THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST KITCHEN LOOKS LIKE

A CONVERSATION WITH NIKANDRE KOPCKE OF MAZÍ MAS

BY STEPHANIE PARKER

Nikandre Kopcke has just returned from a dinner party in London when I reach her on Skype. She's twenty-nine, and already a CEO. Half Greek, half German, her British lilt belies her New York City upbringing as she tells me about Mazí Mas, the organization she founded to help oft-ignored and unemployed migrant women use their culinary skills to create financial freedom.

Inspired by her Greek godmother, whose husband wouldn't allow her to follow her dreams and open a bakery, Kopcke founded Mazí Mas, which means "with us" in Greek. The organization trains migrant women for employment in the food industry. Kopcke founded the restaurant in 2012, after completing her Master's in Gender Studies at the London School of Economics.

The organization started small, hosting sporadic dinners around London. It now boasts a full-fledged pop-up restaurant at the Ovalhouse Theater that is currently wrapping up its third month of operation. Mazí Mas has been written about all over the Internet, from the *Huffington Post* to *Bloomberg* and *Buzzfeed*. There are even plans to expand Mazí Mas to other parts of the world beyond London.

Kopcke and I recently spoke about all-women kitchens, shitty curry recipes, and how she sees her role as a feminist.

STEPHANIE PARKER: When and how did you become interested in food and cooking?

NIKANDRE KOPCKE: I've always been around food, and as I grew up that really became an obsession. Cooking was just something that, throughout my academic career, I was doing on the side as a job to make money in the summer. And then when I finished my master's, it was something that I really wanted to move into full time. I grew up in a Greek culture where food is community, food is love, food is everything. That became a running thread in my life.

Did you attend culinary school or have any formal training?

No, it's all been on the job.

When and how did you identify food as a feminist issue? What about food and feminism comes together for you?

I think a lot of this traces back to my childhood. I grew up watching women in Greece cooking for their families and being completely unrecognized for that. And these women just had tremendous skills. And then it became something that I was absolutely obsessed with in my academic studies—care work, and feminist economics. And it became the torch that I was carrying. I was determined to do something about it.

"I think that as a white feminist, what I am best positioned to do is to use my privilege to give other people a platform."

How would you describe the current climate, from what you've seen, for women in the food industry?

I think it's still very tough, especially for the reasons of motherhood. Motherhood is still viewed as an obstacle and a liability. And I still think that in many kitchens, men are much more likely to get promoted because it's always like, "Ooh, when's she gonna pop one out?" I think it massively handicaps women and it pisses me off when I hear women chefs saying, "Oh no, it makes no difference," and it's like, I can tell you for sure that you're middle class or upper middle class and you're white, because you have to be in a privileged position in order to say that it doesn't handicap anyone. Women are certainly coming up [in the food industry] and I think it's exciting. But it's really, really hard to find women chefs. And I think that goes back to sexism and the patriarchal conditions of society. It's still not a woman-friendly profession unless you're willing to sacrifice having a family.

You've mentioned in other interviews that your Greek godmother compelled you to start Mazí Mas. How did her life and story inspire you?

So my godmother is just one of the most important people in the world to me. She had this unbelievable patriarchal husband... she had to have dinner ready for him at a certain time and he would sit at the dining room table and eat it and she would stand in a corner, lest anything was missing! Lest he desire anything further! And then we would eat by ourselves at a small table in the kitchen. She wanted to open a bakery with a friend of hers and everybody around her was hugely supportive and encouraging, except her husband. He said to her, "You're going to make a laughingstock of me. Women don't do that!" And that's what he was like. But the irony of course is that I wouldn't be here doing this if she had realized her dream. So part of this, I guess, is trying to do this for her, in a strange way.

So you were inspired by your godmother, but how did you come up with this specific idea for Mazí Mas?

This was not something that happened all at once. I think that it was brewing over a number of years. Because of my studies, because of my feminist activism, because I was thinking feminism and care work all the time, it first began as this seed of an idea that I wanted to create a space for women. And then it became about trying to assign a financial value to care work in a very practical way. What I was really interested in doing was subverting this paradigm of women, and in particular refugee and migrant women —being constantly wards of the state and charity cases— because I saw them as potential economic actors.

