

By Necee Regis
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MEXICO CITY — Throw a rock in Mexico City and you're bound to hit a really good place to eat. The city is renowned for its growing culinary scene (including the first Michelin star awarded to a taco stand), and each time I visit, I look forward to being delighted by some new place I'm bound to discover.

This year's gem opened mere weeks before I arrived. Suchi, the way residents of the northern Sinaloan city of Culiacan pronounce "sushi" (or so our waiter explained), serves a wildly imaginative mashup of two seemingly different cuisines: Sinaloan and Japanese. The brainchild of mustachioed and tattooed Mexico City-born chef, restaurateur, and TV personality Aquiles Chavez, Suchi's menu stretches traditional notions of both sushi and tacos.

I admit it can be dizzying. It's like arriving in a country where you expect one type of meal and are transported to another land entirely. For example, Dorito sushi. How could I not order such a thing? It sounds like a gimmick until you take a bite, and then it isn't. The shrimp and cream cheese roll, coated with crushed Doritos and gooey shrimp topping, is a perfect balance of creamy, salty, and crunchy with lingering spice on the lips.

According to Chavez, the inspiration for this and other rolls comes from Culiacan, a colorful town where everything is brightly painted — cars, tombstones, houses — and you'll find anything and everything in their sushi. Thus, the menu's Dorito roll, and the genre-bending Yapa roll with platanos, cream cheese, pork belly, carrot and jicama salad, flambéed bacon, and caramelized onion.

From Dorito rolls to eel tempura: Mexico City's newest culinary gem



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The shrimp and cream cheese roll, coated with crushed Doritos and gooey shrimp topping, at Suchi.

Not all cross-cultural dishes are rolls. Crispy tostadas are topped with yellow-

garlicky sesame oil.

"We make things our own way," said chef Chavez. "It's not a gimmick, it's real food. The base ingredients and tech-

nique are the most important, plus a pinch of salt and heat. If it's right, you don't need to fix it."

Sushi traditionalists won't be disap-

pointed by a wide choice of familiar dishes such as hand rolls, spring rolls, tempura, fried rice, sashimi and nigiri selections, and California and spicy tuna rolls. One favorite, Himitsu maki, is a variation of a classic eel roll with eel tempura wrapped in silky avocado, topped with an eel sauce and crunchy *arare* — tiny, crunchy soy-flavored rice crackers.

Simple wood tables are enlivened with decorative plates sporting mask-wearing Japanese superheroes, and red cloth napkins embroidered with more masked heads. The vibe is casual and celebratory, not stuffy, and creatively attired patrons seemed to be more Mexican than gringo. We played a game: Is he a famous Mexican film director? Is she a doyenne of the city's fashion world? We'd never know, but it was fun to observe our fellow diners in such a festive mood.

The restaurant is located in the Roma Norte, on the border of Condesa, two neighborhoods touted for their bohemian vibes and vibrant culinary offerings. Tucked inside the Hotel Casona Norte, in a restored, 1920s mansion, Suchi is accessible from the hotel's lobby or directly from the street.

"I'm so happy to be at La Casona," said Chavez, who has several different types of restaurants in other cities in Mexico. But his heart right now is all in Mexico City.

"I love Mexico City. They have all the flavors of the *cocinas* of Mexico in one place. It is *the* place to be. When you are there, you are everywhere."

Agreed.

Suchi, Durango 280, Roma Norte. Open for lunch and dinner. casonaroma.com/suchi

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Is this the CSA model of the future?

► **CSA**
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weigh out exactly 1.5 pounds of baby potatoes, no getting saddled with vegetables you don't like or can't figure out what to do with.

Instead, customers sign up online (Family Dinner is primarily subscription-based, although one can also order a la carte), choosing a half, whole, or double share according to dietary preference: omnivore, pescatarian, vegetarian, vegan, paleo, gluten-free. In addition to the local produce, meat, and fish, shares might include eggs, baked goods, or prepared foods; customers can add on dairy, bread, fresh pasta, mezze, and more. Don't like beets? Make a note of it, and you won't get them. Ever. The order will be delivered to your front door on Saturday or Tuesday, your choice.

