

PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: KITCHENISTAS

November 5, 2024

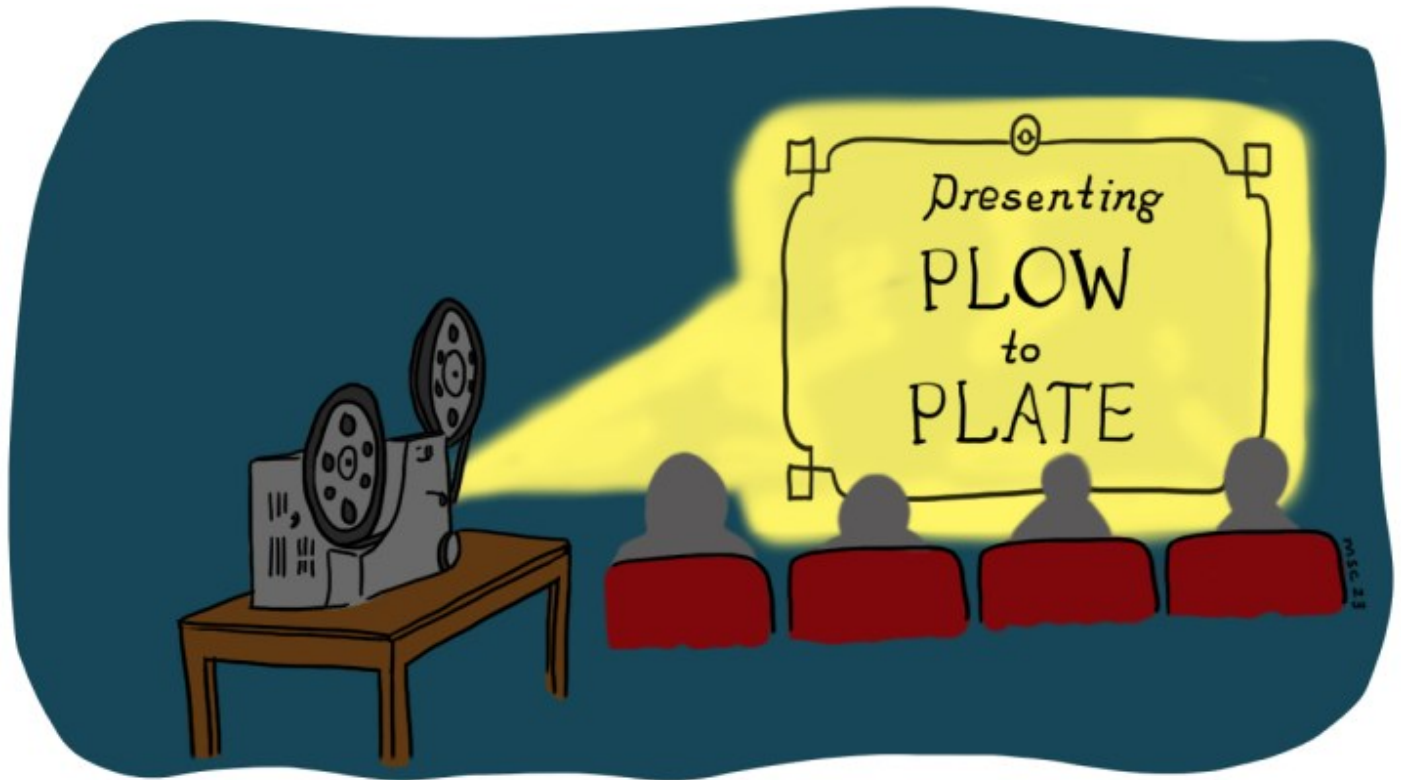


Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Adam Rabiner

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The opening frame of the documentary *Kitchenistas* shows an older person's hand penciling a new entry into a well-worn, dog-eared and stained notebook containing family recipes. Once completed, just past the one-minute mark, it reads: "Octubre 3, 2020. Empanadas de carne pollo—para la pelicula de las Kitchenistas." Then abruptly the screen flashes, "One Year Earlier" and we are off to 2019 and the inauguration of the 16th generation of the seven-week nutrition education course, "Kitchenistas 101," comprised of mostly Latina and Caribbean women, embarking on the first class, "Cooking for Salud." Was this intriguing tease of an introduction simply a clever way of rolling some screen credits? Only toward the end of the movie, when the footage is shown once again in fuller context, do you realize that these simple images capture the thematic heart of the film.

