Cooking Up Community

Soledad Ensemble enjoyed a week-long residency with the Barn Arts Collective in Bass Harbor, Maine where we developed our upcoming work for young audiences, *The Seven Ravens Project*. In addition to collaborating in the rehearsal space, the Ensemble cooked all meals together in the Barn Arts Collective kitchen.

While creating a work of theater that addresses the meanings of home, displacement and quest, our multinational, multilingual, multiethnic company shared dishes that are close to our hearts and remind us of home, family and heritage. Here are some of the easy, delicious meals we created, in the form of edited, transcribed interviews with each member of the company.

**Juliana Suaide Makes a “Brazilian Stroganoff”**

My name is Juliana Suaide and I’m from Sao Paolo, Brazil.

This is not a Russian or an East European stroganoff. It’s a Brazilian stroganoff. I don’t know how it became Brazilian, but it did. It’s delicious and it’s completely different from what you could eat in Russia or anywhere else.

It’s pretty simple. Nothing fancy. This is a kind of food that you can eat anywhere you go. You can go to a cheap restaurant, or you can go to a fancy restaurant and they’ll have like, “Oh! A gourmet stroganoff.”
Juliana purchased her first vinyl record while we were in Maine. It's an album by River Whyless, a band with roots in Bass Harbor, and a close relationship to the Barn Arts Collective family. We all enjoyed listening to the record. This band is wonderful!

I'm doing a chicken and a cheese stroganoff. The thing about cheese stroganoff is that it's something that only my family does. Nobody in Brazil has cheese stroganoff. So anytime I tell anyone I'm making a cheese stroganoff they're like, "What? That doesn't exist." And I'm like, "I know—we created it." You can make it with chicken, beef, if you want to be a little different, with fish—or the cheese one that nobody knows.

First, I cooked some rice—just regular white rice.

The chicken stroganoff is just some chicken breast with olive oil, onions and garlic, and then you put some tomato paste, a little bit of ketchup, a little little little bit of mustard, and you leave it on the stove for a bit. And then you turn off the stove and add some of the cream. It's a Brazilian cream that you can sometimes find here in Latin grocery stores—it's called crema de leite. It's important that you turn off the heat because, you know, it's cream.
When everything is ready, you put everything on a plate with these chips—they’re really thin. **Batata palha frita.** They’re a garnish.

For the cheese version, you should really use a **Brazilian white cheese**, which we don’t have here—so we’re just using **mozzarella**. Cube the cheese and cook it briefly, so it gets hot but doesn’t melt.

You can eat it all separately or, if you really want to be Brazilian, you have to mix it all in together.

My mom taught me to make this dish. But the woman who works in my house—she makes the best one.

It’s so funny— it’s such a simple dish, but every house you go to, it tastes different. Everyone has their own little touch that nobody knows what it is.

It’s my favorite meal. So every time I want to taste home, I make a cheese stroganoff.

I’m not sure who invented the cheese version. I’m not sure if it was my grandma or my mom, because I think maybe they invented it for me. Because when I was young I was very annoying with food—a VERY picky eater, and my grandma would try to do everything to make me happy, and so I think that’s why she invented the cheese stroganoff. I’ve loved cheese since I was very young, so I’m pretty sure it was invented for me.

Bom apetite!

**Miaojuan Chen Makes “Chinese Dishes”**

I’m from the south of China, from a town called Zhangzhou in the Fujian Province, close to Taiwan Island.
This meal is called “Chinese dishes.” The first dish is onions and eggs. It’s one of my favorite dishes. My mom always cooks that for me, when I’m home. So the ingredients are onions and eggs.

The second dish is shrimp with peas, corn, carrots and green beans.

I planned to do a fried rice. But I put too much water in the rice, so I’ll probably just do the shrimp as its own dish, by itself. I usually use a rice cooker. I’m also going to make a similar dish with chicken.

I’ll put in salt, soy sauce, and corn oil.

My mom did the cooking in my family--when I was younger my mom did most of the cooking, but now, as an adult, my dad is doing most of the cooking. My dad is becoming my mom.

I mostly learned to cook on my own because I was away from home. I went to a different town—to boarding school—for high school, when I was thirteen. And then I went to a big city for college, and then I came to the states. So I don’t see my parents that often. I basically learned how to cook on my own and with my boyfriend, and since coming here [to New York].

In addition to bringing her cooking skills and her astounding artistry, Miao was our tea fairy. Yumm! Miao was also great at repurposing leftovers to eat for breakfast, especially savory things--rice, eggs, buns, salad...

