

New Just Food Director Takes a Personal Interest to a Professional Level

By Anne Goldberg August 15, 2014

Longtime social justice professional and NYU grad student Jasmine Nielsen talks about moving into her dream job as Executive Director of Just Food, and how her friends inspired her to write a cooking blog.

When Jasmine Nielsen met outgoing Just Food director Jacquie Berger at a benefit in January she thought, this woman has my dream job — “and she’s great and she clearly loves it and is good at it. Darn!” Nielsen said. It never occurred to her that six months later that job would be hers. But while Nielsen may be surprised at this turn of events, you get the impression that no one else is. She has been putting the message out for a long time that this is where she wants to be.

Nielsen has been looking at the world through food since she was a kid — the child of hippies who let her experiment with cooking projects, and sent her to school with tofu ball sandwiches on whole grain bread. The freedom she had in the kitchen gave her the opportunity to think “intentionally” about how she ate, and she learned early on that you could tell a lot about someone based on what their comfort foods were, and what they kept in their pantry. More importantly, she learned that food is an important tool for community building.

Nielsen had been executive director of Love Heals, a NYC-based AIDS education foundation, for 15 years when she decided she needed to shake things up a little bit with a graduate degree. “I learn from people around me and I learn from people who work for me, but I hadn’t really been in that space of having knowledge imparted,” she said. Reflecting on her options, she realized that she spent most of her spare time reading and thinking and talking about food. On a whim, she headed for Google and threw her fates to the internet, typing in “graduate school food.” Lo and behold, her search lead her to the the Food Studies program at NYU. Not only could she go to school for food, she didn’t even have to leave New York, where she has lived for 18 years. It seemed too easy. She still feels this way, and marvels, “I liked it too much. How could that be a job?!”

In talking about her interest in Just Food, Nielsen explained the organization’s long commitment to connecting New Yorkers to their food in the way she had been as a kid. In one of their programs, they take both the clients and staff of a food pantry to one of the farms that supplies it. “Everybody has the right to know and to understand where their food comes from. There’s so much talk about trying to get people to eat better, but it has to make sense to you, it has to be culturally relevant. I think that when you see the supply chain things that are scary become less scary.

Particularly with foods, people have so many phobias, and when you see a new food and understand where it comes from it becomes not a foreign thing but something that you can own and have some mastery of.”



Nielsen, never one to miss a market

Nielsen also realizes that she is in the best place at the best time: “I think it is an amazing time because people who were not talking about food 5 years ago are talking about food and are excited about it. If you can channel that enthusiasm and energy into getting resources to help communities build better food systems, that would be an amazing legacy. The [sexual and reproductive health] work is really important, but it’s all social justice. It’s about ensuring equal access, and allowing people to self-determine their lives, and you can do that through different media. And now I’m going to do that that through food!”

This recipe comes from Nielsen’s blog, [The Drunken Fig](#) — a colorful chronicle of her culinary exploits (pig roasts and Paris are involved!), which she started writing as a way to channel her excitement in the weeks before she started her graduate program at NYU. The blog is both an expression of her food philosophy, and a response to her friends’ constant question: how do you figure out what to cook? Her answer: “I’m making this because these are the things I happen to have on hand right now. You don’t have to go out and buy a bunch of ingredients.” With the blog, she says, “one thing I’m trying to buck is that notion that you can’t cook for yourself. They’re not elaborate recipes, they’re usually things that are really quick to make or that you can make a ton of and eat throughout the week.”

“Over time what’s evolved is this marriage of personal health, community and global responsibility, but not ignoring the sensory aspects of food, the delight and the sensual pleasure of it. And improvisation, liberation! Sometimes it’s not the most delicious thing, but you made yourself dinner! That’s great!



Nielsen recommends a deconstructed bruschetta to help avoid the sog factor

Summer squash and kale bruschetta

- 2 scallions
- 3 thin slices of good bread
- 1 medium summer squash
- 5 stalks purple kale
- 1 ounce feta cheese
- 6 basil leaves (mint or parsley would also be great)
- 1 1/2 tablespoons good quality olive oil
- 1/2 lemon (zest and juice)
- Pinch Aleppo pepper (or a little less red pepper)
- Salt and pepper

Bring a cast iron skillet up to medium low heat with half a tablespoon of olive oil. Trim and reserve the dark green portion of the scallions. Slice the white and light green portions lengthwise into strips. Cook, flipping occasionally, until limp and starting to brown. Sprinkle with salt and remove from pan.

Place bread slices into pan and allow to toast, flipping as needed, while you go about the next steps.

Using a vegetable peeler, shave long ribbons of summer squash into a small bowl. Slice the kale as you would for a slaw and add this to the bowl along with the feta, remaining olive oil, lemon juice and lemon zest, Aleppo pepper and salt and pepper. Mince the scallion greens and fresh herbs. Add these plus the cooked scallions. Stir to combine and let sit for at least five minutes to allow the flavors to meld.

To serve as an hors d'œuvre, pile the kale and squash salad onto small pieces of toast and serve immediately. Or go for a deconstructed bruschetta, which ensures that the bread won't get soggy before you eat it.