

Good things  
come in

# packages

Fine-dining  
restaurants  
adapt to takeout

by Gabriella Gershenson

As chefs scrambled to respond to shelter-in-place orders, those working in fine dining quickly realized that the days of elaborate tasting menus were over, at least temporarily. Like everyone else forced to face the realities of how the pandemic would affect their work, they transitioned to cooking takeout meals at accessible price points to nourish locals instead of destination diners, and stay in business.

For many chefs, this period of transition has made planning for the future all but impossible. “I feel like at this moment, the best that we can do is take it day by day,” says Chef Niki Nakayama of n/naka in Los Angeles, who went from making sought-after tasting menus to take-home bento boxes. “The most we can plan out is a week ahead of time; everything is so unpredictable. What I know causes stress for myself is to try to anticipate too much.”

Change is the constant. Matthew Kim, chef de cuisine at Pasjoli in Los Angeles, went from executing a menu that revolved around a rarified French duck press presentation to thinking up three-course, family-style meals intended to reheat at home. “Pivoting from that to a stew where the whole process will take 24 hours, not just for one sauce, but for the whole dish, changed a lot about the way we are producing and processing food,” says Kim.

It’s been a learning curve. Elements that are integral to fine-dining menus,

such as finely wrought sauces, delicate garnishes, and carefully calibrated two-bite courses, are ill-suited to boxed meals. Simplification has been key. For instance, a broccolini side at Pasjoli that was once served with béarnaise sauce and Bayonne ham is now offered sautéed in a lemon vinaigrette. “Béarnaise is very temperamental, which is not conducive to delivery or takeout,” says Kim. “[The dish] went from three components that were kind of complicated to just one.”

His take-home mains are dominated by forgiving slow-cooked proteins, such as short ribs, duck confit, and beef Bourguignon. “We try to stick to braised meats, which are well-done and have a good fat content so it won’t come off as dry once you get it at home and reheat it,” says Kim. Each order from Pasjoli contains reheating instructions, and the occasional treat. “[With] the beef Bourguignon, we sent out half a grilled cheese and a pro tip, which is to dip the whole thing in the sauce, because it’s all about the sauce on that one,” says Kim. Now, the grilled cheese is sold as an add-on item to reheat for lunch.

When the meals became more relaxed, the prices dropped too. Ryan McCaskey, chef/owner of Acadia in Chicago, went from offering \$215 tasting menus to an à la carte menu of comfort dishes that tops out at \$20. Where he once spent \$2,000 a week on garnishes, he now mostly omits



The Ultimate Grilled Cheese, \$11, Matthew Kim, Pasjoli, Los Angeles. RECIPE, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com).

them. “It might be a couple of pieces of flat-leaf parsley or chopped parsley or shaved Parmesan cheese on the current menu, but that’s it,” he says. McCaskey has even simplified the burger that he had previously offered on his bar menu, changing the toppings from onion-bacon jam, fontina, and a truffle Mornay sauce to a more approachable caramelized onions, American cheese, pickles, and mayonnaise (\$14, recipe, [plateonline](http://plateonline.com)).



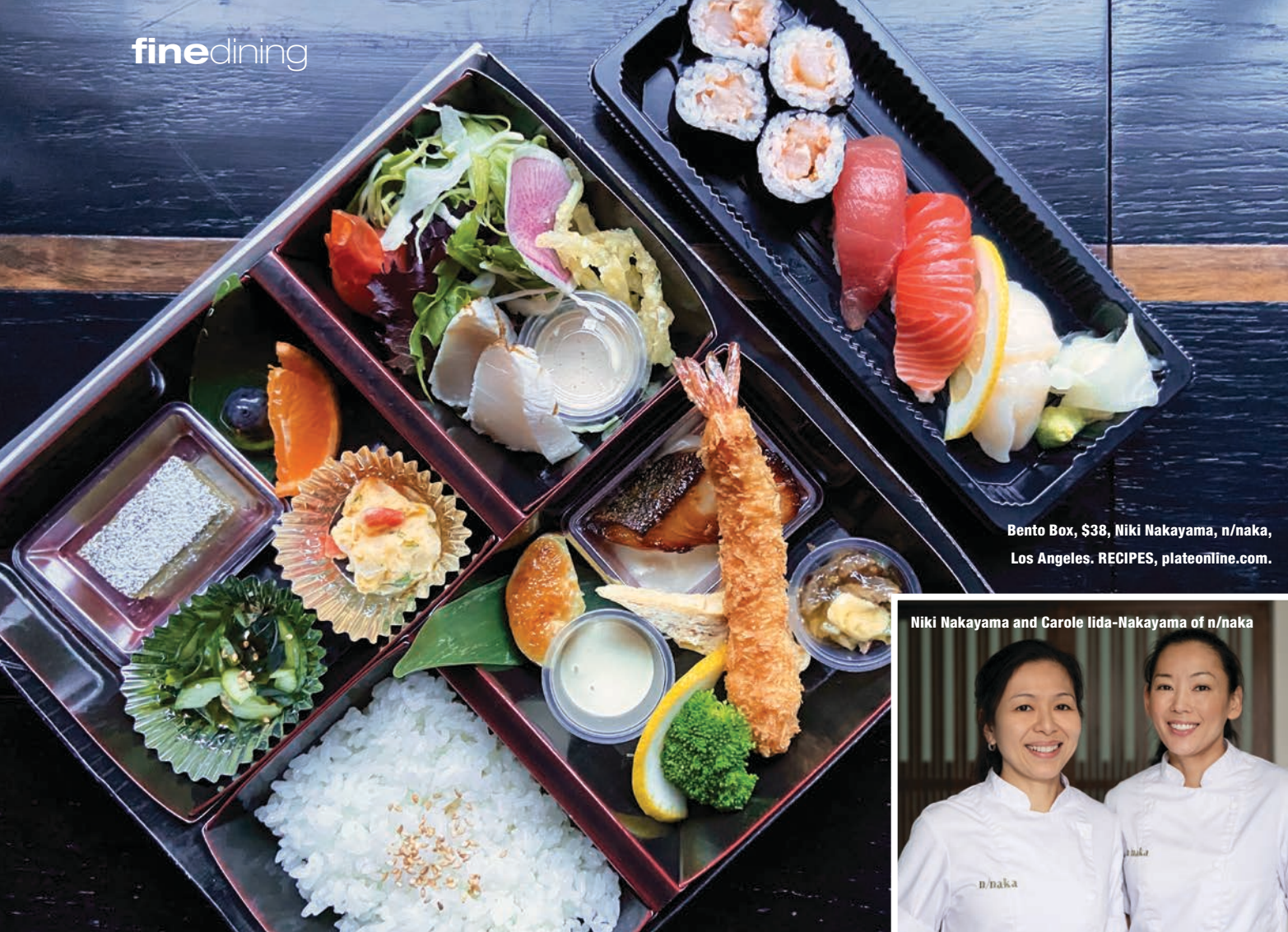
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com). “It’s simple but good, and the other burger is a lot of food and it’s a little fancier,” says McCaskey. “I think people at the end of the day just want a really awesome, big, juicy burger.”

