

Dinnerview: Natasha Sajé

written by Danielle Susi | December 16, 2020



Born stateless in Germany and raised in New York City and its suburbs, Natasha Sajé is the author of three books of poems, including *Vivarium* (Tupelo, 2014), as well as a postmodern poetry handbook, *Windows and Doors: A Poet Reads Literary Theory* (Michigan, 2014). Her distinctions include Fulbright and Camargo fellowships, the Alice Fay di Castagnola and Robert Winner awards from the Poetry Society of America, and the Utah Book Award. Sajé has taught in the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA in Writing Program since 1996 and at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, where she has directed the Weeks Poetry Series, since 1998. Her latest book *Terroir: Love, Out of Place*, a memoir, was published by Trinity University Press in November 2020.

Here, she talks about a chocolate addiction, romantic meals around the globe, and Yotam Ottolenghi cooking her final meal.

On her all-time favorite meal:

There have been so many! I'll tell you about two romantic meals. The first was in the dining room of the Dorchester Hotel in London in 1985, with my then-husband Tyrone. He was a chef and we loved going out to eat, and I learned how to critique cooking from him. Interestingly, he was very discerning but had a high tolerance for bad cooking. In other words, he knew what was wrong with the dish but usually ate it anyway. However, once in a restaurant in Paris, he was served old sweetbreads, and refused to eat them or pay for them. We ended up walking out of the restaurant, with the waiter pulling one of my arms, and Tyrone pulling the other. The French do not have "the customer is always right" ethos. Anyway, at that Dorchester meal, where Anton Mosimann was the executive chef: I remember our banquette for two, padded, aqua-colored silk-covered: luxurious. It was curved into a quarter circle, so we could touch, but also look out at the dance floor. The gracious waiter asked about our timing preference, so we danced between courses. I'm sad to say I don't remember what we ate, only that it was good and light (Mosimann advocated what he called "cuisine naturelle") and beautifully presented.

Another fantastic meal I remember is from Bao Bei in Vancouver last summer.

My wife Laura and I stood in line starting at 5 p.m. to get a table (I love that egalitarian method!) and we spent nearly three hours eating every vegetarian thing on the menu (plus pork dumplings for me), including the best pot stickers I've ever had, and amazing seasonal vegetables in unusual preparations, like seared bok choy and woodland mushrooms.

But here's a description of another wedding meal: Laura and I had invited nine friends to meet us in Portugal for a hiking trip. We planned to hike from inn to inn along towns on the Atlantic coast. We also planned a surprise wedding on the second night (officiated by my best friend who is an Episcopal priest) in the town of Odeceixe. Our dinner that night was at an extremely simple restaurant at the juncture of the river mouth and the ocean. The tiny steamed clams (the size of a fingernail) were incredibly briny and sweet. For dessert we had packaged individual ice creams from their take-out freezer. That trip was a great way to have a wedding—no one had to dress up, give us anything, prepare anything, or go anywhere they weren't already! Sadly, I recall that Laura ended up with an omelet, as the cooks were not the most imaginative about incorporating protein for vegetarians.

On what the light looks like during her favorite meal of the day:

I eat a big lunch, and the light around my house in the Salt Lake foothills is crisp and strong at noon. The sun is (usually) shining from the south, flooding through large windows. The leaves on the chokecherry trees sparkle.

From early spring to late August, I watch the cherries bloom and form fruit, then watch the birds eat them while I also try to get to the cherries to make chokecherry-cranberry jam, the most time-consuming jam you can imagine, because each tiny cherry has to be pitted by hand after it is boiled.

On snacking while writing:

No, partly because I don't want to ruin my laptop. I make seed cookies (recipe on my website) that are a great (and neat) snack. I do drink tea throughout the day and practice the Chinese habit of re-steeping it. The teas I like (mostly varieties of oolong, but lately also a fresh spring purple pu'erh) can be re-steeped up to five times, with most of the caffeine expressed in the first steeping.

On her go-to late-night snack:

I try to eat everything in an 8 or 6 hour time frame, say 9 a.m.-3 p.m. This gives the digestive system a rest and reduces blood sugar levels. I've gotten used to going to bed on an empty stomach and find I sleep better. I eat like an old person, which is also what I am. That's not to say I'm rigid. When we travelled in Sardinia, I adjusted by eating dinner late and skipping breakfast.

On her food quirks:

Many, many: most stemming from eating for good health or frugality. I figure out ways to eliminate or reduce sugar and gluten from my baking. I do bake my own sourdough bread that's high gluten. I would no more eat a commercial

(i.e. packaged) baked good than eat the stuff in my compost bin. I scrape off frosting and leave the pie crust. I can't bear to waste food. I'm a good forager.

My most monstrous habit is chocolate. I eat it every day, and in great quantities, 75-100 grams a day. My favorite brand is Bonnat, a French brand made with extra cocoa butter and no vanilla, so you can really taste the chocolate and it melts in your mouth. They make four kinds of dark milk chocolate with 65% cocoa butter. I order those by the case. I also love Ritual, made in Park City with great care. Fabulous! For filled chocolates, my favorite is Soma in Toronto. Alas, they don't ship, and I also like Zotter, in Austria, which distributes in the U.S. and does ship. In fact, I had planned a trip to the Zotter factory for this past May. My favorite filled flavors are the ones with alcohol, like the Marc de Champagne, and the Butter Caramel. But here's the thing about me and chocolate (aka theobroma: food of the gods): if I can't get my favorites, I'll eat anything, even Hershey's. So, it is an addiction. (And yes, I supplement with magnesium because someone told me people who crave chocolate are low in it.)

On her final meal request:

How about a spring lunch party with dear friends, musical chairs so I can talk to everyone, in my own house, wherever that will be? I'll have Yotam Ottolenghi do most of the cooking, Chad Robertson of Tartine supply bread, and his wife Elizabeth Pruiett supply pastries. (Or Nichole Peterson of Salt Lake City!) After some amuse bouches—assorted olives and nuts and some savory bites from Tartine Bakery—we'll start with organic, large, steamed artichokes, with a vinaigrette, to eat by hand. That will make everything that comes after taste even better. (By the way, I love an Italian aperitif called Cynar made from artichokes.) Then some steamed wild clams. Then diver scallops or a meaty wild fish like halibut, seared and served with a red pepper coulis and a spring pea/fennel/shallot medley. A salad of Boston lettuce and thinly sliced radishes. Then a cheese course: dolce gorgonzola, camembert, Roquefort, Appenzeller, and some cheeses I've never before tasted (but no goat cheese, please). For dessert, something made with fresh fruit—since it's spring, how about sour cherries, maybe a galette or stewed and served with a crustless cheesecake (no yolks). Then those Soma chocolates. Could we start at 1 p.m. and end at 5 p.m. so I can go to my final sleep on an empty stomach?