It came together finally in the year after I graduated because I was volunteering and interning for organizations that I had problems with. What they were doing was really great, but I saw in them a lot of room to improve and things that I would change. One example was, I was working at this really awesome charity that works on food poverty and food waste [issues]. It's basically the premise of a soup kitchen. People get together and reclaim surplus food from supermarkets and other shops and then come together and cook free meals for people who are in need. And what I saw there were young, twenty-something, middle-class white women telling brown women what to do, and worse still, printing off these shitty curry recipes off of BBC *Good Food* and handing them out to Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who had a lifetime of cooking experience. I was like, "What the fuck is going on here?" And that was the moment when I was like, "I can do this, but I can do it better." I was really interested in post-colonial theory, this sense that white women have been telling brown women what to do for too long, and that's not part of my feminism. I think that as a white feminist, what I am best positioned to do is to use my privilege to give other people a platform.

PAGE 24: CHEF AZEB WITH NIKANDRE KOPCKE, PHOTO CREDIT: CAROLIN GOETHEL. ABOVE: PHOTO CREDIT: MAZÍ MAS.

How has London's attitude towards immigration affected your approach to creating Mazi Mas?

Here in London, so many migrant, refugee women are by and large invisible. And the populations are so segregated. So that was something that was really important to me to change. I think that migrant women should have a place in all of this, especially in the food revolution that's currently sweeping the UK. And what British food looks like now is not what British food looked like even fifteen years ago.

When did you start Mazi Mas, and how did you initially fund it?

It clicked around the end of September 2012, and then we had our first event in November and our second event in December. In terms of funding, we haven't had funding until very recently and even then it's been very, very small amounts and by and large almost entirely project funding. But I guess it was good because it forced us into business development very early on. We just didn't have funding to rely on, so it was like, "Okay, how are we actually going to sustain this financially in a commercial way?" We're not financially sustainable yet, but we're on a really solid path. It started very small because I didn't know a fucking thing about business. I was like, "What? I started a business?" It literally started because it was the most obvious way to solve a problem. I saw something that I wanted to change and it was like, "Okay, how do I do this? Well, I'm going to set up a restaurant. Okay, I have no idea how to set up a restaurant. But I definitely can get thirty friends in a room and get them all to part with twenty-five pounds for an amazing dinner cooked by a woman."

How does compensation work?

My number one priority is that none of the chefs were going to volunteer because the whole thing is about giving them an independent income. I often work with women who are financially abused—that's very common—and there's domestic violence as well, and obviously they can't leave as

long as they don't have an independent income. We pay our people very well. Everyone is paid living wage or above. That's very important to me. From the beginning we were always breaking even, except for me. I wasn't paid for a long time. And the organization has been built by volunteers, which has been really amazing.

How have you found these women, the chefs? Or how have they found you?

Initially I had a lot of contacts because I had been volunteering in community cafes, I'd been volunteering for that charity that I told you about, and for an organization called the Hackney Migrant Center. And I mean, they're just everywhere! It's funny when people ask me that question, but it goes back to them being invisible. What we did very early on was, we just reached out to loads of women's organizations and community organizations in London, and organizations that supported migrants and refugees more broadly, and said, "Here we are, this is what we do, and please refer your clients." And now there's word of mouth from our current chefs to their friends, so it's sort of spiraled. I'd say we have a pretty good profile among organizations. We don't have to go and do the outreach anymore.

How have the lives of your chefs changed since becoming a part of Mazí Mas?

The main thing is that they've gotten work. They're all long-term unemployed. I would say that most of them have been unemployed for five or more years. And that just becomes a vicious cycle because a lack of a recent employment history is the number one deterrent for employers hiring new employees. Everybody has gotten further work, but most over the past two years have come back to us for a number of reasons. The environment in the kitchen here is amazing. You have this collaborative atmosphere, everybody's supporting each other. It's all women, and the chefs are always citing in feedback sessions that that makes it difficult to go on to kitchens where people are aggressive and rude and yelling, and where it's these horrible macho cultures. We've had chefs progress and leave and go on to full-time roles, and then quit because the pay is so bad. I think most of all, what changes—and the most important thing—is that self-confidence builds, and a sense of being valued and respected. It's good for people to have an income, but it's more important for them to have respect and dignity.

How does the restaurant work? Is it like, Monday is Ethiopian night, and Tuesday is Turkish night?

Yeah, exactly. We've got two women in the kitchen at any time and one is heading it up and the other supports her, and then that flips later on during the week. So tonight Azed, who's from Ethiopia, is in the kitchen with Roberta, and Roberta's from Brazil, but last night Roberta was kitchen managing with Zohreh from Iran. And that works really, really well because they love learning about each other's food.

How do you see the future of Mazí Mas?

Permanent restaurant within the next year. And doing much more work on the expansion and the replication in other parts of the world, which at the moment I don't have a lot of time to do. And then also developing a sort of structured business incubator, which will allow us to launch women into business, which we're kind of doing informally at the moment. But I want to do that in a very structured way because fundamentally that's why I set this up, to support women to set up their own food business because that's what they want to do.

