

Walnut-Crusted Tomato Tart

May I just say how delighted I am to have mastered a gluten-free, vegan tomato tart this summer? Picture-perfect, savory and seasonal tarts are a mainstay in French cuisine, and they typically involve large quantities of butter, cream, eggs and wheat flour. Thanks to Niki of Rebel Recipes, I have been inspired and succeeded in mastering a tart I could eat. And it was delicious. So many possible variations to try next! That includes zucchini, aubergine, spinach and artichokes, to name just a few.

Ingredients

Tart crust:

- 2 tbsp ground flaxseed
- 4 tbsp water
- 1/2 cups ground walnut meal
- 1 1/2 cups flour (I used a blend of oat and buckwheat)
- 3/4 tsp sea salt
- 1 1/2 tbsp coconut or olive oil
- 3 tbsp plant-based milk

Filling:

- 1 cup soaked cashews (soak for 1 hour in hot water)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water
- 3 tbsp nutritional yeast
- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- 1 tbsp Herbes de Provence
- 1 tbs. Dijon mustard
- 4 small cherry tomatoes, or 1 medium tomato halved and seeded, set to drain on paper towels
- 1/2 can organic chickpeas drained
- 1 tsp sea salt

Toppings:

- Small colorful heirloom tomatoes, cut in half seeded, set to drain on paper towels
- Drizzle olive oil
- Sprinkle sea salt
- Herbes de Provence

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
2. Make a flax egg by mixing the ground flax and water in a bowl. Set aside to thicken.
3. Pour walnut meal into bowl. Add flax egg, oil and almond milk. Mix well, using hands to combine ingredients and form a ball.
4. Grease a round, loose bottom pie pan with oil.
5. Using your fingers, press crust dough into the bottom and up the side of the pan. Poke a few holes with a fork across the bottom.
6. Bake for 10 minutes. Remove and set aside to cool while preparing the filling.
7. Place all ingredients for the filling in a high speed blender or food processor. Blend until smooth.
8. Spoon filling mix into crust. Level out with a spoon and place tomatoes, pressing in slightly.
9. Drizzle with a little olive oil, herbs and sprinkle of sea salt
10. Return to the oven and bake for 25-30 minutes (until the base is crispy and the tomatoes are cooked and caramelized).
11. Allow to cool before removing the pan.
12. Tart is best served at room temperature and keeps well for up to 24 hours.

Enjoy!

Life as an Experiment

"Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do."

– Mark Twain

This has served as my motto for at least the last two decades. It continues to serve me in the face of my own fears, lines from old stories, questioning from my family and even surprising bouts of homesickness. It continues to guide me because I am committed to living my life without regrets. If life is one big experiment (and I am certain it is), I have surely entered a new phase. Boundaries that I perceived to be real are continually revealed to be illusions. Visiting Kyiv last month was all about dissolving geographical boundaries. But there are so many other boundaries in our lives. Some of these boundaries protect us, and some, in the end, limit us from living life to its fullest. We can gain further inspiration from Twain in the way he continued after the lines above: *"Throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."* I am.

While I may not have caught the full potential of those trade winds this past week, I did my best to explore, dream and discover all the riches here in Ariege. After six weeks of solo travel, my husband, Joachim, caught up with me in Toulouse. I was thrilled to see him for countless reasons, and at the top of the list was my excitement to share Foix. In summers past, we have based ourselves in villages outside of Lavelanet and quickly discovered the vast differences in climate and topography over a 30 minutes drive to the other side of a mountain. Foix was the home base I chose for myself last winter to finish my third book, and I quickly fell in love with the mountain views, the warmth of the people and the

charm of this small city. Now we had a week off to set sail together.

Although I had known Day 15 of Tour de France would end at Prat d'Albis, just above Foix, I had not given it much thought. That is, until I realized it would literally pass along the street above our house. For any TdF fans, may I just share that we had a front-row seat for the approach to the final ascent of the day? And it was so simple to stroll up the hill, finding a seat along the stone wall to cheer the racers on with our neighbors. We were advised to arrive an hour before the riders were due, for the pre-race entertainment. Our timing was perfect. Just as we settled in, the caravan of wacky sponsor vehicles arrived, tossing out swag to bystanders. It was quite the thrill to see the riders arrive over the hill, with Simon Yates (winner of the day) already far ahead of the pack.