I like to cook noodles. And hot pot. We put water in a pot and put in different soup ingredients. You keep the hot pot boiling and just add different ingredients.

It’s hard to cook Chinese foods with these kitchen things. We’re used to a whole different set of tools, so this is challenging.

Most Chinese dishes are stirfry so we need real fire! But, we’ll see, maybe it will work…
My name is Maya Naomi Carter and I’m from Massachusetts.

Right now I’m cooking **cornbread**, but the whole meal I have planned...I’m making **penne arrabbiata** with **ground chicken** sauce. And some **roasted green beans and tomatoes**.

I learned the pasta sauce growing up with my mom and dad--we made pasta a lot in the house. Pasta, chili--generally with ground turkey or chicken because I didn’t eat red meat growing up. I learned to cook from my parents.

When I’m making cornbread from scratch, I use **cornmeal** and **flour** and a little **baking soda**, **sugar**, **milk** and **eggs** and **butter**. I didn’t know if there would be cornmeal here/didn’t know if I was gonna have time to make it from scratch, so when I do a store bought mix, I generally get **Krusteaz**. So this is **Krusteaz honey cornbread mix** that I’m doctoring with my own stuff.

I’m adding butter, milk and egg and a little bit of **cinnamon**, and I kind of like my cornbread sweeter than most people do, so I put sugar in it.

I think cornbread with solids is very valid. I think that it’s lovely, and I think that it’s great to have solids in your cornbread when you’re not having something that’s completely solid, so if you’re doing it with, like, a
soup or a stew or something. But since there’s going to be other roughage with tonight’s dinner, I’m just gonna stick to the non-things-in-it...Also, I’m making a double batch so we can have it for breakfast or lunch and I find it’s easier to doctor or do things with plain cornbread when it’s just plain.

The Seven Ravens. Birds. Brothers. Queens! Maya reigns supreme :)

My girlfriend taught me how to make green beans this way. And I made them this way for the first time with her. And I like them this way the best. I start with butter and garlic and I make sure to brown the butter and the garlic together and then eventually I put in a little salt, pepper, some more butter, kind of let the green beans cook down. And then right at the end I put in just a splash of red wine and some more butter to balance it and if we have it, lemon and if we don’t, not lemon!

…It’s the butter, it’s the butter. I know lots of people cook with olive oil and I’m also a big proponent of that sometimes, but, you know, I like my vegetables to taste like vegetables, but also like you just wanna eat them all the time, and I find that butter helps with that.

The pasta will happen once the green beans have gotten a little more together. It’s rice and quinoa noodles, so they take a little less time to cook.

One of the first times I made these by myself, I just put in way too much wine and then tried to balance it and they just got soggy and purple and sad and it was not the best experience. But I’ve since figured out that if you put the wine in at the end, it will cook off just a bit but not cook too far into the green beans, and it’ll keep them nice and crisp and you can still taste the butter. I find that the key is you have to balance the butter and the wine. You can’t put more wine than butter or you have to keep putting butter in when you put wine in.
Good morning. My name is Brianna Mireya Espinal, and I’m about to fry up some bacon right now.

The Breakfast Bae of Brooklyn strikes again! Delish! Brianna’s specialty breakfast dishes combine classic American comfort foods with seasonings and ingredients—like platanos and adobo—from her Dominican heritage.

So with ham, in general, I love to put honey and some seasonings—probably some adobo—and just let it sizzle in all that goodness and its own fat. Adobo—that’s a go-to. I’ve been using it. I made chicken the other day, and this, and every time I make bacon—yes, adobo’s good.

What’s in adobo? Life.

(Actually, the ingredients in our Goya adobo are salt, garlic, black pepper, turmeric, oregano.)

Basically, anything I would use to cook anything, is in one bottle.

My pancakes...I experimented with this a long time ago and I was, like, trying to find a way to, like perfect it—putting coffee in pancakes. And here, what’s great in this house is we have so many things to play with. I think a lot of breakfast foods are very savory and very sweet—and fruit is also a key part of breakfast, at least for me. So you’ve got your pancake mix, then you throw coffee into the equation—brewed coffee. Then I also threw in some berry jam, I think it was like strawberry raspberry, I threw a little bit of that in there. Some cinnamon, some of that organic raw sugar, it’s kind of like brown sugar. You mix that. And then I made an apple pie filling topping. And the only thing that was missing from it was cornstarch and I think that’s what brings the thickness to the apple pie filling, but we didn’t need that. It’s got apples, and we have this bottle of apple pie spice, which is cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice.

