

Dining & Wine

When Chocolate and Chakras Collide



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

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Evan Sung for The New York Times

David Romanelli and his yoga students at Exhale Spa stretch, breathe deeply and then eat (cross-legged position optional).

“I DON’T condemn/I don’t convert.”

The words of Ziggy Marley’s “Love Is My Religion” floated over 30 people lying on yoga mats in a steamy, dim loft above Madison Avenue on Friday. All had signed up for a strange new hybrid of physical activity: first an hour of vigorous, sweaty yoga, then a multicourse dinner of pasta, red wine and chocolate. As soon as the lights went up, dinner was served on the floor: an (almost) seamless transition designed to allow the yogis to taste, smell and digest in a heightened state of awareness.

“It’s a little weird to sit on a sweaty yoga mat and eat soup,” said one woman, not pausing as she spooned up a smooth, cinnamon-spiked butternut squash purée from a bamboo bowl. “But people are used to doing some weird things in yoga class.”

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Joy Pierson, pouring wine, left, brought food from the Candle Cafe, where she is the chef.

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Evan Sung for The New York Times

The "Yoga for Foodies" dinner included vegan ravioli.

Joy Pierson, the chef at the nearby Candle Café, a vegan restaurant that supplied the meal, sat cross-legged at the front of the room, encouraging everyone to breathe in slowly. "Ssssmell the squassshhh waaaafing through the air," she intoned.

Friday's event at Exhale Spa was the first of a series of "Yoga for Foodies" sessions, devised by a young, adventurous yoga teacher, David Romanelli, and coming soon to restaurants in Chicago, Cleveland and Dallas.

Calling his mission "yoga for the Everyman," Mr. Romanelli, 36, plays Grateful Dead songs during class, wears sweat pants rather than spandex, and has already experimented with offering chocolate truffles after chaturanga instruction. "It's a way of getting people in the door," he said in an interview. "The world is a better place if people do yoga. And if they come because chocolate or wine is involved, I'm fine with it."

The past decade has produced thousands of new foodies and new yogis, all interested in healthier bodies, clearer consciences and a greener planet. Inevitably, the overlap between the people who love to eat and the people who love to do eagle pose has grown. In 2007, a combination yoga studio and fine dining restaurant, Ubuntu, opened in Napa, Calif.

Yoga retreat centers now offer gourmet cooking classes and wine tastings; New York yogis trade tips about which nearby ashrams (Anand) and studios (Jivamukti) serve the best muffins.

But not everyone agrees that the lusty enjoyment of food and wine is compatible with yogic enlightenment. Yoga purists say that many foods — like wine and meat — are still off limits. Others, like Mr. Romanelli, say that anything goes, as long as it tastes good. The debate is exposing rich ores of resentment in the yoga world.

"The culture of judgment in the yoga community — I call it "yogier than thou" — is rampant, and nowhere more than around food," said Sadie Nardini, a yoga teacher in New York. ("Yogis" are those who do yoga, teachers and students alike.)

Ms. Nardini "came out" as a meat-eater on The Huffington Post last year, in an essay she titled "Om Scampi."

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“Nowhere is it written that only vegetarians can do yoga,” she said in an interview. “We do not live in the time of the founding fathers of yoga, and we don’t know what they wanted us to eat.”

There are many ways to “do” yoga: the term embraces meditation, worship, study and action, as well as the physical pretzeling that Americans primarily associate with the term. Just as the Judeo-Christian tradition has produced many offshoots, yoga has many schools, like Ashtanga, Iyengar and Tantra. But over the 5,000 years of its evolution, and across Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions, yoga has always been broadly understood as a route to enlightenment and purification.

Which is where eating bacon and pouring wine in yoga class, as Mr. Romanelli has done, becomes complicated. “People are starting to push back against the traditional, quiet, serious approach,” said Mr. Romanelli, who has a scrubbed, cheerful, regular-guy aura. After graduating from Vanderbilt University, he moved to California to work as an assistant to Shaquille O’Neal’s agent. In Santa Monica, he said, there were lines down the block for yoga classes. and, noticing a business opportunity before a spiritual one, he began attending classes, where he was quickly hooked.

Ever practical, he and a partner opened their first studio in 1998 in Phoenix, where he is still based, rather than in yoga-saturated Los Angeles. He said he faced immediate disapproval when he began playing pop music in class and advertising on bus shelters, pushing the limits of the tradition. “It was the chocolate that really rattled the cages of the purists,” he said.

Both American-style yoga and the food revolution were born in the counterculture of the 1970s. Both have bubbled away in urban centers and pockets of hippiedom and are becoming more mainstream than their early practitioners could have imagined.

India has become to American yoga what France is to American cuisine: an ancient source of wisdom to be reinterpreted, democratized and repackaged by its acolytes here. The “yoga industry” now represents about \$6 billion in annual spending by American consumers on classes, videos, mats and apparel like the \$158 Apres Yoga jacket at the upscale chain Lululemon, according to Yoga Journal magazine.

And in yoga and foodie circles alike, contemplating the awesome significance of every bite taken — its flavors, its implications, its history — often seems to lead to moral judgments about others.

“It’s been one of my struggles,” said Rick Bayless, the Chicago chef, who has

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been practicing yoga for 15 years, is not a vegetarian and loves pork. “I think that sometimes the yoga community is a little too austere, and it’s hard to talk about what I do with people who believe in eating just what you need to stay alive.”

“When I started teaching, it wasn’t really O.K. for yogis to talk about food,” said Mary Taylor, a yoga teacher in Boulder, Colo., who studied with Julia Child at Les Trois Gourmandes, her cooking school in Paris. “And food wasn’t such a big part of American life back then — there were maybe five spices at the supermarket, and one food magazine.”