The class is taught at the Olivewood Gardens Learning Center in National City, California, a lower-income area south of San Diego, whose main drag of fast-food restaurants is the hallmark of a food desert. Years ago, “Cooking for Salud” began as a gardening and nutrition class for children but evolved into an adult-oriented program as moms wanted to learn to cook the foods their kids were getting excited about. In an interesting twist, the program now spans multiple parent-child combinations. For example, tenth-generation Monica is mother to sixth-generation Esperanza.

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Most of the Kitchenistas, which in Spanish translates as “professionals in the kitchen,” enter the class knowing how to cook. However, many of them are immigrants from Mexico or other Central and South American countries and are unfamiliar with how prepare some of the ingredients. In addition, many are employed and leading modern lives with limited time for making meals, so the class teaches fundamental skills and abbreviated recipes, whether a student has ten minutes or a full day to dedicate to scratch-made cooking. The mantra is that eating healthy should be easy, delicious, not expensive and delicious.

But the class is about much more than simply cooking. Kitchenistas are schooled in the five pillars of wellness: 1) sleeping, 2) eating, 3) exercise, 4) connecting with people and 5) being mindful. Many attend class wearing traditional clothing and jewelry from their countries of origin. A Guatemalan Kitchenista shows off a necklace of seemingly identical cloth dolls and says of the figures, “They are not like us, we are like them. What happens to one, happens to the rest. Though of different ages, education, and stories, we love each other and have adopted one another as sisters.”

The Kitchenistas learn from others too. They host a visit about culinary medicine from Dr. Sabrina A. Falquier Montgrain (a ninth-generation Kitchenista herself), Joe Pastry

and guest chefs Angel and Angel from Tecate, Mexico (Honoring My Culture), where they learn about guajillo, ancho and Mexican chiles. They take the third pillar of wellness seriously. When not cooking they practice breathing, yoga, tai chi and movement. Indeed, they view what they are doing as a revolutionary movement.

The Kitchenistas perform demonstrations in schools and community centers where people come to hear what they have to say. They take the “Heart Healthy Tacos” show on the road to Imperial Beach, CA and the “Cooking Mindful Mushrooms” class to San Diego. They teach an off-site “Cooking for Salud” to the United Women of East Africa and testify at city council meetings where they advocate for community-wide changes in policy.

The closing credits inform that, as of December 2020, more than 275 Kitchenistas had graduated from the “Cooking for Salud” program. Kitchenistas have become elected officials, nonprofit leaders, small business owners and neighborhood mentors. They advocate for healthy food solutions and traditions to change communities and transform lives.

THE FILM SHOWS THE TIES THAT BIND MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS, PAST AND PRESENT, WHERE WE COME FROM AND WHERE WE HAVE ARRIVED. IT ALSO POINTS THE WAY TO WHERE WE NEED TO GO.

Can you see now the images of the beaten-up family recipe book and wrinkled, pencil-wielding hand and how they resonate with sisterhood, family, sharing and tradition? The film colorfully conveys how the Kitchenistas have learned to become professionals in their communities and families, planting seeds, promoting healthier and better lives, melding the modern with the traditional. The film shows the ties that bind mothers and daughters, past and present, where we come from and where we have arrived. It also points the way to where we need to go.

Kitchenistas on Zoom Tuesday, November 12th, 2024 @ 7:00 p.m.

Screening link: <https://plowtoplatefilms.weebly.com/upcoming-events.html>

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to plowtoplate@gmail.com.

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