Philanthropy also plays a significant role in the new order. In addition to running the restaurant, McCaskey hosts free markets for the hospitality industry, and donates up to 500 meals a week, as well as useful supplies, like gloves and masks,

to area hospitals. “We didn’t have to necessarily do what we’re doing, but I wanted to stay busy and be able to pay our staff and service the community and the neighborhood,” says McCaskey. Before Chef Kyle Connaughton of SingleThread in Healdsburg, Calif., started offering take-away at his fine-dining restaurant, he was cooking hundreds of “donation meals,” often sponsored by local wineries, for shelters and frontline workers.

In contrast, seemingly minor considerations have taken on great significance. “We didn’t have any takeout containers whatsoever,” says Kim. “We had doggie bags with little boxes for leftovers. We realized we had to buy boxes for the first time, and larger bags to fit those boxes.” Kim favors rectangular aluminum containers that can go straight into the oven for reheating. McCaskey uses plastic containers with snap-on lids that can be



Bento Box, \$38, Niki Nakayama, n/naka, Los Angeles. RECIPES, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com).



Niki Nakayama and Carole Iida-Nakayama of n/naka

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popped into the microwave. Nakayama, renowned for her exquisite \$275 13-course kaiseki dinners, buys special vessels for her \$38 bento boxes. For these meals in particular, the food and the container are inextricably linked. Bento is a Japanese lunch box that is divided into small compartments, each holding a different component of the meal. Nakayama uses recyclable, disposable boxes that she imports from Japan. “The goal for bento is always to pack it so nothing moves,” says Nakayama.

In addition to the inherently portable nature of bentos, for Nakayama, changing over to a bento takeout menu made culinary sense. She and her partner and sous chef Carole Iida-Nakayama assemble boxes that speak to the foods of their childhoods, with the goal of bringing warmth to the meal with familiar elements such as

cucumber-seaweed salad, panko-fried shrimp, and white chocolate matcha cake ([recipes, plateonline.com](http://recipes.plateonline.com)). “They are comfort foods that we put into bento, instead of very formulated, elaborate courses,” says Nakayama. They are also delicious eaten at room temperature, and have flourishes that elevate them, like the sesame aioli dipping sauce for the shrimp.

Though the meals have gotten more casual, the chefs are striving to keep them just as thoughtful. Service plays a different role in takeout than it does in a three-hour tasting meal, but for these chefs, the experience is still important. When diners drive up to SingleThread to pick up their prepaid meals, the dining room manager, a contactless concierge of sorts wearing a suit, tie, and mask, places the order in the guest’s trunk. The experience continues once the food

makes its way home. For instance, when Connaughton prepared a dinner that paid tribute to *The French Laundry Cookbook*, it included four dishes from the 1999 cookbook, literature that explained the inspiration behind the meal, as well as instructions for how to plate the dishes, Thomas Keller-style. “People like to take the food home and really enjoy taking it out of the box, putting it on the plate and making it look pretty,” says Connaughton. He also offers other extras, such as bouquets of flowers grown on the farm, and pairings from local wineries, to make dining out at home extra special.

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