I wasn't too sure how we would improve on that impromptu viewing of TdF, but each day we've had a healthy dose of the natural beauty of our location. Never traveling further than 30 minutes by car, we still only put a dent into our list of options. There is just so much to see and do in this part of Ariège. If we did nothing but follow the local markets, picnic and swim in the village streams, it would have been fulfilling enough, but there really was so much more.

Within this region, there are three magnificent prehistoric caves. We chose to visit the Niaux Cave, just a 20-minute drive from Foix, passing Tarascon-sur-Ariège. For years as a high school history teacher, these caves have been on my bucket list, but getting to the Pyrenees always seemed a bit out of reach. Now with the opportunity here, I have to say there was just a bit of hesitation. There was no doubt I really really wanted to experience that art, and at the same time, I really really hate caves, especially long, dark slippery ones. I will say in truth the experience definitely did not disappoint, and at the same time, I was delighted to

see the light of day at the end of the tour. While I was prepared to be in awe, I really had no idea how powerful the experience would be. The number of paintings alone was surprising, but the attention to detail was astounding. Imagining life that long ago, and the scenes that took place as those paintings were created, is truly overwhelming.

The small town of Foix is a busy place year-round, with a cultural events calendar to challenge cities three times its size. There is literally something artsy happening every week, and lucky for us, our dates in town aligned with the Regional Folk Festival, the Jazz Festival, a weekend antique market and the African Dance Festival. Not usually a festival fan, here in Ariege I am quite comfortable sharing space with the few hundred rather than thousands who enthusiastically attend nearly everything offered.

JazzFoix was a real find, since Joachim is a jazz guitarist and performed for years with a band in Stuttgart before our move to Texas. He was delighted, and more than a little surprised that I had bought three-day passes for the two of us, with a commitment to attend the 9:30 p.m. concerts. Afternoon naps allowed me to power past my bedtime three nights in a row, much to my own surprise! It certainly helped that the event was literally two blocks from our house. On the first night, we realized that in our twenty years together, we had never attended a single concert as a couple. To be sure, there was a bit of a learning curve, as Joachim is a front row, center seat kind of guy, opting for the full experience, whereas that was my worse nightmare. I prefer something midway back on the aisle, allowing for some perspective to take it all in. It was good that we had three nights to find our way to a good compromise. We enjoyed ourselves so much, we already have the dates on our calendar for next summer.

Scorching temps across France last week led me to make a pact to swim or wade into every stream or river encountered. It was a fabulous idea, and let me just say, I swam in water so cold

it hurt even after I was out! Not so many years ago, I would have laughed if anyone had suggested I swim in anything less than 80 degrees. And to think of all I would have missed!

I love local art events and have attended some very special ones over the years, but last week I attended the most enchanting one ever. It was Vagabond Arts, hosted annually in the tiny hamlet of Baulou. Cars are left out on the main road, and the experience begins as you enter the forest paths. Every building in the hamlet, from the church to the barns, is put to use to display work from area artists. Each display was an installation in itself under the canopy of moss-covered beech trees. The effect was mesmerizing, and I left completely rejuvenated, as if I had been to a spa.

Wasn't it perfect that the weather cooperated with my plan to wrap up our week with a short train journey to the thermal baths at Aix-les-Thermes? We went from highs of 98 degrees to rainy skies and 70 degrees, and rain overnight on perfect cue. A 40-minute train ride to the ski resort village of Aix is a treat in itself, but then two hours in the thermal baths with spectacular mountain views puts it over the top. Talking the train is a must, because the last thing you want to do when your bones are like jelly is to mess with driving home. If you needed another reason to visit Ariège, this should do it.

