

# Recipe for Progress

*Alma's passion project grows for future generations*

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Alma's story began three years ago at the corner of Olympic and Broadway. In June 2012, Chef Ari Taymor was cooking at a Venice, California, pop-up when his real estate agent called with the news that a former kebab shop in downtown Los Angeles was available for lease.

The decision needed to be made within forty eight hours, but the timing was serendipitous. Chef Taymor was close to signing a contract with another restaurant when the opportunity arose, and within two weeks, he and co-owner Ashleigh Parsons opened Alma.

To offset mounting equipment costs for plates, pots, and a refrigerator, a successful Kickstarter campaign followed. This was how my relationship with Alma started. My husband and I contributed on a whim, and after summer had turned to fall we pushed open Alma's rustic wooden door to sample the five-course tasting menu included in our reward.

We sat at the bar all evening, watching Chef Taymor cook with a palpable calmness while Ashleigh stood at the end of the counter expediting plates, filling water glasses, and checking on guests when she had a spare moment.

Glossy white tables lined the dining room, and candlelight flickered against heavy earthenware bowls. It was the kind of place we could see ourselves frequenting, except that we lived eight miles away, a legitimate obstacle in

sprawling Los Angeles. Over a glass of wine we contemplated moving if for no other reason than to claim Alma as our own neighborhood restaurant.

We savored dishes like chilled artichoke soup with burnt avocado, and tender seaweed and tofu beignets with yuzu kosho and lime. Alma's plating is artistic, but its food is far from avant-garde. Instead, Alma's techniques rely heavily on traditional methods like fermentation, roasting on the bone, and utilizing easily digestible, market-fresh ingredients. It's a vision Chef Taymor describes as "Southern California terroir," celebrating the weather and culture of the region, with a menu that changes with the subtlety of the seasons.

Ingredients are sourced from Alma's experimental Venice garden, and Chef Taymor shops at the Santa Monica Farmers Market twice a week, building relationships with local farmers and browsing the stalls for fresh produce and ideas for new dishes. Before a recipe reaches the menu, Chef Taymor ruminates for weeks.

"Usually I will spend two weeks just thinking about it. I'll start with something and write it down. It might be three components, one, or just a technique. I'll keep turning it and turning it, then set it aside and pick it back up. When we start testing, the process of preparing the dish will change it again, facing the realities of what it's like to cook it."

Our first meal at Alma ended with a clever dessert composed of crisp amaranth, coffee grounds, and an unctuous egg yolk. The food, while creative and utterly thoughtful, didn't seem to ask for applause. It was simply an offering, each plate a meditation on seasonal ingredients, inviting us to savor each bite and soften into a moment of contentment before the next course arrived.

At the end of the evening, we felt exactly as Chef Taymor hoped we would.

"Physically, I want people to feel satiated, but not heavy or full, and to feel nourished and taken care of. We try to build a balanced meal in addition to something that's intellectually stimulating."

Since its opening, Alma has worked to refine its menu, allowing the food to serve as a medium igniting broader conversations. No matter the creative pursuit—whether music, writing, painting, or cooking—the craft itself is merely a vehicle serving to generate an emotional response, an idea, or, in ambitious cases like Alma, progress both in and out of the restaurant.

In this vein, to enjoy a meal at Alma is to participate in a new movement unfolding in Los Angeles, where a burgeoning neighborhood restaurant with two visionary owners seeks to answer a meaningful philosophical question: If ingredients are perishable and meals are fleeting, what remains?



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“Who wants to learn how to use a mandoline?” Three students cluster around Courtney Guerra, Alma’s farmer and forager, to watch her hold a radish on the bias and demonstrate how to protect her fingers from the sharp blade.

It’s a warm spring day, and behind blue gates at the all-girls New Village Charter School near Los Angeles’s Filipinotown, a cooking lesson is underway. It’s part of Alma Community Outreach (ACO), the nonprofit Ashleigh spearheaded shortly after opening Alma. Ashleigh flicks a mustard green leaf in her mouth and smiles, offering a piece to the girl standing next to her. “Have you had sushi? It tastes like the spicy wasabi you add to soy sauce.”

While working at restaurants and after-school programs in San Francisco following the completion of her masters in education, Ashleigh became interested in bridging the gap between ingredient sourcing at local restaurants and the proliferation of nearby food deserts. Bored of research but engaged by hands-on learning projects, Ashleigh accepted Chef Taymor’s offer to help run his new Los Angeles restaurant on the condition that outreach would become an integral part of Alma’s vision.