Ms. Taylor said that it was once difficult to reconcile her commitment to yoga with her love of good food. But in the Upanishads, the sacred Hindu texts, she said, she found an aesthetic philosophy in which the appreciation of worldly things is not only acceptable, but necessary to achieve true understanding. “Until you appreciate the fullest taste of a vegetable, you don’t know the truth of it,” she said. “And you bring out that truth by cooking it, making it beautiful and delicious and appealing to the senses.”

“Cooking most definitely can be yoga,” said Ayinde Howell, the executive chef at the Jivamuktea Café, the restaurant within the influential Jivamukti yoga studio in Manhattan. (Yoga, a noun, is also used as an adjective by many American yogis, as in “That’s so yoga.”)

Mr. Howell, a lifelong vegan, is also a yoga teacher and a musician (Russell Simmons, the music impresario and yoga ambassador, has Tweeted glowingly about Mr. Howell’s salad of chili-cruste^d tempeh pieces with a creamy peanut dressing.) Part of his role as a teacher, he said, is making it possible for others to imagine a richly pleasurable life as a vegan, tempting them toward that path.

So cooking might be yoga, but can bacon be yoga?

Clearly not, most yoga teachers say.

“The very first teaching of yoga forbids us to eat meat,” said Eva Grubler, director of training at Dharma Yoga in New York, one of the most venerated yoga centers in the country. In the Yoga Sutras, a primary text of yogic philosophy, ethics are broken down into five yamas (things to not do) and five niyamas (things to do). Ahimsa, the first yama, is a prescription not to harm others. But the definition of “others” — whether it includes all animals, or only people, or should perhaps extend to the plant kingdom — is in debate.

Ahimsa is now interpreted by some American yogis to allow meat, if it is humanely slaughtered. Many teachers say that they have adopted a “don’t ask,

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don't tell" attitude about meat, and Mr. Romanelli says he eats meat when he knows its source (and sometimes when he doesn't). Bacon, he said, is a yogic teaching tool, providing an opportunity to contemplate principles of attraction and revulsion, desire and self-denial, and why we are so attracted to things we know to be unhealthy. (It also, of course, provides priceless shock value.)

"This is the hottest of all hot-button issues in yoga," said Dayna Macy, a managing editor of Yoga Journal, who recently attended the slaughter of five steer at Prather Ranch, an organic, certified-humane cattle ranch in Northern California, in an attempt to resolve her inner turmoil about eating beef.

Several prominent American yoga teachers like Ana Forrest and Bryan Kest have recently acknowledged eating meat. In an example of how yogis have adopted the language and ideology of foodies, Mr. Kest calls himself a "selectarian," one who chooses everything he eats.

Many American yogis are so particular about what they put in their bodies that they make Alice Waters look like Paula Deen. Sometimes, even an all-vegan, organic, low-carbon-footprint diet is not pure enough: each vegetable must be grown in an atmosphere of positive energy. Steve Ross, an influential teacher in Los Angeles, says in his book "Happy Yoga; 7 Reasons Why There's Nothing to Worry About" that yogis must ask themselves this question in the produce section: "Are the farmers full of gratitude and love, and do they enjoy growing food, or are they angry and filled with hate for their job and all vegetables?"

Mary Taylor, the student of Julia Child, says she seeks a "middle path"; she follows a vegan diet but refrains from judging those who don't. "If we become aggressive and intolerant towards those who do eat meat, is that an act of kindness?" she said. "If your grandmother is making a wonderful meat dish that you have loved since you were a child, is it yoga to push it away?"

Many would say yes. Sharon Gannon and David Life, the founders of the influential Jivamukti style of yoga, admit only vegans into their prestigious teacher training program. The same rule applies at Dharma Yoga.

"Ten years ago we would not even be having this conversation," said Ms. Grubler, who added that a vegan diet was a given for her. "Yoga used to be much quieter, but now there are more people, they are more activated, and they are questioning everything." She says that the true yogic path gradually and organically frees people of desire for meat, dairy, caffeine and alcohol.

"A pure yogic diet is one that is only calming: no garlic, onions or chili peppers, nothing heavy or oily," said Ms. Grubler. "Steamed vegetables, salads and fresh

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juices are really the ideal.” Yogic food choices can also be influenced by ayurveda, a traditional Indian way of eating to keep the body healthy and in balance. Some yogis determine their dosha, or dominant humor, vata (wind/air), pitta (bile) or kapha (phlegm), and eat accordingly. Foods are invested with properties like warming or cooling, heavy or light, moist or dry.

Mr. Romanelli says that such ideas about food are aspects of yoga that most Americans find forbidding, unrealistic and generally, as he puts it, “woo-woo.”

One man’s woo-woo, of course, is another’s deeply held belief system.

Mr. Romanelli believes that any profound pleasure of the senses — a live Bruce Springsteen track, an In-N-Out burger, the scent of lavender gathered in the French Alps — can bring on the “yoga high” that is a gateway to divine bliss.

“What yoga teachers do and what chefs do is not so different,” he said. “We take everyday actions like moving and eating, and slow you down so you can appreciate them.” Achieving stillness and peace amid the distractions of life, he said, has always been the higher goal of yoga.

Back at the Exhale studio, wandering among the supple bodies of his acolytes, Mr. Romanelli talked about his recent embrace of the Slow Food movement and his dreams of returning American yogis to what he describes as the happy, prelapsarian state of 1995. “Remember before you had your first e-mail address or your first cellphone,” he said. “Don’t you think that your food tasted better back then?”