

SARA & SARAH

THE DUO BEHIND
L.A.'S CELEBRATED FALAFEL
STAND MADCAPRA PLOT
THEIR NEXT MOVE

by Maisie Wilhelm
photos by Sierra Prescott

A few years ago, one of the hottest restaurants in New York was a spot in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, called Glasserie. Almost overnight, the restaurant and its young chef, Sara Kramer, captured the attention of critics and customers alike. Kramer's unfussy Middle-Eastern food, with buttery, flaky bread and rabbit for three, drew waves of the food-curious to the charming yet equally remote part of town.

Kramer, who was not the owner, realized that she needed a place to call her own. "I wanted all the things that Glasserie was for me, but more on my terms," she said during our teatime chat at another New York City "it" spot, Dimes. She ate the tahini-slathered toast drizzled with honey the same way she picked her words: delicately.

So in 2014, Kramer left—for California. She wanted a different kind of work partnership, so she and her Glasserie sous chef Sarah Hymanson headed west with a vague plan to start something new. The two had met years prior while cooking at Dan Barber's restaurants and had gotten to know each other's work styles. Both women are drawn to heavily vegetable-based cooking. Kramer's family background includes Israeli and Moroccan influences, while Hymanson grew up eating lots of Asian and vegetarian food. They also share a fierce work ethic, which made them believe they'd be good business partners.

Before cooking, these women each spent years pursuing other passions. Hymanson majored in East Asian Studies and Studio Art at Oberlin College in Ohio after an adolescent interest in circus performance ("I was a pretty serious acrobat"). Right after high school, Kramer toured the U.S. with—and later played the lead in—the Broadway musical *Mamma Mia!*

Kramer wasn't in love with performing—"It was a very intense

experience"—so she enrolled at New York University for vocal performance before eventually switching to Food Studies. She went vegan and joined a food co-op. "I was so young and extreme," she said. She later attended the Natural Gourmet Institute, the culinary school in Manhattan whose alums include chefs Chloe Coscarelli of *By Chloe*, Amanda Cohen of *Dirt Candy*, and Alissa Wagner of *Dimes*.

Meanwhile, Hymanson, having cooked meals for 100 at the college co-op, apprenticed at Applewood, a small Brooklyn restaurant known for its devotion to sustainable farming and whole-animal butchery. The experience served as her culinary school.

Cooking in Barber's restaurants also made an impact on both women. "I had access to the most beautiful products you could ever touch," said Hymanson, "and it filled me with a desire to cook and share them with people. I wanted people to taste products at their finest." Hymanson also learned "how to appreciate the hierarchy of a more formal kitchen." Kramer went on to cook at Andrew Tarlow's group of Brooklyn eateries and Hymanson cooked at Mission Chinese Food in Manhattan before they ended up at Glasserie together.

Their experiences inside and outside the culinary world, mixed with their innate chutzpah, seem to have imbued each woman with the calm confidence that if something doesn't work out, they are capable and will survive.

This attitude greased the wheels of their decision-making, enabling them to head up and move. They didn't have a clear plan, but they knew what they wanted. "I don't think the restaurant world has to be an industry in which you kill yourself to be successful," Kramer said. "I can get down with the 'in the



trenches' attitude, but I want to work in a way that illustrates how I value people, not just their capacity as workers."

Shortly before the two arrived in L.A., news broke that the duo planned to open a restaurant and a more casual falafel concept. Someone from Grand Central Market—a popular collection of food counters under one roof in downtown L.A.—approached them about putting the falafel shop there. Kramer and Hymanson secured investments and, sharing partnership and authority equally, opened Madcapra at the Grand Central Market in May 2015. Much as with Glasserie, they found an audience immediately.

So, Los Angeles loves them. How do they feel about L.A.? "People have this idea that L.A. is full of movie stars and very vapid and I have not found that to be case," said Hymanson.

"There are tons of really interesting people here." And the food scene is hard to beat, with one exception. "There's every kind of food here which I love to explore—endless regional Chinese food, endless regional Mexican food—though I'm still looking for a great Uyghur restaurant like Kashkar Café in Brighton Beach."