“It’s very much a needs-based community program,” Ashleigh explains. “It’s customized to each school. When we sit with principals and they ask ‘What do you guys do?’ we say, ‘No, what do you need?’ Teachers have so much on their plate, and we want to lift the burden by offering access to florists, professional chefs, and photographers. It’s really about connecting the resources we already have to the schools and to the larger community.”

The New Village curriculum evolved organically after members of Alma’s team were invited to be guest judges during a wellness initiative the previous year. Following a hike in Griffith Park, groups of girls were given twenty dollars to buy ingredients at the farmers market, and one hour to cook a memorable dish after returning to campus. Alma’s team was

so taken by the experience they decided to pilot weekly improvisational cooking lessons.

Principal Andrea Purcell takes pride in how individualized the program is. “Some students just need a point to be engaged. Others need a healthy meal. Others are interested in cooking and might have a future in the culinary world. We are always looking for ways to build a nurturing community at our school, and the folks at Alma fit in perfectly with that.”

For students like Aylin, a senior, the program has offered lessons in both cooking and confidence.

“I knew nothing about cooking,” she says. “The instructors often say ‘Go with what feels right!’ For a long time, Aylin says, she didn’t know what that meant, but week after week, she’s watched her skills grow.

Aylin offers a wide smile when I ask what her favorite aspect of the garden is. “Being part of the community. We gather vegetables together, play music, it’s a really tranquil environment.” As graduation nears, the tone of her voice is reflective, because in a matter of weeks her experience will become memory and she’ll enter the next phase of her life armed with the foundational techniques ACO aims to provide.

“We definitely take an approach to teach safety and basic knife skills,” Ashley notes, “but our real goal is to show students they can take limited ingredients and are empowered to prepare a meal, even if they don’t have a stove or an oven.”

Cooking lessons strike a balance between allowing students freedom to experiment with ingredients and providing gentle instruction as needed, like how to julienne basil leaves or the value in starting with less salt and adjusting as you go.

As another school year at New Village comes to a close, Chef Taymor and Ashleigh remain hopeful about the impact a program like ACO can make. Both come from academic-focused families, and when the two met at a San Francisco yoga studio in 2008, Chef Taymor considered

returning to school for a masters in public health, and Ashleigh was looking to make her research more relevant. Through the exploration of opening a restaurant together and establishing Alma Community Outreach, they developed an avenue to make a difference on their own terms.

ACO is already seeing results, especially as students begin to identify what they need in their lives.

“Often times students are being told they’re insignificant,” Chef Taymor says. “We want them to know that if you’re not getting access to good food, you have the ability to demand access and make as much noise as it takes to get it.”

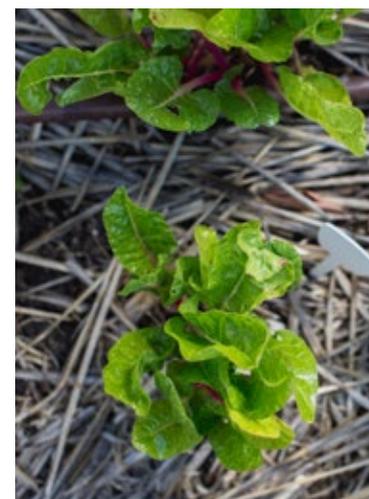
Inspired to take action and with the blessing of their principal, girls at New Village have started opposing their school lunches. When the catering company brings in unhealthy food, students know it’s their right to request fresh ingredients like those offered in today’s lesson.

Guided by cooking instructor Lani Trock, a professional photographer who also forages flowers for Alma, Lani works closely with Ashleigh and the school’s gardener to prepare menus and shop before each session. This afternoon she’s preparing a fresh salad composed of furred pieces of chard, icicle radishes, cilantro flowers, and a pasta salad dressed in fresh pesto.

Extolling the power of color, Lani’s voice reaches above the courtyard’s soothing waterfall and gently encourages girls to make their plates beautiful when it comes time to assemble their meals. “Let your eyes and your nose guide you,” she offers.

Lani places delicate cilantro blossoms up to a girl’s nose, letting her inhale the subtle perfume, while Courtney passes out radishes straight from the garden before everyone huddles around a large cucumber, marveling at its size.

At a nearby table, curly chard leaves are pulled off their stems and added to a white plastic bowl, while students wash dirt from peppery mustard greens and a salad spinner drums a soft beat across the





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courtyard. Lani hops over the garden bed and finds bottles of vinegar and honey to quickly pickle the radishes, then props her blender onto a bench and pulses a bright pesto filled with soaked cashews, green onions, soy sauce, lemon, and basil.

