

'tis a gift to be simple

by andrea fox



'Shakers did not talk when they ate,' says Sanchez. 'Just like us,' chides one of the guests in Manchester-by-the-Sea. Sanchez's inviting, natural table theme, brightly-flavored Shaker chicken broth, and good company express the warmth of the season. Photos by Emma Cavaliere

What could be more inviting than making the holidays warm with nurtured local ingredients and artisan preparations suffused with humility?

That's exactly what J. Ricardo Sanchez and Fine Food + Cooking bring to Salem and Art Throb this month — but it's not how you might expect tradition to taste or be set.

From simple herb cookies and hand-churned sweet butter to a delicate, yet nourishing Cod soufflé, Sanchez is setting client tables with delights that are a traditional twist on tradition — Shaker tradition. "I want the holidays to be enjoyable and simple," he says.

We are used to New England holiday traditions that hark back to the Pilgrims, Puritans and colonials. But struck by the "simplicity of preparation and quality" of Shaker cuisine — and with a nod to the spirit of the season — Sanchez is taking this under-the-radar regional culinary practice, adding two parts finesse, and laying it on urban Northshore's tablescapes.

The draw of land, sea and local

Sanchez recently made Salem his home after a long-desired return to Massachusetts. He grew up in San Diego, but finds New England farming and treasures from the North Atlantic coast fascinating. "Land and sea — what a beautiful combination," he says.

While his expansive career includes food styling for *The Today Show* and Martha Stewart publications and roles cooking at The French Laundry, La Cirqque, and the Relais & Châteaux property — The White Barn Inn, Sanchez spent several early years in

Boston with the Boston Ballet. He recently embraced Salem for its access to local food and artisans.

"I love the work of small farms," he explains. When he visited the Salem Farmers' Market, he realized "one no longer needs to go to Boston to be a self-sufficient chef in the Northshore...Salem is going somewhere; Salem is here to stay."

It was here he added Shaker cuisine to his repertoire. We know them for their furniture making and celibate practices, but this old, disappearing society offers a little of the unexpected — a refined, culinary culture. "What I love about Shaker cuisine is that it strove for perfection without sacrificing well-balanced nutrition; growing and sourcing quality products, and enjoying rich foods with modesty," says Sanchez.

"Their cuisine was considered sophisticated as they used many herbs and spices to enhance flavors of their foods," said Sanchez. Shaker origins link to 19th-century Nantes, France, and influence American modern cooking.

Service and simplicity

Sanchez has worked the third shift at an artisanal bakery, was the head chef and farmer at an estate in the Pennsylvania countryside, and cooked with famed chef Peter Callahan catering in New York City. He has cooked for Vera Wang, Marc Jacobs, the President of the National Broadcasting Corporation, Sarah Jessica Parker, and more. He credits his comfort in service to experience in corporate human resources. "The celebrities are the high level executive...it's about working with others, for others, and providing a service," he says.



'It's all muscle memory. For chefs it's body language,' says Sanchez as he whips maple sugar cream for the apple gingerbread cake with salted caramel.



Fresh pickled local vegetables, duck liver pate, chutney, and hard cheese simply open the palette. 'We believe in white glove service...service paralleled with nobody else. That's what Ricardo believes in as well,' says Betsy Bullock of By The Sea Sotheby's International Realty at her recent holiday gathering.

Beyond chef services, he brings this sensibility to local clients helping them to set up their pantries, devising menus, and teaching cooking. "It's about what they're looking for," he says — refreshing, humble words in this age of "celebrichef."

The 2011 Holiday season features simple woods, glass and natural foods. "Private clients are looking for something a little out of the norm that a seasoned chef can bring to their holiday table...Offering the Shaker Holiday Table this season...rooted from France, via England, and now in New England...[I'm] tying all that in being 'local history,'" he says.

Sanchez's Shaker-Style Salem Holiday features roast beef with a cranberry mandarin orange-spiced sauce, chestnuts, and field mushrooms with braised lettuce and herb salad. For some, beef like filet mignon is preferred over turkey or ham on holidays, Sanchez says. "I am suggesting in the Shaker tradition, it's roast beef."

The finale, Shaker apple ginger cake that Sanchez twists with New England-inspired maple sugar cream and salted caramel, sounds utterly repeatable. It's sure to add some heat and sweet to the holidays.

Twist your own tradition and wow your friends and family with Sanchez's tips on how to approach your holiday:

- Source local
 - Develop a plan and write a menu
 - Cook dessert ahead of time
 - Incorporate special items from your family.
- For more on Sanchez, go to finefoodandcooking.com.

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