Unlike New York, everything is intentional and planned, because the reliance on cars necessitates thoughtful planning. "You don't happen to be in the same place a lot," said Hymanson. "You can't just walk out of your home and go to a bar and expect to see someone, or stumble out of your apartment and blindly hop on the subway and go someplace for a few minutes. People make plans with each other, or else you're alone."

"In New York, no one would ever say, 'Hey, let's go to Prospect Park and go for a walk!'" Hymanson added. But in L.A., a pre-planned hike in the hills is normal. "I like that."

Kramer loves the weather and the down time. "I have been able to do some reading, gone on a lot of hikes, and have been to the beach several times. I'm in L.A. now so I have to chill out," she laughed. And then there's all the great food. "The ethnic food restaurants are amazing. I eat a lot more ethnic food than I did in N.Y.C. Los Angeles is exciting—there's so much to discover, but there's also a lot of room to do something that's yours."

Which is exactly what they're doing at Madcapra. Their menu is small but mighty, with four types of falafel sandwiches and salads and a handful of Middle Eastern-inspired sides including white bean spread and pickles. The reason they picked falafel as their signature item is that it's so "approachable," said Kramer. "There is room to create something new and good. Very few people are really modernizing falafel."

"We wanted something not finicky, but beautiful. We like to eat vegetables with spice," Hymanson added, "eating with our hands, sharing, and having lots of different things on the table." In a departure from the dishes they served at Glasserie, like slow-roasted lamb shoulder and grilled chicken with zhug, Madcapra is completely vegetarian, though the two chefs are not. They make everything they can in-house, including the bread, drinks, hot sauces, and other condiments.

Their California dream continues. Next up, they are partnering with Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo of Animal and Son of a

Gun to open a full service restaurant, slated for late spring or summer 2016.

It should be a win for all—Shook and Dotolo will provide the operational and structural support, while Kramer and Hymanson will be the chefs, bringing their overall concept and specific style to the table. Kramer says the new restaurant's cuisine will be "Middle Eastern flavors and California produce, with a main focus on vegetables. We are hoping we can create something that feels unique to us." They described a "high concept casual" establishment where patrons can come through on a weeknight or for a special celebration.

With this second business, they will be thrust back into the dance of running a restaurant.

"A play is a very choreographed thing, but the potential for change in a kitchen is different; every single night is different. It keeps you more alert. It doesn't allow you to get bored or lazy because every day changes in a serious way that you have to pay attention to.

"Being in a kitchen is a more enlivening experience for me," she continued, "your performance depends on who you're acting with or working next to." Still, she prefers the kitchen to the stage. "It feels like a little bit more of a triumph. It brings in a certain element of danger, which I kind of like. The stakes always feel a little bit higher in a kitchen."

TOMATO SALAD WITH CHILI, BLACK PEPPER, AND CARDAMOM

- 2 tablespoons black peppercorns
- 12 cardamom pods
- 3 dried arbol chiles
- 2 cloves of garlic, grated on a microplane
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 10 to 12 tomatoes of varying sizes, shapes, and colors
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes, varying colors
- sea salt to taste
- 1 lemon, cut in half
- 2 tablespoons sesame seeds, toasted
- 1 bunch cilantro, coarsely chopped

First, make the spice oil. Dry-toast the black pepper, cardamom, and chiles in a pan, until fragrant. Let cool. Using a spice grinder, grind well, but not overly fine. Combine the garlic and olive oil with the spices and set aside. (You can make this ahead and keep it in the fridge. Just bring the oil to room temperature when you are ready to use it.)

Next, cut the tomatoes as you like them and combine in a bowl with as much of the spice oil, salt, and lemon juice as you like. Stir carefully with a spoon to distribute without damaging the tomatoes. Add the sesame seeds and cilantro and serve the salad by itself or accompanied with a spoonful of labneh and some good bread. A perfect breakfast right there.