It’s amazing. I love this house. It is so well-equipped.
For the topping, first you cook up the butter, the cinnamon, and the sugar together, and then you pour in the water and the apples, and then you stir them and you keep the pot covered, and you stir them. And that goes on for about fifteen minutes. And then it becomes a delicious breakfast topping.

In addition to being a breakfast bae, Brianna is a talented visual artist. She has helped construct a visual identity for The Seven Ravens Project. Here are Juliana, Miao and Brianna constructing the props we call “the puppets” for our showing at Barn Arts.

I’m just really into comfort food, which probably isn’t the best health choice, but there’s something about that kind of food-like things that are fried, things that are baked, things that have a lot of cinnamon and butter that just, when you eat it you just feel good. You feel really good.

Tostones—classic, you gotta keep it classic. You cut them up—not thin—but you cut the plantains up into even, small slices and you throw them into a frying pan with cooking oil that almost covers them. You cook the plantains and make sure they’re golden on both sides, and then you take them out, and you take a cup, and you just lightly press them and mash them and you throw the back into the pan and you cook them up as—kind of like chips. And it’s just a classic breakfast. And I love a platano because you can do so much more with them. My mom makes platanos where she mashes them up with olive oil and butter and garlic and the water that she boils them in, and then she throws in purple onions on top.

Once they’re fried, put them on a paper towel, dab them off a bit. Sprinkle some salt—sometimes I make a little chimi sauce, which is just ketchup and mayo and it tastes amazing. I don’t even like mayo, but, mixed with ketchup? Oh, I’ll eat it.
Ana Cantoràn Viramontes Makes Enfrijoladas

My full name is Ana Guadalupe Cantoràn Viramontes. I am from Puebla, Mexico. It's in the south, more to the south of the country, in Mexico. That's where I am from.

That's Ana on the pans, cooking up some DELICIOUS enfrijoladas!

Today I am making enfrijoladas. It's just a simple thing. It's not the fanciest Mexican food, but it's one of the easiest and fastest.

I fried up some garlic. If my grandmother were doing this, before frying the refried beans, she would also put some pepper, like spicy pepper, to give the beans a little bit of spice. But I'm not doing that because not everybody is eating spicy today. Then I use milk and a little bit of water to thin the beans because for the enfrijoladas you don't want them to be super thick. And then I just pass the tortilla through boiling oil to make it crispy, otherwise it gets smushed and not good. And then we just cover them with the beans. Oh! I put cumin in the beans and just for fun a little bit of curry powder. That's not originally in the recipe.

On the top, you can put cheese, onions, avocado, and some crema. There is also a salad if you want to have some greens on the side, but that's it.

My grandpa and my grandma used to have a grocery store, like a bodega, and one of the things they used to sell was cooked beans. So people came and just got a little bag of cooked beans. That was something they used to sell in there. So I've seen her fry the beans and all that.

It will be easiest if I have the plates here and I'll start assembling the enfrijoladas here.
My full name is Marisol Kimberly Rosa-Shapiro. I was on Reading Rainbow when I was a kid, when I was about 8 or 9. I was one of the book reviewers, you know. And I can’t find it online any more but there was an amazing video of me reviewing a book called “Plane Song” about different kinds of planes. And I remember very clearly them coaching me—cause there’s a plane called a “rag bag” and I would say, like “Reayg beayg,” and they would say, “rhaag bhaag,” and I’d be like, “rhaag bhaag.” And it was really cute.

And then, I remember, at the end, I was like, “My name is MARISOL Kimberly ROSA-Shapiro. And I think you’ll enjoy this TRUUULY LOOOVELY book. Buh dum dum.”

I’m from New York City. Culturally, ethnically, my mom’s family is from Puerto Rico. And my dad’s family is from…

**The cast bursts into “Puuuerto Ricooo, you lovely island…” the beginning of the song “America” from West Side Story**

And my dad’s family is Jewish from Austria and Russia. I’ve never been to either of those places, but I have been to PR a bunch of times.
This meal that I made is sort of like southern American, which has nothing to do with my cultural heritage, besides being American, but succotash is kind of a mashup of all kinds of summer veggies. **Summer squash, corn, tomatoes, and onion.** With just salt and pepper.

And then I made, it's still in the oven right now, but there's a **sweet potato** casserole. And I also made some tofu. I'm baking some **tofu**. Which is not in the same world of cuisine as the yam casserole or the succotash. I just put a little bit of **soy sauce** on it, and a little bit of **curry powder** and some **sesame seeds**.