We have fallen more in love with Ariège on each visit, and we certainly dream of creating a second home in the area. However, with all of the unexpected events and changes in the last year, I have become immensely aware that how I will work in Europe is still unfolding. It would be lovely to make a second home base in Foix, but I think for the meantime, I'll need to take life in six-month chunks and see how this continues to play out. With that in mind, I do have a return ticket to Europe for February 2020. That ticket gets me to this continent. The where and for how long will need to make themselves known in the next chapter, setting sail beyond the safe harbor of home.

Invitations

“Destiny’s interventions can sometimes be read as an invitation for us to address and even surmount our biggest fears.”

– Elizabeth Gilbert

Sometimes, invitations can challenge our fears. Right now, I have received an invitation that has been developing over nine months in bits and pieces. For some time, I did my best to politely attend to the gentle requests as they arrived but refused to see the big picture they were forming. Instead, I choose to direct my focus to what appeared to be more important tasks. This summer, however, the gentle nudging is over and there is a tangible pull in a direction quite unexpected and to be honest, a little bit scary.

Have you ever received an invitation that you tried to ignore? I am sure you have. Like most things in life, invitations arrive with a variety of qualities. Some are tangible, printed on embellished papers, and some are spoken. Some demand attention, while others are subtle, arriving as hints, glimpses and whispers in your dreams. Invitations may arrive for a joyous celebration or to begin a friendship. Perhaps you have received an invitation to forgive someone from your past, or to take on a new responsibility at work.

It takes a lifetime to learn to receive each invitation with gratitude, then discern the right response. There was a time I thought every invitation was a gift from the universe and I was compelled to accept. I’m thankful to be beyond that stage. Now I know invitations arrive to help us clarify who we are, how we will spend our finite energy and what purpose in life

will we fulfill. And in that, sometimes our answer is a resounding “yes” and other times a “no, thank you”.

Back to my series of invitations. What is it that I find a bit frightening? I am six months out from my 60th birthday and have lovingly created the home I longed for in the sweet, slow pace of San Marcos, Texas. I can not begin to express how much I love this home, and even more, the fact that all of my children are nearby. I treasure our monthly family meals together and opportunities to meet my girls for lunch or pedicures on the days I ride to Austin with Joachim. What a gift. I recognize it because of the years we were a continent apart – or times when we were near but I was not emotionally present to reap the benefits of my dear family.

Why now, when I have created such a cozy nest for myself, am I being called in a powerful way to work in another continent? And not just the west of Europe, which is a second home to me, but now Eastern Europe too? I had accepted over the past years a life between Texas and Western Europe. Yet now, here comes this invitation stretching well beyond my comfort level, appearing of its own accord. It's no longer willing to wait quietly in line – it wants my attention here and now.

I have come to know that all invitations are an offering. How they are answered is for me to discern. And thankfully, I have learned over the last decade to open the door to each request and let it sit a bit. Leaning in to see what it will serve, and whether this is a wise investment of my energy. It's quite a bit like checking the weather. That is, checking by stepping outside rather than checking your phone app. How does it feel? Will I need a jacket to be more comfortable? Or is it too hot or too cold, and I should just stay home?

And then there is the issue of travel. Although traveling is exciting, it can also be draining. If I must travel to share this message, there is clearly a limit, as I am not getting younger. Every time I share a plane with a struggling senior,

I whisper a silent prayer that by the time I reach that age, those who need what I have to share will come to me!

You know, there is a famous homeopath, George Vithoulkas, who over time created a thriving school on his home island in Greece. Now that's a model I could aspire to. But then, where would that be? In the French Pyrenees? In A village in Baden-Württemberg, Germany? Along the banks of the San Marcos River in Texas? Or perhaps the Carpathians?

Today, it seems too soon to tell. I sense more traveling is required before the answer arrives. This time feels like one of those days when you step outside and the air and sky are far too changeable to predict. While I love the potential of days like that, I am not so sure that I love the situation I am in.

