

PARTNERSHIP

THE FOOD OF LOVE

Chefs Daniela Soto-Innes and Blaine Wetzel lead renowned restaurants on opposite sides of the country. Now engaged, they are finding ways to share their lives—and passion for cooking.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY EIRIK JOHNSON



SLICES OF LIFE
At the Willows Inn, a variety of desserts, including (from top left) fresh quince and a caramelized-pear preparation.

THE LOVE STORY started in the summer of 2018, with a chance encounter at a *pintxos* bar. Blaine Wetzel had just landed in Bilbao, Spain, after a long series of flights from his home on remote Lummi Island, Washington, a two-hour drive and 10-minute ferry ride north of Seattle, arriving in the Basque Country the day before the annual awards announcing the World's 50 Best Restaurants. That evening, out for a bite with some chef friends, he saw "this smoking-hot girl at the end of the bar," he says.

Daniela Soto-Innes was also in town for the awards. Cosme, her modern Mexican restaurant in New York, would rank 25th that year. She had been at the bar a while already when she caught Wetzel's eye. "I turned around, and I see the most gorgeous man I've seen in my life," she says. "And we stared at each other for like a while, I don't know for how long."

Eventually, they started chatting. "She didn't know I was a chef. I didn't really know she was a chef," says Wetzel, noting that they both recognized each other but couldn't determine from where. They wound up leaving the bar together, strolling through Bilbao and talking for hours. "It was a foggy night, like a movie," recalls Soto-Innes. "We were on a bridge right across from the Guggenheim. And then it started raining... and we ran, ran, ran."

Though separated by the length of the U.S., they have since carved out a life together as a new restaurant-world power couple, weaving a long-distance relationship into their intense schedules as chefs in the spotlight.

For the past decade Wetzel, 33, has run the Willows Inn on Lummi Island, starting as head chef there at 24, fresh off a two-and-a-half-year stint at Noma in Copenhagen. He had initially responded to an ad on Craigslist for a short-term seasonal gig cooking simple food, but, taken by the quality of the ingredients he found on the island, he decided to stick around, eventually buying the inn with help from local investors. With his team of young acolytes, he's turned the historic property, established in 1910, into one of the most buzzed-about destination restaurants in the country. In 2012 *Food & Wine* magazine chose him as one of the year's best new chefs. Two years later he won the James Beard Award for rising star chef. Wetzel marks his decade at the helm this spring with a new cookbook, *Lummi: Island Cooking*, a visual record of over 80 seasonal recipes, out from German art publisher Prestel.

Soto-Innes, Wetzel's 29-year-old fiancée—they were engaged last March—has had an equally meteoric rise since being plucked at 23 from the line at Enrique Olvera's Mexico City flagship restaurant, Pujol, and tasked with opening Cosme, Olvera's first U.S. venture. She went on to create some of that restaurant's most iconic dishes, including the large-format duck carnitas originally served as a staff meal and the corn-husk meringue conjured as an homage to her mother. In 2016, she won her own James Beard Award for rising star chef. In 2017, Soto-Innes became a full partner in Olvera's American operations, including their second spot together, Atla in New York, and their third and fourth, opening soon in Los Angeles, plus a restaurant in Las Vegas. Last year the World's 50 Best

Restaurants named her the world's best female chef.

"Blaine and I, we have the same stories, we won the same award at [about] the same age," says Soto-Innes one fall afternoon, perched beside Wetzel at the bar at the Willows Inn, digging into a brunch spread of house-smoked salmon rillettes and whipped fromage blanc. The day's off to a slow start, after a late night of mezcal and dancing that closed out two days of collaborative cooking with visiting chefs—James Lowe of Lyle's in London and Daniel Puskas of Sixpenny restaurant, near Sydney. Wetzel often hosts chef friends on the approximately nine-square-mile island (population 1,091), fishing and foraging with them and then collaborating on a meal for guests at the inn.