The fact that it’s summer made me excited about succotash. And also seeing the squash in the fridge.

The casserole has **butter**, a couple of **eggs, vanilla, cinnamon, milk**. And then on top there are some **cornbread crumbs** and some **sliced almonds** and some **oats**.

If I were going to make a traditional meal...? My mom’s sweet potato casserole, my mom’s stuffing, probably a pernil, which I’ve never done--a roast pork. My mom makes what we call stuffing at Thanksgiving, but it’s not like American stuffing, which is bread based. It’s actually mashed up **platanos** with mashed up **meat**, and it has **sofrito**, which is the fundamental thing in all Puerto Rican food. It has cilantro, culantro, onion, garlic. It’s what makes all Puerto Rican food good. And frying, also makes things good. I guess that’s true all over.

To me THE traditional meal is either Puerto Rican Thanksgiving or Passover meal, which also I've never cooked myself, but which is gefilte fish and matzohs and matzoh ball soup and things that make you constipated. Oh, I have made haroset, which is chopped up walnuts and apples in red wine and cinnamon. It represents the mortar between the bricks of the pyramids that the Jews built. And there’s egg salad.

Oh, right, for the Puerto Rican Thanksgiving we also need coquito--coquito is like a coconut milk rum drink that’s just outrageous.

**Brianna: “It’s like a better egg nog. It’s what egg nog wishes it was.”**
I really don’t know if the tofu’s even going to be worth eating, but I do think that the sweet potatoes are gonna be good. (Oh god, THEY WERE TERRIBLE because we ran out of butter and I had to use Smart Balance—never again!)

**Lots of conversation about the origins of succotash--both the food (is it derived from the Indigenous American’s “three sister” crops?) and the word (“I think it’s just a bunch of nonsense syllables thrown together.”)**

**Then, Marisol pulls out the tofu from the oven.**

It exists. That the best I can say for it, I think. It exists. You may find it HORRENDOUS, in which case you can be honest with me.

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During a walk into town, we found ourselves on a poster in a window! Barn Arts Collective has a strong and growing presence in their local community.

**Soledad Ensemble Makes A Show in Residency at Barn Arts Collective**

Our time at the Barn Arts Collective residency was tremendously fruitful. It was a new frontier for us as a company—our first residency experience with all-day access to rehearsal space and to each other. Without the constraints of day jobs or rehearsal space hours, we were free to make of the week what we wanted and needed. Here are some of the principles that supported a successful week of work and play together:

**Take stock:** On our first morning in residence, we took some time for individual, quiet reflection. Each of us did a bit of journaling about what we needed, creatively and personally, during our week away from big city life. Making this time for reflection and intention setting set us on a course towards an enriching individual and collective experience for the entire week.
**Be flexible:** We began our residency working the typical theater maker workday schedule, with rehearsal/creation time beginning at 10am, followed by a ninety-minute lunch break at 1pm and another several hours of work before breaking for dinner prep and downtime at about 6:30pm. We decided by the second or third day of residency to skew our days later so that we could explore our beautiful surroundings a bit during the day, and then focus more intently at night. Also, since we wanted to make use of natural light in the barn for our public sharing, we decided to rehearse more evening hours each day, during which the sunlight would most closely resemble the natural light on the evening of our public work-in-progress sharing. This new schedule was more productive for all of us.

**Create and Commit to Community:** Barn Arts Collective is a bustling hub of activity year-round, but the summer months are especially active and generative. Between May and October of this year, the Collective hosted over 200 artists in residence working on over 50 original productions. Access to a brilliant live-work space—with 11 beds between the main house and barn—forms the bedrock of the Collective’s success. But they also rely on a vast and growing community of artist-administrators, volunteers, and community members to lend the Collective support and to provide enthusiasm, spark and steam throughout the year. In return, the Collective provides a vast array of diverse programming in their community, including concerts and theater productions, in-school arts education experiences for local youth, and a series of opportunities for audiences to further develop their engagement with the work that they experience. Increasingly central to their audience development, and of tremendous import to our experience, was the Collective’s facilitated, Liz Lerman-style feedback session with audience members after our work-in-progress presentation. This post-performance discussion helped forge community through heartfelt conversation and personal reflections from the audience members, and an opportunity for the artists to respond to audience questions, to ask specific questions of the audience, or simply to field audience reactions. Fostering community-building opportunities before, during and after presentations enriches the experience of audience members and artists alike, and helps develop an appetite for adventurous artistic work in the Bass Harbor community.