Having just traipsed across Eastern Europe, it is clear the message I delivered is being well received. I am sharing a natural path for restoring immunity and reclaiming power over your own health. People here are not only ready to listen – they are ready to take action. What I am sharing doesn't feel new. It is reminding them of how healing used to be perceived. So the importance of this journey is clear. What is not clear is how I can address my need for home – and more importantly, can I have my cozy nest AND travel farther than I may feel comfortable? My search for a home, a refuge and a place to retreat began early in my life, and the fear of getting too far from mine is hard to ignore.

So, what's a girl to do? Well, I'll tell you what I am going to do next. I am going to take a week off from teaching, clients and overthinking. I am going to enjoy time with my husband, who has just arrived, with the gorgeous backdrop of the Midi-Pyrenees. Today the Tour de France literally whizzes by our back yard, and next week the local jazz festival sets up one street over. I certainly plan to work in some hikes in the forest, a few swims in the river and cooking delicious

meals together with local produce from the markets. As always, I'll shift gears as answers begin to appear, and perhaps a path will form that allows me to share what I know, wherever that leads me, while maintaining a deep connection with my family and home. It doesn't have to be an either-or – but I may need some occasional reminding.

Sweet Potatoes with Creamy Tahini Sauce

The pairing of creamy, steamed sweet potato with tangy, tahini topping is a match made in heaven. The simplicity begins with a short, accessible list of ingredients – and there is virtually no clean-up! Serve with a mixed green salad and you've got a weeknight winner.

Ingredients

- 3 lb sweet potatoes, any color (6 small or 3 large), scrubbed
- 6 Tbsp coconut butter or your preferred vegan butter, room temperature
- Juice from 2 limes
- 2 Tbsp tahini
- 1 Tbsp coconut aminos or tamari
- 2 tsp toasted sesame oil
- Kosher salt, freshly ground pepper
- Flaky sea salt
- Toasted sesame seeds and lime wedges (for serving)

Directions

1. Bring a few inches of water to a boil in a medium pot fitted with a steamer basket. Halve sweet potatoes crosswise if large and place in steamer. Cover, reduce heat to medium and steam until fork-tender, 25–30 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, smash together butter, lime juice, tahini, soy sauce and sesame oil in a small bowl with a fork until smooth, about 3 minutes. Season tahini butter with kosher salt and lots of pepper.
3. Arrange sweet potatoes on a platter or a large plate. Let cool until you can just handle them, then split open and generously spread tahini butter over. Season with sea salt; top liberally with sesame seeds. Serve with lime wedges to brighten the flavors

Enjoy!

Adapted from Bon Appetit's Sweet Potatoes with Tahini Butter

La maison d'Hortense

She was 97 and still tended her rose garden ☐— her namesake Hortensia bushes, the berry brambles and fruit trees that filled the steeply terraced lot behind the house. Getting up and down those stone steps certainly took effort these days ☐— but oh, that view was remarkable. Hortense loved this home as much as she loved her independence. She worked to quiet the ongoing concerns of her family members over her living alone. What could possibly happen at this point? While she woke grateful for another day each morning, she knew her time here on earth was growing short. How the end would come did not concern her in the least. She was fearless ☐— because

wise Hortense had allowed life to fuel her courage rather than spark anxieties.

Hortense insisted on caring for herself and living out her days in her childhood home, where she with her husband, Gaston, happily reared their daughter. The father of Hortense built the three-story home in the early 1930s. He situated it just above the historic center of Foix to take advantage of the sun through the cold winters and offer magnificent views of the mountains. He filled the terraced hillside with fruit and nut trees and arranged a square plot for a kitchen garden just outside the front door. The house served as the family's refuge for nearly a century. Eventually, Hortense's five grandchildren filled the rooms with sweet memories over the days spent here during their school holidays. She could still hear their joyful voices, chasing one another up and down the spiral staircase, making a day of exploring the treasures in the attic and picking their heart's content of whatever fruit was ripe. Of course, they were all grown now, with families of their own. And that is exactly how it should be, she thought. They are now making treasured memories in their own homes.

After giving her roses a quick trim, Hortense made her way to the kitchen to prepare herself a cup of tea. Carefully carrying it around the corner into the sitting room, she felt an unusual heaviness come upon her. Perhaps the climb up the garden steps was too much for her today. She found a safe spot for her tea on the side table and eased herself onto the sofa. I'll just close my eyes here for a moment, she thought. And that is how Hortense left this world. Peacefully, with a smile on her face, having spent the morning tending to the home she so loved.

