San Francisco, we're all rooting for each other and fighting for covers," Sobel said.

"If you're going to be a complete left-winger, you're going to potentially push away customers."

Yet, Sugarfoot's Fields said she isn't worried that her outspokenness will hinder the fundraising process for her future space, or even alienate potential customers.

Another fledgling restaurateur, Reem Assil, who is opening an eponymous Oakland bakery in May, shared similar sentiments — because, as she put it, "food is inherently political." The mantra will be reflected in her bakery, as she plans to use it as an educational space for people to learn about Middle Eastern food and culture, but also as a place where customers can openly discuss the state of the country, good or bad.

"We may not ever be the popular one because we put our politics forward, but we're going to be an honest place," Assil said.

During a recent break between food prep and meal deliveries, Fields noticed writing on the bottom of a nearby stop sign.

Underneath the word "Stop," someone had scribbled "Trump."

"See, you can't avoid politics, no matter where you are," Fields said. "It's part of the landscape now."

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