

the column

## Chef talk in Marin whet my appetite for a Southern-fried seder

The first time I laid eyes on Jan Birnbaum, I was instantly reminded of the old maxim: Never trust a skinny chef. While Birnbaum isn't quite San Francisco-hipster thin, you could

probably fit two of him into one Mario Batali.

But as it turns out, I can trust Chef Jan — he used to weigh 400 pounds.

I was sitting in a sunny white room in the beautiful Osher Marin JCC in San Rafael with my friend Danna and about 30 other people. Living on the Peninsula, I

don't find myself at the Marin JCC very often. But this Sunday afternoon was a special occasion.

We were there to hear Birnbaum, of San Francisco's Epic Roasthouse, in conversation with local food writer GraceAnn Walden — but also for a tasting of Birnbaum's Passover food, made even more exciting by the fact that both Danna and I had forgotten to eat breakfast that morning. Watching photos of the chef's delectable Passover treats flit across a flat-screen TV behind the speakers was nearly torturous, as was the assistant setting up the tasting table next door.

Walden introduced Birnbaum, saying that he was an old friend on whom she has something of a crush. It's not hard to see why — in addition to being able to cook fabulous meals, Birnbaum also speaks with a soft and lovely Louisiana accent. Mmm-mmm.

That accent comes courtesy of an upbringing in Baton Rouge. As Birnbaum tells it, his family was en route to Houston after living in Brooklyn for about 30 years. They stopped in Baton Rouge, "went to shul on a Friday night, and never left."

I have a particular affinity for Southern Jews — partly from growing up on the very edge of the South, partly from going to Jewish camp in North Carolina and partly from just thinking it's darn cool that Jewish communities have been thriving for hundreds of years in the cotton-pickin' Bible Belt. I love the ideas of Jews eating grits instead of kasha, sweet potato pie instead of kugel.

Birnbaum learned how to cook in his mother's kitchen, and made his first meal at around age 7 — an omelet that got a standing ovation from the family.

Although cooking was clearly his call-



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ing, he studied engineering in college, then changed direction, taking up with famous New Orleans chef Paul Prudhomme. That segued into a gig at the Quilted Giraffe restaurant in New York City, then Campton Place in San Francisco.

In 1994 Birnbaum opened Catahoula, a restaurant and bar in Calistoga, which he ran for a decade. On a whim the first year he decided to host a seder at the restaurant, figuring 20 people might show up. The final count was 119, which had grown to 600 by the end of Birnbaum's Catahoula days.

He isn't hosting a restaurant seder this year — but, he said, "next year at Epic!"

As part of the talk, we got a menu from one of Birnbaum's Catahoula seders, along with a few recipes. The menu includes some completely traditional dishes — homemade gefilte fish, tsimmes — and some that blend tradition with modernity, like crispy gribenes and tapenade, and a braised brisket that looked a bit like spare ribs.

And in case you were worried about withdrawal from the disappearance of Bartons after-seder mints (see page 31 of this week's issue), Birnbaum suggests a gooseberry clafoutis with homemade vanilla ice cream.

At the end of the talk, we were ushered into the next room, where Birnbaum's matzah meal pancakes, piled high with his honey red wine marinated heirloom apple charoset, sat on little paper plates.

I took one and bit into the pancake. It was soft and not too sweet, perfectly complementing the reduced marinade drizzle and the apples. A dried mystery fruit, possibly a cherry, was the best part of the charoset, its plump tartness melding well with the crunchy, sweet apples. I'll have to remember that for my own seders this year.

And speaking of my own seders, on my way out of the building I started thinking that, inspired by Chef Jan, it might be a good year to have a Southern-fried seder — it'll give me an excuse to make that Passover sweet potato pie recipe I've been holding onto. ■