My scheduled seminars and succession of flights across Europe have come to an end and finally, the time came to travel from Kyiv to Foix. The first leg of the journey, from Kyiv to

Frankfurt, was smooth — and there the delays began. From the very un-German-like chaos at passport control to the grounding of all flights into France, I saw my blissful return to Foix slipping away. And was the car rental process in Toulouse always so excruciatingly slow, or was my impatience getting the best of me? Hunger, exhaustion, 90-degree heat (even at 8 p.m.) and malfunctioning car air conditioning provided a meltdown recipe for sure. But the calm company of my travel buddy and navigator, Lena, helped me stay in check.

The welcome committee to Foix, Cathy and her charming partner Paul, had prepared a lovely evening meal of fresh vegetables and were full of suggestions for my weeks ahead. By the time we moved to the terrace to enjoy the beautiful night sky, it was nearing midnight and I could feel myself nodding off. Seeing my pitiful condition, Cathy ushered me off to my home for the next month, suggesting kindly that we talk more in the morning.

Under different circumstances, I would have jumped at the chance to explore this charming house, but my heavy lids and lack of focus left me no choice. I wanted nothing more than a quick shower and to find my way into bed. Asleep instantly, I slept with the deep peace and satisfaction of having reached my final destination after the trek across Europe.

I woke to birdsong and the golden light of sunrise peeking over the mountains. The cool air morning air that drifted across my room was a welcome change after weeks in big cities. It was then that I became conscious of a comfort and peace that penetrated the very core of my being. This was a feeling that I associated with a place and time in my life, but where? I didn't dare stir in bed, afraid any movement would disrupt this perfect, dreamlike state. But was I dreaming, or was I awake? The sensation of familiarity was so profound it could not be ignored. I've been here before, I thought, not here physically but here in this feeling that warmed my heart and filled me with joy. This room, this house, had awakened

memories so long tucked away ☐— and they were of my grandmother. While my eyes may have delivered a different message, my heart conveyed that I was in my grandmother's house. Now before you (or my children, if they are reading this) begin to fret that I have become delusional, I do know I wasn't in my grandmother's house. And yet, in that moment I went back to 1970, in the tiny bedroom just a few steps from hers, in her Bay Area bungalow.

Growing up, my Grandma Tillie's house was my sanctuary from my childhood home, filled with chaos and trauma. I feel quite fortunate to have found a place of refuge for those first 11 years of my life. It was the only place I knew where I could count on waking up to safety and peace ☐— and be fed meals prepared with love. Her presence was a balm to my young heart and soul.

Unfortunately, when I could have used her most as I approached adolescence, my grandmother passed suddenly. We were all there, picking her up for dinner out at her favorite Chinese restaurant. One moment she was full of life, joking with my father ☐— and then she just sat down and was gone. In that split second, I lost my beloved grandmother ☐— and maybe more important, my island of safety.

This past December, on another trip to Foix, I shared lunch with my new friend, Cathy. She had invited me to celebrate the completion of my book and to bid me farewell. We sat on her terrace soaking in the winter sun, enjoying the spectacular view of the mountains and the delicious meal she had prepared. I marveled at the serenity of her setting, given it was a just a five-minute walk from the downtown market and shops. Teasing Cathy, I tasked her with finding me a house on her street for the upcoming summer. I don't know which one of us was more surprised when she actually did, and it was right next door to hers!

As my summer plans solidified, Cathy contacted the owner of

the house next door ☐– Hortense’s daughter. She was delighted to have an opportunity to share her mother’s house and worked out a simple agreement with Cathy. As it turned out, aside from some cleaning and gardening, the house had been virtually untouched for three years. And if truth be told, it felt like it hadn’t been touched since the 60s!