Family Dinner owner Erin Baumgartner, currently at the eye of the delivery storm in black T-shirt and clogs, long brown hair pulled up in a ponytail, pauses between hoisting boxes in the sweltering heat to check spreadsheets and route maps on a laptop. She speaks as passionately about perfect summer tomatoes and the importance of local food as she does about tech stacks and data analytics. Baumgartner and husband Tim Fu founded Family Dinner in 2017. He was at MIT's Sloan School of Management; she helped lead MIT's Senseable City Lab, using data science to understand and find solutions for complex urban issues — everything from waste management to opioid use.

They were also passionate about food. Why not use a data lab approach to begin tackling some of the issues around the way we distribute, access, and consume it? "We started Family Dinner because nothing is more broken and complex than the food system," Baumgartner says.

Small family farms are shutting down across the country, facing challenges from rising costs to changing weather patterns. According to the USDA's most recent Census of Agriculture, in 2022 there were 141,733 fewer farms in the United States than there were five years prior, with 20 million fewer farm acres; most small family farms (which make up about 86 percent of the farms in this country) rely on non-farm sources for the majority of their household income.

The way we distribute food, across countries and continents, is bad for the planet: Transportation accounts for nearly 20 percent of the worldwide food system's total carbon emissions, found a 2022 study in the journal *Nature*, with the United States one of the top four



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF



Above: "A couple nerds at the helm make a few things easier," says Family Dinner owner Erin Baumgartner, who uses data science to strengthen the local food system.

Left: Skylar Howes delivers CSA shares from Red Fire Farm.

Below: Iron Ox Farm radishes, ready for delivery to Family Dinner subscribers.



emitters.

And much of the food then goes to waste. The USDA estimates the country wastes more than 30 percent of its food supply annually, approximately 133 billion pounds.

Family Dinner uses data science and software to support local farmers and transport food efficiently while minimizing waste. Its reach gives farmers

access to a greater geographical range and market share.

"This is one stop for me, and we have a bunch of produce," says Rodgers of Clark Farm, a fairly small-scale operation with 10 to 12 acres of crops. "Just to be able to drop it here — there's no way I'd be able to sell a bunch of turnips and cilantro to someone. It's not happening. This is our biggest wholesale. If

few things easier," Baumgartner says. "When we can automate things, it becomes so much more efficient. As we automate, it becomes more scalable. How do we scale something like this to work for 2,000 people? It's no more complicated, because all the systems are already there."

Family Dinner started with 10 weekly customers. It now delivers to almost 700, working with more than 80 local producers. The company recently joined forces with Farmers to You, a like-minded business founded in 2009 that showcases Vermont producers. The entire outfit is moving soon from the current warehouse space to a much larger one a few doors down.

"It's a unique opportunity to be able to partner with somebody with the same mission and same goal to fix the food system and create access for everybody to this food that's good for the environment," says Farmers to You CEO Andrew Kay. "How do we become more 21st century in our operational processes? This is what that move does. Being as efficient and tech-forward as we can be and scaling on a sustainable level, and to be able to repeat that and bring in more farmers, that's really the goal here — to build a New England food shed that everybody has access to but that's not cost-prohibitive to run and operate."

Most subscription shares at Family Dinner range from \$62-\$148 each week, delivery included. Farmers to You has a \$40 weekly minimum. Scaling up can help make these services more accessible to more people, Kay says: "To become truly affordable on both sides of things, it's how much volume can you offer people. When you build a strong and deep customer base, you're able to control operating costs better and order more from your vendors, which creates a more sustainable pricing system."

It is a good time for growth. During COVID's peak, when supply chains were threatened and people didn't want to go to the store, there was a surge of interest in food delivery; Family Dinner had a 900-person waitlist. Now we are in another uncertain time, with ICE raids that threaten the immigrants who make the food system run, tariffs potentially raising food prices, government cuts that could affect food safety, and a developing dietary agenda for the country via the Make America Healthy Again movement.

Consumer behavior has shifted, too. Red Fire Farm once had waitlists for its CSA, launched in 2001. "CSA was really a hot, relatively new concept that was just catching on and there was a tremendous amount of demand that allowed our farm to grow quite a bit," says co-owner Ryan Voiland. "That lasted during the 2000s, and then I'd say by around 2012 or so things started to get weaker with the market. Especially the last 10 years or so it has gotten harder to find sales."

Changing times call for changing models. As Baumgartner says in a 2019 TED Talk: "What we're hoping to do and what we're hoping to build is just a better way to CSA."

For more information, go to www.familydinner.com.

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