What kind of expansion are you working on?

We have expanded into Australia. That happened about a year ago. I think Mazí Mas is relevant all over the world, so I'm helping a group of people in Berlin develop it there. I think over the course of the next year we will definitely have set up in Berlin, and probably in Leeds as well, in the north of England. But I'm not interested in doing this in a top-down way. It's very important that the local groups have autonomy. So there's a structure and they have to adhere to certain values, but fundamentally they are better able to assess the needs than I am.

So are these just people who heard about Mazí Mas and were like, "Hey, this sounds great and we want to do it"?

Yeah! I just got an email from a woman in Phoenix being like, "I love this! I work with refugee populations. Can we speak?" That reminds me, I need to email her back!

STEPHANIE PARKER IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND PHOTOGRAPHER FOCUSING ON THE INTERSECTION OF FOOD AND SOCIAL JUSTICE. SHE RECENTLY TRADED THE PEAKS OF MONTANA FOR THE HILLS OF NORTH CAROLINA, WHERE SHE'S LOOKING FORWARD TO EATING HER WEIGHT IN HUSHPUPPIES.

MARLITH'S CEVICHE

"Marlith's traditional Peruvian ceviche has become one of our favorite dishes at Mazí Mas. It is super simple to prepare, yet a real showstopper—and irresistibly delicious. We love the interplay of vivid colors, textures, and flavors in this dish. Summer on a plate!" -Nikandre Kopcke

INGREDIENTS

500 GRAMS SKINLESS AND BONELESS SEA BASS OR SEA BREAM

2 LARGE SWEET POTATOES

8-9 LIMES

1 BUNCH OF FRESH CILANTRO

2-3 CLOVES GARLIC

ONE FRESH RED CHILI AND ONE FRESH GREEN CHILI (MORE IF YOU LIKE HEAT)

2 RED ONIONS

SALT

VEGETABLE OIL

HALF A BAG OF *MAIZ CANCHA* (PERUVIAN CORN NUTS*)

HALF A BAG OF FROZEN *CHOCLO PERUANO* (PERUVIAN GIANT CORN*)

4 LARGE LETTUCE LEAVES

* CAN BE FOUND AT MOST LATIN AMERICAN SHOPS; THERE ARE SEVERAL IN AND AROUND ELEPHANT & CASTLE IN LONDON, INCLUDING ONE IN THE ELEPHANT & CASTLE SHOPPING CENTRE

INSTRUCTIONS

PREP YOUR FISH: Wash with cold water, pat dry, and cut in 2-cenimeter cubes. Set in a bowl in the fridge while you prep the rest of your ingredients.

Put the sweet potatoes into a pot and cover them with water, then put them on the stove to boil. You want to boil them in their skins until a fork easily pierces them, about twenty minutes to half an hour, depending on size. Once they are ready, run them under cold water until they are cool enough to handle. Peel them carefully—this cannot be done perfectly, so don't worry if bits come off with the skin—and slice them into 1 centimeter thick rounds. Set aside.

WHILE THE POTATOES ARE COOKING: Squeeze the limes into a large bowl. Pick the cilantro fronds off the stalks and reserve.

Finely mince the garlic. Slice the chilis and red onions crosswise into fine rounds (if you don't like heat, seed the chilis first). Add the garlic and chilis to the lime juice and season with salt. Put the onions in a separate small bowl of cold water to draw out any bitterness.

Using a deep fat fryer, or a small saucepan filled with vegetable oil to a depth of about 3 centimeters, fry the *maiz cancha* in batches until golden brown. Drain on a clean kitchen towel and sprinkle with salt.

Put the *choclo peruano* into a pot of water and bring them up to a boil. Cook for 5 minutes, then drain and set them aside.

Take the fish out of the fridge and add it to the bowl of lime juice, along with the sliced onions (drain them first). The length of time you marinate the fish in the lime juice depends on how "cooked" you like your ceviche. 20 minutes will cook the fish quite thoroughly; if you prefer it raw, let it sit no more than five minutes.

ASSEMBLE THE CEVICHE: Place a lettuce leaf on each plate and arrange two slices of sweet potato on the side. Add a spoonful each of *choclo peruano* and *maiz cancha*. Spoon the ceviche onto the middle of the leaf and top with a sprinkling of red onions and cilantro.

ENDNOTES | THE EVER-EVOLVING WORLD OF COFFEE CULTURE (CONTINUED)
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