So this is how I came to stay in what is truly still Hortense’s home. Her lively energy and determination are still very present ☐– as well as her flair for decorating, which includes the frequent use of crocheted doilies. ☐ My first week has been an interesting opportunity for self-discovery, as there are certainly times in my life when this setting would have felt just a bit creepy. But it actually could not be further from the truth. Here and now, this house is a welcome respite from my teaching and travels, from finally finishing that third book, from a year of moving houses and all that this year of motherhood has delivered. I am grateful to Hortense for creating such a welcome space, and I could not feel more at home. And who knew it would be in the French mid-Pyrenees where I would connect with my long-deceased California grandmother?

Stay tuned, because this story has just begun! I’ve had quite the week of setting up house and shifting into the slower pace and simple pleasures of village life. If you’d like to tag along on this journey, you can keep up with my daily adventures on Instagram!

Kyiv

Let me be honest here. On the bucket list of places I’d like to visit in my lifetime, Ukraine was never near the top. Actually, it wasn’t even in the top 100. Absolutely no offense

intended, but there was never a real curiosity, and after the unrest in 2015 any chances it had were pretty much extinguished. Now that I am here in the city, I've spent considerable time wondering why this was true. Why have I felt an undercurrent of unease since heading farther east?

I discovered the answer easily when I considered some old stories. I'm a child of the Cold War era and a product of Catholic Schools. I am certain there was not a day of my childhood that we didn't pray for those forced to live behind the 'Iron Curtain." According to Sister Mary Julius, bless her soul, I should never take for granted my freedom to pray and go to church, because there were frightening parts of the world where that was not allowed. And, she continued, children who did go to church would just disappear. For six-year-old Lauren, who already had her own suitcase full of fears, this was really too much to handle. I am pretty sure, along with a host of other vows, I took one then to never to travel beyond that "curtain," whatever that meant!

So here I am, 59 years old and seriously trying to reconcile the beautiful, bustling city of Kyiv and its friendly residents with the ridiculously scary stories from my childhood. Along with that comes a practical question: Why Kyiv, and why now?

Remaining open to invitations that speak to my heart is a skill I've learned over time. It is a middle path that presents itself when you grow beyond the story of your experiences and connect with your true identity or soul. There you can develop the skill of discernment. This is the skill that protects you from impulsively jumping at every offer, as well as its polar opposite: living on the sidelines of life as a doubting skeptic. Both extremes result in their own kind of regrets.

If either of these paths sound familiar to you, know that the balance between them is an art. And it is exactly where you

can live out your fullest life. This middle path requires giving yourself permission to *fail* (*although there are no real failures*) and then evolve, embracing the lessons from each experience. Accepting your failures requires self-compassion and an open heart, one that opens wider with time. This opening is growth and will deepen your trust in your innate wisdom.

So, how does this all relate to Kyiv and the fact I am here? The story actually began last September, when Lena appeared online in my Foundations of Gemmotherapy course. My curiosity getting the best of me, I wrote her to ask how someone in Kyiv found my practice. You can read about her answer here. From the start, her determination and grasp of the topics matched her enthusiasm. I recognized Lena's passion as it was similar to what I felt seven years ago. If my travel could support a movement in Kyiv, with Lena at the lead, then it would be well served.

I can now say our mission was successful. Lena has rallied some powerful individuals who I know will each do their part to establish Gemmotherapy in Kyiv and Ukraine. I feel honored to play my part in what will unfold.

My days in Kyiv have been primarily about teaching. Each morning, we packed our bags, picking up fresh juice on the way to a homeopathic clinic in the city center. There, we met the most remarkably enthusiastic group of students, which included medical doctors, a dentist, osteopath and interested mothers. And when on July 4 this sweet group threw an impromptu celebration for me, my heart was won. They said, "We will take every opportunity to celebrate independence, yours or ours." These are words I will remember each Fourth of July to come.

Each day, we returned home spent from working in two languages, and after some tea and quiet, we would walk. Lena graciously shared her majestic home city with me. I have especially enjoyed my time with Lena's beautiful family in

their flat. On the fourth floor of their historic brick building, we were at eye level with the gorgeous, starred domes of St. Volodymyr's Orthodox Cathedral. If I ever forget I am in Kyiv, those domes quickly help me place myself. In fact, I had a magical view of the center golden dome, glistening against the night sky, as I fell asleep each night.

