

The Ritual of Real Food with Chef Centehua Deneken

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When I speak of real food within the vast realm of food culture, I find it peculiar that I must define what real food is. Bringing in freshly picked berries and newly harvested cucumbers from my mother's garden comes as second nature to me—I was raised

with apples and apricots growing just outside my window in lieu of fences and telephone wires. But where is this line drawn between foods that are real and foods that are somehow less than real? How are we to differentiate?

For Chef Centehua Deneken real food is clean and sustainably conscientious, but also close to the source. In her eyes, this can simply mean knowing the process by which food came to be: from seed, to farmer, to kitchen and finally to nourishment. The shorter the route to nourishment, the more real the food.

Centehua, whose name means unity or oneness in Nahuatl, an indigenous language spoken in south-central Mexico, holds the position of head chef at Liberty Advance, a nonprofit retreat facility nestled in southeastern San Diego County, where she creates menus based on seasonally available food. Her training is rather unconventional: She cites classical ballet as her education in the culinary arts. She believes there is an important similarity between dance and food, which influenced her education in the culinary arts.

"Food is there to give pleasure, but also to fuel you. It's not an obsession with the body but with how you feel," she says.

Centehua's journey into real foods began in the kitchens of her adolescence.

"I saw a lot of goodness coming from the kitchen," she says. "My nanny, who was indigenous, would make homemade food every day." She describes herself as having been a "sickly child," though. Dangerous fevers that often ended in seizures sent her to the hospital on more than one occasion. Her mother, with the aid of her nanny, looked to

alternative medicine for help. Ancient detoxifying remedies such as chlorella, cilantro and bone broth restored Centehua to health and ultimately solidified her faith in the healing powers of real food.



(Centehua at home with Daughter)

Her culinary attitudes were quite accidental. She had been recently divorced and didn't feel good in her body. When she stumbled upon a raw foods cookbook, it catalyzed a deep transformation in her life, healing her mind, body and spirit once again with food. Of her own accord, she began preparing foods for her friends.

"I saw the power that it really has to assist people in some more serious issues. It's a healing tool," she said. She doesn't consider herself a "raw foodist." Her diet has shifted over the years and she considers such dogma counterproductive to overall health and wellbeing. "Those kinds of dogmas I don't think are healthy. This is not for everybody, so I think it's a detoxifying diet. It's a good tool for healing and for restoring."

Years later, after she moved to San Diego, her journey to nourish her life would come full circle—once again back into the kitchen when she had to decide which foods to prepare for her own children.

"Having children was really the beginning and the remembering into this healing journey," she says. "It was really a journey into self love. Food is a way to love yourself and to love others."

Before putting together a menu, Centehua checks with local farmers to see what they have harvested. This cultivates a farmer-direct relationship and further embodies her philosophy of keeping it close to the source. "I love supporting my local farmers and we're so lucky here with almost everything."



Her absolute favorite foods to prepare are **raw desserts**. "It's Mary Poppins' wisdom," she says. "Sugar does help the medicine go down. There are so many good things in something that is sweet."

In many ways her story is not so much about real food as it is about how love, ritual and food can coalesce in the kitchen to nourish our lives and replenish our spirits. Real food offers real connections to people and also to the earth that we inhabit. Centehua's greatest message is about healing oneself through nourishment and changing the health of our community from the inside out.

"Make food with love," she insists. "It's that important. There's a link with everything you do and how things turn out when you're really invested and when your heart is really in it."

To find a rich source of information on Centehua's personal chef services, educational opportunities and catering services, visit Centehua.com

Amanda Kelly is a freelance writer based in San Diego. Her roots rest somewhere between the Pacific Northwest and the headwaters of the Mississippi River. She strives to inspire a greater appreciation for Mother Earth through the art of storytelling as well as living each day naturally and to its fullest.

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