

forgo being finicky.

Throughout her travels, and even here at home, she is driven to discover the most authentic food in every culture. "As Americans, we tend to tag a cuisine in the same way we sometimes tag a culture and the type of food we think that culture offers. Then we decide if we like it or not," Feniger says. "But in reality, each cuisine is made up of so many similar ingredients. Take the Mexican, Thai, Indian and Vietnamese kitchens. Just off the top of my head, the major ingredients in these cuisines are cumin, cilantro, onions, garlic, brown sugar, chilies, green onions, vinegar, ginger. How you balance these as a cook makes the difference in the cultural cuisine. Food goes way beyond appreciating difference. Food crosses barriers. It opens doors, it embraces difference."

Feniger's not enthusiastic about some of today's too-slick watering holes. She tells a story about an L.A. hotspot where the chef prepared a special entrée for her: a combo of lobster, pancakes, maple syrup and some kind of pudding. Apparently, the concoction came out of the kitchen looking as sexy as a lesbian Johnny Depp, but it turned out there was nothing real beneath the layers of presentation and makeup.

This is not to say that fine dining always turns Feniger off. She's one of the earliest protégées of Wolfgang Puck. Great food is at the heart of her career and is the thing she loves most. But there's a difference between the kind of food that pretends and the kind that comes out of the kitchen elegant in its simplicity. In a sense, Feniger can actually be said to opt for tradition—tradition communicated through honest, authentic food.

Another story Feniger likes to tell is of a dinner she and her partner, the filmmaker Liz Lachman, shared with Sakinah, a woman in a small village, while cows grazed under the hut. The three women never exchanged a word in a common language, yet they dined and communicated for hours. They laughed. They told stories. Through cooking together, they shared generations of family experiences.

"In that tiny hut, cooking together, our lives grew bigger."

This is one reason Feniger's new restaurant, built on the concept of global street food, is sure to be a hit. Being around her, I was reminded of something the poet Muriel Rukeyser has said: "The world is made of stories, not atoms." To Feniger, a list of ingredients will never tell the whole story. Someone must bring them together.

Almost 30 years ago, Susan Feniger took to the streets. This year, she'll own Street, in a bright and welcoming section of Highland Avenue in L.A. It's not at all hard to make that connection. ■

selecting the best, brightest or most entertaining (which can also mean outrageously bad) to put before the cameras and celebrity judges.

When asked if she's had anything to do with boosting the gay and lesbian representation on the show, Hurwitz merely grins. "No comment," she says. Familiar lesbian faces have included Sabrina Matthews, Michele Balan (who made the final four of season four) and Erin Foley (a contestant this season). Gay and lesbian comics do well, Hurwitz says, as long as they "don't fall into the trap" of dwelling only on gay material.

"Now even gay audiences want to laugh at universal subjects. I think the key to being a good comedian is making your truth a universal truth."

While Hurwitz is the only producer with stand-up experience, she recently hired three writers, her first opportunity to hand-pick other talented comics.

"I wanted to make sure they had stand-up experience, too," she says.

Straight white males have dominated comedy, but two of the new writers are women (one of them gay). The third is an African American male.

"We joke that we are making writers' room history," says Hurwitz. "It wasn't intentional, but just worked out that way." How funny. ■

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Cayne: The biggest thing for me is that when I went on set I was just treated as one of their cast members. I was treated as a real actress, I was never looked at twice. I just became a part of the show and it was pleasantly surprising.

Weiss: I think the longevity that I've had in my career and the way that I've been able to reinvent myself and that people have taken me so seriously, I think it's surprising for a woman, especially a young woman. I started when I was 21. I'm just very appreciative and sometimes I feel like I have that imposter syndrome where I have everybody fooled, like I'm this little kid from Philadelphia running around on the Sony lot.

When you have clients who are really in demand, like Jason Bateman from Juno, does that give you more sway to help your clients who are less well-known?

Weiss: Yeah, in fact when I sign a client, people are really taking notice because I'm always looking for thought-provoking points of view and really talented individuals. I don't just sign to sign—I'm way too busy for that. So if I take on a new client, it gives them validity because of who I'm representing. I've got a lot of big feature guys on my roster. I launched James Woods' career from actor to director, now he's going off to do a movie. I've been really fortunate. ■

I have. It was a very long and slow process, mostly full of ignorance and misconceptions. My mother still says crazy things every once in a while. I was sitting with her and she was like, "Nisha, did you know that so-and-so has two daughters and they're both gay—what a tragedy!" I had to explain to her why that was offensive to me. Then she does incredible things. I was shooting in Toronto and she was visiting me. Toronto has this really huge gay Pride, which takes over half the city. She went with me out in the streets and she said, "The one generalization that I can make about gay people is that they all have such big hearts." That was her take on gay men and lesbians: that they will go out of their way for you and do anything for you.

How did you get cast in this role?

They were looking for an Indian actress who was willing to play a lesbian. I always kind of thought people of one ethnicity shouldn't play another ethnicity, but Amber took it to the level of I'm going to cast all gay people to play gay people. I thought, You're awesome.

You acted in and directed *Chutney Popcorn*.

I was meant to direct, and I lost my actress a few weeks before shooting. It was really hard to find an Indian American who would play a lesbian, didn't have an accent and was familiar with dyke culture.

You got into directing through acting, right?

I was a struggling actor and there were no parts for Indian girls. Meryl Streep and Glenn Close were on the cover of magazines saying that the roles for women were terrible. I remember holding the magazines and going, if they're complaining, what the hell am I going to do?

You had to make your own role, which is what Amber's doing too by making this space for queer women of color.

Exactly. It was so great to see somebody so dedicated to telling our stories and telling them real, because it's easy to get cynical. After I did *Chutney Popcorn*, I went on this round of meetings in Hollywood and they were like, "This is great, but can you do something without lesbians?" You get beat down....

Any anecdotes about the scene on set?

Flirting, craziness and drama! Good lesbian drama, not bad lesbian drama. Guin and I had a blast teasing each other. As soon as people got in hair and makeup, the lesbian identity started feeling insecure, so you could easily needle somebody. We were just having a funny cruel time...with each other's characters. My character is a straight girl [at first] and Amber gave me heels to wear. I was like, "Oh. Dear. God." I haven't been in heels in how many years?

Did you master the heels?

It took me a few takes and then, I'm proud to say, I mastered the three-and-a-half-inch heels. Jennifer Beals' got nothing on me! ■