

# CLOSE TO HOME

CHEF NATALIA PEREIRA OF WOODSPOON IN  
LOS ANGELES COOKS FROM THE HEART

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Cooking is one of the most intimate things you can do for another person, says Chef Natalia Pereira, as she moves about WoodSpoon, her 12-year-old Brazilian restaurant in downtown Los Angeles. “In my cooking, I share my memories, my palate, my feelings. I take people to different places and times in my life.” It’s these heart-filled, intangible ingredients that Natalia pours into her food. The result is home cooking at its finest, rustic but refined.

Born in Minas Gerais, an inland state in Southeastern Brazil, Natalia has fond memories of the sweet fragrance of flowers and the earthiness that rises after the rains, as well as the aroma of her mother’s cooking. “My mother had this beautiful view and respect for food,” Natalia says. “There was always a different perfume in the air, like anise, lemongrass, or cloves.” An orphan, Natalia was raised by her father’s wife, Francisca—so when Natalia talks about her mother, it’s Francisca that she speaks of. Francisca was the first to introduce Natalia to cooking. She gave Natalia, then about 8 years old, some bricks and coals for a makeshift stove, and a tin of sardines that was both ingredient and cookware.



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WHEN YOU  
COME TO MY  
RESTAURANT,  
YOU ARE  
COMING TO MY  
HOUSE AND I  
WILL COOK A  
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When she was 21, Natalia came to the U.S and her mother stayed behind in Brazil. Though she is multilingual in Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian, Natalia didn't speak any English when she arrived in the U.S. Food became her form of communication. In her first jobs, she served as a private cook for families. Impressed by her cooking, people would often urge her to open a restaurant one day. When prompted to pick a name for this fantasy restaurant, she didn't know the proper English words to explain it, so she pointed to a wood object and did a stirring motion with her fist—and thus, it was dubbed WoodSpoon.

For years, WoodSpoon remained a daydream. Then, one of the families she cooked for became her unexpected benefactor, giving her seed money in 2006 and pointing her to a commercial space in downtown Los Angeles. At the time, the location near the fashion district had no food scene to speak of. It would be years before that transformation happened. "There was literally nowhere to eat around here when she opened," recalls her good friend Carl Louisville, a fashion consultant and former owner of the shop Guerilla Atelier. At the time Carl lived just steps away at the Eastern Columbia Building and became one of Natalia's first customers. They consider each other family now.

Simple food, simple pleasures, and making the most from very little are core principles in both Natalia's food philosophy and styling choices for the restaurant. The tables are topped with vintage mismatched plates and glassware. Seventies-style dining chairs covered in shades of citrus and floral patterns line the tables, along with the occasional metal folding chair. The colorful assortment makes it feel like someone's childhood home. Likewise, Natalia's menu features flavors that reflect the rainbow of cultures found in Brazil—from African to Italian to Lebanese.

Her menu selection is also a tribute to her mother. She replicates Francisca's recipes for grits, collards, and polenta. "My mother liked to add fresh corn to her polenta to make it a little bit sweeter," she says fondly. In addition, Natalia offers five to six daily fish specials. Even this choice is reflective of a childhood activity when she used to fish at the local rivers in Minas Gerais and come home with her catch of the day.

Menu offerings like Chicken & Okra and Chicken Pot Pie are childhood favorites that her mother used to make. "I grew up with very little," Natalia says. "So we knew how to get the most out of things." Her mother's chicken pot pie was an example of that efficiency and economy. Francisca would make a chicken stew for a Sunday meal and the leftover chicken would be turned into a pie. This pie is now one of the most beloved dishes on WoodSpoon's menu.

In fact, Natalia's chicken pot pie reached peak fame in 2010—and Carl remembers it well. He and a group of friends were headed to the restaurant to eat when they noticed two long lines. "I came inside and the entire place was in a panic. Apparently, her chicken pot pie was featured on *The Best Thing I Ever Ate* the night before, but Natalia had no idea because she doesn't watch TV," Carl laughs. "Now people were coming in to try it. I turned to Natalia and said, 'Sweetie, we can't leave you, we have to stay!'" Carl and his friends became wait staff and bussers that night. They ran out of plates and pot pies before closing time.

Carl notes that so many places in this downtown Los Angeles neighborhood have come and gone, but Natalia's restaurant continues on. What is it about her restaurant that gives her staying power? The answer appears rooted in her spirit of warmth and generosity. "I cook for myself and I share," Natalia remarks. "When you come to my restaurant, you are coming to my house and I will cook a meal for you."

