

THINGS TO DO > RESTAURANTS, FOOD AND DRINK

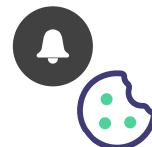
Q&A: San Jose's Chef Baca on pastrami, green chiles — and pivoting plenty in 2020



SAN JOSE, CA – OCTOBER 28: Madelyn and Rodney Baca, owners of The Shop by Chef Baca, work at their space inside the San Pedro Square Market, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

By [LINDA ZAVORAL](#) | lzavoral@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: November 2, 2020 at 7:00 a.m. | UPDATED: November 2, 2020 at 7:01 a.m.



Tucked inside downtown San Jose's San Pedro Square Market is an eatery that might best be described as a marriage of fine-dining expertise and comfort-food sensibility. And it comes courtesy of another marriage, that of culinary talents Rodney and Madelyn Baca.

He'd been a chef in upscale restaurants from Los Angeles to Europe before taking over the top toque duties at The Grill at SAP Center. She's a San Jose native who oversaw catering divisions at SAP and Silicon Valley companies.

Together, they own [The Shop by Chef Baca](#), a venture that's been evolving since their launch in 2019. We chatted with Rodney about topics both serious (the challenges facing local restaurants) and light-hearted (what he cooked for Nancy Reagan). Here's an edited version:

Q: Early in 2020, you were juggling restaurant booths at both SAP Center and the San Pedro Square Market. Then COVID-19 forced the shutdown of the arena. What sort of pivoting have you had to do since then?

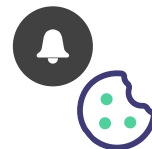
A: What an awesome problem to have, two locations and both in such high-visibility areas. We were on cloud nine, but with the shutdown we went from really building and developing our brand to just trying to keep the doors open.

We have started our own nonprofit, Baca Systems 501(c)3, to challenge Silicon Valley to help sponsor events and ideas on salvaging small businesses by creating a food program for furloughed and laid-off employees. This allows our nonprofit to hire local restaurants to feed these groups daily. We believe it takes a village, and we are asking major companies to contribute to not only save us, but many other companies.

Q: How did you and Madelyn bring your skills together for The Shop by Chef Baca?

A: Madelyn wanted a comfort-style spot, so she gave me the blueprint of what she wanted her place and menu to look like. Through trial and error, we have been able to get close to her vision.

Q: How does your New Mexico heritage inform your cooking and your restaurant offerings? In other words, red or green?



A: Being from New Mexico is such an honor. People do not realize how diverse the food there is — a combination of Native American, Spanish and cowboy or ranchers. Red or green (chile) is usually the first question asked, and I personally love them both. We put our housemade New Mexico Green Chile Aioli and Baca's New Mexico Green Chile BBQ Sauce on our Baca Burger.



Rodney Baca prepares a pastrami sandwich at The Shop by Chef Baca in San Jose's San Pedro Square Market. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

Q: What do you recommend for first-timers, who want a taste of what Chef Baca does best?

A: It depends what you are in the mood for. But the No. 1 eye-catcher is our homemade pastrami. We cure it and brine it for five days. Every other day, we gently flip the pastrami over — and tell it how much we love it! Then we smoke and slow-cook it for seven, eight hours. It has our signature pineapple-molasses-mustard sauce and we do our caramelized onions, fresh cole slaw with maple aioli, provolone cheese and homemade pickles.

Q: As one customer noted on Yelp, you elevate everything on your menu. The Steak Fries aren't just huge fries; you toss Kennebec potatoes with candied roasted garlic and grana padano cheese and serve them with housemade ketchup. What's the philosophy behind that?

A: Our philosophy is to take those little fine-dining steps and implement such details to showcase our cooking acumen. Our goals are that everything we serve is made by our hands and that we take the extra steps to give you the best possible product while utilizing the most sustainable and humane foods.



Q: One of your frequent customers at the Hotel Bel Air restaurant was Nancy Reagan. I'm having a hard time seeing that skinny thing eating something like this over-the-top pastrami sandwich. What did she order from your menu back in the day?

A: She usually got the Spa Cobb Salad with poached organic chicken, turkey bacon, hard-boiled cage-free eggs and locally farmed heirloom tomatoes.

Q: Do you have a fun new dish coming this winter?

A: We are planning for the winter, but right now for fall we have our pumpkin crème brulee, cooked and served in mini-pumpkins.

Q: Will you be back at SAP Center whenever the Sharks resume play with fans in attendance?

A: It is our intention to be back with SAP Center but that is a question they must answer. SAP has taken a huge hit during this time and we don't claim to have any insight into their next moves.

Details: Open from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, until 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday and until 5 p.m. Sunday at 100 N. Almaden Ave., San Jose;

<https://theshopbychefbaca.square.site/>

For more food and drink coverage

[follow us on Flipboard.](#)

100 North ...

[Report an error](#)

[Policies and Standards](#)

[Contact Us](#)





A hyperlocal newsletter with stories reported around a location that matters to you.

Sign up for the News Nearby newsletter

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our [privacy policy](#) and [terms of service](#).

Tags: [Restaurants](#)



Linda Zavoral | Assistant features editor

Linda Zavoral is a Features reporter and editor who writes about restaurants, libations, travel and the arts for the Eat Drink Play and Eye/Timeout sections. She's a Bay Area native and a San Jose State University journalism graduate. Her previous roles at the Mercury News include Lowell Thomas award-winning editor of the Travel section, Alameda County bureau chief and Getting Ahead editor.

lzavoral@bayareanewsgroup.com

[f](#) Follow Linda Zavoral [eatdrinkplaybayarea](#) [t](#) Follow Linda Zavoral [@Buh_byeTRAVEL](#)

SPONSORED CONTENT

We've got you covered.

By State Farm

Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there. ®



SUBSCRIBE TODAY!
ALL ACCESS DIGITAL OFFER FOR JUST 99 CENTS!