It's been about 18 months since Soto-Innes made her first trip out here, just a few weeks after the pair's meeting in Spain. On that initial visit, they went kayaking among killer whales, and Wetzel introduced Soto-Innes to his mom, a nurse in Seattle. Not long after that, he met her family in Mexico City, where Soto-Innes spent the first 12 years of her life, before

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—DANIELA SOTO-INNES

her parents, both lawyers, relocated the family to Houston. "We'll work straight through a lot of days so we can have a four-day weekend together," she says. "And we've spent a lot of money on plane tickets."

Wetzel spent the winter of 2018–2019 living full time with Soto-Innes in her Brooklyn apartment, taking advantage of his restaurant's downtime—the Willows Inn closes annually between December and March—to enjoy big-city life for the first time in years. "You should have seen him try to use the subway," says Soto-Innes. "It was the funniest thing ever."

And they've had a wild ride tagging along on each other's frequent guest chef gigs. Soto-Innes keeps a running tally on her phone of their peripatetic schedule. "Vancouver three times, Lummi seven times, Seattle five times, New York a lot," she says, reading down the list of places they've been. "L.A. four times, San Francisco once, Louisiana, Chicago, London, Paris, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Bilbao twice, San Sebastián, [Spain], Girona, Venice, Firenze, Bologna, Siena, Rome, Montepulciano, Mexico City six times, Oaxaca five times, Tulum, Singapore, Phuket, Bangkok, Brazil, Puerto Escondido. I think we're missing a few."

On one early trip they cut across Europe by motorcycle, hitting the top Michelin-starred restaurants en route. "Arpège, Alain Ducasse, Etxebarri, El Celler de Can Roca, Disfrutar—like 20 restaurants on one trip.... It was outrageous," says Wetzel. "Everywhere we went we were welcomed with open arms." On a visit to Noma recently, Soto-Innes etched a mashup of their names—"Blaniela"—into a brick at the restaurant.

Their romance has played out in the public eye, a social-media love story chronicled on their Instagram feeds. A video Soto-Innes posted just before Christmas

showing the couple canoodling in Todos Santos, Mexico, has had over 50,000 views. ("Te amo bombón!" she wrote.)

A few months into their courtship, hints began arriving that Soto-Innes might be ready to take the relationship further. "She was laying it on pretty thick," says Wetzel. "I opened this letter that was like a formal invitation. It was an invitation to change her last name.... And she mentioned to me over pepperoni pizza that she liked vintage Tiffany rings."

Wetzel popped the question under the stars on a beach in Tulum, Mexico. Two days later a shaman at their boutique hotel bound them together in a temazcal sweat-lodge ceremony, surrounded by "prayer flags, crystals and a giant roaring fire," as Wetzel remembers it. They plan to get more formally hitched with a big party in Oaxaca in the fall.

This past winter they began looking for a new home together, in a new city, L.A., where they hope to relocate—part time at least. Soto-Innes and Olvera are launching two spots in the same building in downtown L.A. this spring: Damian, a sort of West Coast version of Cosme, and its casual taco-centric sibling, Ditroit. (A third spot, Elio, is also in the works at the Wynn hotel in Las Vegas.)

Wetzel spent some time last year scouting locations for his own L.A. restaurant, his first new venture since starting at the Willows Inn. Though the project is on hold for now, he has been thinking, he says, about a major departure from the precious, tweezered food served at the Willows Inn. "I've been wanting to do a tiki bar, with really good ceviche, poke, fried chicken," he says. Wetzel also hopes to launch a smokehouse pop-up in New York this summer, to promote the cookbook and act as a trial run for a potential restaurant in the city.

Since meeting Soto-Innes, he has been learning how to let go a bit at the Willows Inn, taking a step back, sharing the spotlight with a longtime deputy, chef de cuisine Casey Palermينو. "I think the Willows has improved so much, just being given a tiny bit of room to breathe," he says. "Daniela has taught me a lot about how to give opportunity and trust and space to people." ●



TASTE MAKERS
Above: Wetzel and Soto-Innes on Lummi Island. Right: Grilling cabbage skewers. Below: A full Willows Inn breakfast.



PLACE SETTING
Clockwise from left: A view of nearby Orcas Island; marinated tomatoes; the Willows Inn dining room.