An hour later, bowls of cooked pasta, platters of mandolined cucumbers, sliced radishes, chard, and mustard greens are clustered on the table, and Lani cuts up several lemon wedges then gives them a squeeze while Ashleigh follows with a drizzle of olive oil and a pinch of sea salt.

As a living project, this garden is the heart of New Village.

“Students will come through to pick kale and add it to a smoothie,” Principal Parsons shares. “They don’t need permission to participate. We’ll have a big tray of herbs after a harvest and girls will take some home. We can’t keep a ripe strawberry.”

This garden offers sustenance along with an opportunity to engage in the act of caretaking. “We have a very small school, and the garden is a peaceful gathering place,” Principal Parsons explains. “Not

every student is interested, but New Village is about providing opportunities and allowing girls to discover what they’re passionate about. That in and of itself is enough for me.”

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Driving back to the restaurant, I arrive with an appetite for conversation in addition to the multi-course meals I’ve grown accustomed to. While line cooks strain stock, chop vegetables, and fold linens for the evening’s service, Chef Taymor, Ashleigh, and I tuck into a cozy table and discuss the community they’ve built together.

They credit a strong foundation of supporters for helping Alma remain grounded while navigating the inevitable challenges that come with running a small business with limited resources.

As a young restaurant, Alma entered the spotlight early on. Shortly after being honored with Bon Appetit Magazine’s Best New Restaurant award in August 2013, reservations filled up six months in advance, but a glitch in OpenTable’s reservation system double booked tables,

resulting in hundreds of lost customers. Both admit it was a hard thing to recover from.

During this period, Chef Taymor learned to tune out the critics and find people around him who could give sound advice about what to change, where to improve, and where to focus. “The press was really overwhelming, and although wonderful for us, became a challenge to overcome.”

Ashleigh agrees. “We weren’t ready for it at all. We were blown away excited, but not really sure how to channel the press into something really systematic.”

Another restaurant might have buckled under the pressure, but Chef Taymor and Ashleigh turned inward, relying on friends and patrons who were genuinely supportive—from fields as varied as directing to furniture making—to offer insights on creative problem solving to help refine the restaurant, the food, and the service.

Lessons like how to sign a lease, navigate demands from the health department, and manage payroll were learned the hard way, so Alma is eager to share its



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knowledge with those who desire to think critically, incubate ideas, and utilize its kitchen and dining room to test potential business ventures.

If ingredients are perishable and meals are fleeting, people, ideas, and progress are all that remain long after each course has been served. Alma knows this to be true, and is evolving into something more than a restaurant. If it expands the way Chef Taymor hopes, Alma will become a leadership academy training the next generation of creatives and business owners.

“Whether it’s friends starting a small business and hosting a pop-up in Alma’s dining room, or building a garden in local schools through Alma Community Outreach,” Chef Taymor explains, “we want to help people realize their dreams.” This also includes members of Alma’s staff who are striving to become head chefs one day, or that have creative aspirations beyond the restaurant business.

Ashleigh notes this is an uncommon philosophy in the industry. Many restaurants hire line cooks who only aspire to be line cooks, nothing more, in

hopes to retain staff. This enlightened approach means Chef Taymor devotes a majority of his time thinking about what society needs to make a difference in the world.

“We want to uplift as many conscious people as we can so we have an army ready to enact change on a larger scale,” Chef Taymor says. “We’re interested in progression. Period.”

Alma was named after the childhood street Chef Taymor grew up on, but it also means “soul,” a fitting tribute not only to his roots, but to the type of restaurant culture Chef Taymor and Ashleigh are building in downtown Los Angeles.

Measured in equal parts hunger, focus, ambition, and generosity, Alma’s soul offers a recipe for progress available to anyone who shares their philosophy that an unrealized idea, like an untended garden, would wither without daily nurturing.

Although Alma has been celebrating Chef Taymor’s James Beard Rising Star Chef of the Year nomination in recent months, its focus remains on the future.



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“It’s nice to be rewarded by your peers, because we do try hard with the food,” Chef Taymor admits, “but at the end of the day, hopefully a group of people can have an impact. That’s all I really care about.”

Whether they’re labeled as chef, restaurant owner, executive director, visionary, artist, leader, or teacher, Chef Taymor and Ashleigh are the roots from which Alma’s reach continues to grow in the kitchen, in the garden, and in the community. Together they are proof of one thing: nothing good grows alone.

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- 1 Chef Ari Taymor and Ashleigh Parsons, co-owners of Alma
- 2 Raspberry, rose, white chocolate & macadamia nut
- 3 Alma is located on 952 South Broadway in downtown Los Angeles