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# From Cosecha to Bombera: Oakland's Dominica Rice-Cisneros talks restaurants, heritage and inspiration



OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA – JULY 20: Bombera restaurant owner and chef Dominica Rice Cisneros works in the kitchen as they get ready to open for dinner in the Dimond district of Oakland, Calif., on Wednesday, July 20, 2022.

(Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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During its 10-year run, Dominica Rice-Cisneros' Old Oakland cafe, Cosecha, was an epicenter for seasonal, California-inspired Mexican food. Some of us living in the East Bay had never tasted a fresh tortilla or known what nixtamalization was before visiting Swan's Market, which Cisneros helped establish as a dining destination.

Without a lunch crowd, Cosecha was forced to shutter in March 2021, one of many downtown casualties of the pandemic. But the acclaimed chef and Chez Panisse vet didn't miss a beat. Two months later, she unveiled Bombera, a fine dining restaurant housed in an old fire station in the Dimond district, a neighborhood Rice-Cisneros and her husband, Chicano historian Carlos Manuel Salomon, once called home.



Located in the Dimond District of Oakland, Bombera, Dominica Rice-Cisneros' sophomore restaurant, is a celebration of women and Mexican cooking traditions. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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With its celebration of women — bombera means female firefighter — and wood-fired cooking, the restaurant was an instant hit. Rice-Cisneros' niece, designer Nora Yokoubian, transformed the firehouse into a colorful space with warehouse-style windows, leather-backed bar stools and paper fan streamers. A mural in the back by artist Jessica Sabogal depicts two female figures that are a nod to Salomon's Pima roots and a reminder, Rice-Cisneros says, that we are on native peoples' land.

And the food: It's an evolved version of Cosecha's lunch-time favorites. Rice-Cisneros' famed pork belly tacos are pan-seared to a crisp and dressed with housemade tomatillo salsa and pickled onions. Wild-caught Monterey red snapper gets the Veracruz treatment with fruity Sungold tomatoes and rice. There is grilled filet mignon, octopus and multiple celebrations of maize, from pozole and sweet corn blackberry pudding to blue heirloom corn tortillas.



Bombera's menu is an evolved take on Cosecha, with dishes like spicy carrots with toasted almonds, left, corn on the cob, a sandia (watermelon) margarita, fish tacos and taquitos dorados. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

"Bombera is Cosecha's big sister," Rice-Cisneros says. "The heart of it is still California, but there is more variety. I'm really proud of the menu and this big, open kitchen that we have. People can see how much work goes into everything."

Rice-Cisneros grew up in the Eagle Rock neighborhood of Los Angeles, an area densely populated with Latinos and Asians. She was raised in a multigenerational home with her grandmother, "a traditional Mexican woman" from Chihuahua, Mexico, who came to the U.S. as a farmworker when she was a teen.

“She re-created that farm life for us in the middle of L.A.,” Rice-Cisneros says. “She became an urban farmer, and I learned to make homemade flour tortillas and beans with her.”

She moved to the Bay Area in 1993 and worked in restaurants throughout the region, eventually landing at Berkeley’s Chez Pansse, where she worked as a chef for six years. She loves Oakland fiercely, and despite offers to expand her reach, plans to stay there, serving the regulars she’s known for more than a decade.

“I know them, and I know their kids,” she says. “Oakland has been so good to my family and my workers. We’ve had opportunities to go to Palo Alto or San Francisco, but we have so much pride for all the history here — and so much of that is Mexican-American.”

We recently caught up with Rice-Cisneros to learn more about her childhood, her support of female chefs and that big sister menu.



Bombera is housed inside an old fire station which has been transformed into a light-filled space with orange-trimmed windows and colorful paper fan-strewn ceilings. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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**Q. What was it like growing up in your L.A. neighborhood?**

**A.** I was surrounded by a really big sense of Mexican American pride. I had a tight-knit community and never felt invisible. Oakland reminded me of that vibe. You’d go to the mini mall and get fresh tortillas all day long. You’d add a little avocado and salsa — that’s our blini. That’s our caviar moment. That was our birthright. I wanted to re-create that experience for my kid in Oakland. There was no place to go so I created it in Cosecha.

**Q. Bombera has a few meanings. What are they?**

**A.** In addition to a female firefighter, it also means whore. This fire house was abandoned for more than 20 years and used for storage. Originally, it was built for only men to work there. All of that changed in the late 1970s when you couldn't legally have city jobs just for men anymore. In Mexico, there still aren't a lot of female firefighters.

**Q. What is the biggest thing you learned as a chef working in restaurants?**

**A.** I did that for about 20 years, and when I became a mom, I was forced out, and that's OK. I met some cool people and became a private chef. What I learned is there's no support for women. I keep reading these articles about men. The New York Times just wrote about a man opening a Mexican restaurant in New York and making his own tortillas. Why would they ever write about a Chicano mom making tortillas?

**Q. You employ many women. How do you support them?**

**A.** I make sure to offer a set schedule. I talk to them. I ask, "What is it that your family needs? Do you go to school at night? What about your partner?" Some people can only work days, while others need nights. It's about offering flexibility and listening to people.

**Q. What do you want people to know about your team?**

**A.** We're a team of really accomplished chefs at Bombera, but we're not chefs that have training. We are also super proud to be part of the Bay Area food scene. And we love our neighborhood here in Oakland.



Corn on the cob is roasted in a wood oven at Bombera. It will be dressed with lime, green chiles, and whipped pumpkin and sesame seed butter. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)