If I consider which European city Kyiv reminds me of, the closest would be Frankfurt. It is also a busy commercial and administrative center with tree-lined boulevards, but that is where the similarity stops. In central Kyiv, there are over 30 unique styles of buildings alone, from art nouveau and Ukrainian baroque to Soviet modernism. Experiencing so many different eras of history within a single block can be a bit mind-blowing. Known for its beautiful domed churches, Kyiv is home to over 950, many of those dating back to the 11th century. St. Sophia's, the UNESCO treasure, is just one example and a short walk from Lena's flat. There you can't help but connect to Kyiv's rich historical past. Commissioned by Vladimir the Great, St. Sophia's foundation was laid in 1011. Thankfully, historians rallied to save it during the Russian Revolution of 1917.

And because no travel story would be complete without a bit about the food, let me just say I've been in veggie paradise, much to my great surprise. Even though my arrival in Kyiv pushed midnight, I was still greeted with a bowl of soup. Soup, I've been told, is the national dish of Ukraine. And what better soup to mark my first day than Borscht. Here you can find Lena's vegan recipe. Since then I've had an opportunity to experience outstanding meals in restaurants featuring Israeli, Georgian and Odessa cuisine. Nothing makes me happier than an array of vegetable sides, uniquely seasoned and simply prepared from local produce.

I think I was most surprised by the offerings at the Georgian restaurant. Given the scant knowledge I had of Georgia, I am

now intrigued. Sondro, Lena's husband, is Georgian and he has proudly shared photos and stories that certainly have me considering a visit. This week I share one of my favorite dishes.

So, Kyiv? It certainly isn't the scary place 6-year-old Lauren pictured. It is cosmopolitan yet traditional, modern yet historical, bustling yet peaceful. And remaining open to this opportunity has left me with not a single regret, but rather a heart full of joy.

Georgian Spinach Pkhali

It was news to me that Georgian food is quite popular in Ukraine. I certainly didn't want to miss an opportunity to try it. Sondro, the husband of my host Lena, is Georgian. So when she guided me to their neighborhood restaurant, I knew it would be good. Now to be clear, many of the most famous Georgian specialties involve bread, cheese and meat, but there is a surprising number of traditional foods that happen to be vegan. Lucky me! Actually, because over 40 percent of the land in Georgia is dedicated to agriculture, produce such as tomatoes, eggplants, walnuts, spinach and nuts are abundant and frequently featured in traditional foods. For seasoning, aromatic herbs such as tarragon, parsley, cilantro and fenugreek bring the dishes to life and give the distinct Georgian flavor.

As a spinach fan, I was totally intrigued by this spinach and walnut appetizer, which can also be prepared with carrots or beets. It will no doubt become a favorite once I am back in my Texas kitchen. And I will have some wonderful memories of eating it first in a sidewalk cafe in Kyiv.

Ingredients

- 1.5 lb fresh spinach
- 8 oz walnuts
- 1 bunch cilantro, leaves removed and finely chopped (reserving some for serving)
- Up to 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 green onion, minced
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 4 tablespoons walnut oil
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander (or whole seeds toasted and ground with the walnuts)
- 1 teaspoon ground fenugreek
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Pomegranate seeds

Directions

1. In a pot of gently boiling salted water, blanch spinach to soften. Remove with a slotted spoon or tongs and immerse in ice water immediately. This step stops the cooking and maintains the bright green color.
2. Drain spinach well, squeezing out all excess water with your hands. Chop.
3. Grind walnuts to a coarse powder.
4. Combine nuts, spinach and remaining ingredients in a large bowl, mixing well with your hands.
5. Season mixture with salt and pepper to taste.
6. Refrigerate overnight or for six hours to combine flavors.
7. Shape into balls, topping each with a few pomegranate seeds and a sprinkling of cilantro leaves.

Enjoy! And keep an eye out for more Georgian recipes as I continue to explore this cuisine.