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The Nook Neighborhood Bistro serves brunch and dinner in Puck's Alley at 1035 University Ave. Visit thenookhonolulu.com or call 942-2222.

If you were invited to a soup potluck, what would you put on the table? Anicea Campanale is attending such an event, but she won't be ladling hearty minestrone or creamy chowder. No miso shiru, no chilled gazpacho. Not even mom's chicken soup — though Campanale's contribution will be her own version of a restorative broth.

Or rather, brew. Her pot will be filled with Sexpot Ochazuke, based on the humble Japanese dish of tea poured over rice. "Ochazuke is a Japanese staple; it's always been a comfort food. My mom made it when I was sick," said the co-owner and chef of The Nook Neighborhood Bistro, a cozy, restaurant at Puck's Alley. "It really feels like home." Campanale, raised in Northern California by a Japanese mom and Italian-American dad, drew on her Japanese roots to create a new recipe for Empty Bowl Hawaii, a fundraiser that combines the efforts of chefs and ceramists. Chefs cook soups to put in potters' bowls — this year there are some 20 soups and more than 3,000 bowls — and each diner goes home with a warm tummy and a handmade dish. Proceeds benefit Aloha Harvest, which collects leftover food and delivers it to the needy every day.

THE "SEXY" PART of the soup really isn't especially racy. It refers to Sexpot Tea, a popular artisan green tea with orange peel and elderflower blossom made by T-We, a San Francisco company run by Campanale's friends. She mixes the tea with a dashi stock she makes with konbu, fish bones and bonito, plus an alii mushroom stock she fortifies by roasting the 'shrooms with carrots and celery.

"It has a nice umami," she said, noting that the alii mushrooms deliver flavor the same way as shiitakes. "I use local mushrooms in place of shiitake." Campanale will serve the light DENNIS ODA / broth with soft rice and a poached egg, garnished with nori, bubu arare and a takuan she makes with rainbow radish, for a pickled, brightly hued element that was inspired by ume.

"I might throw some greens in there — my mom always put in mizuna. It depends on what's available," she said.

For Campanale, using tea in her food isn't a new concept. The Nook menu includes a couple of items that incorporate the Sexpot tea, including a savory version of orange

chicken and a poached pineapple for French toast. A seared duck dish utilizes another tea, All for the Nookie, a fruity concoction of hibiscus, rose hip, pineapple, orange, apple, cinnamon and coconut that T-We makes exclusively for the restaurant. Campanale also loves crafting cocktails — so much so that the restaurant’s cocktail list is always evolving — and she turns the teas into simple syrups for the drinks.



Anicea Campanale, chef at The Nook Neighborhood Bistro, pours hot stock over the ingredients in her Sexpot Ochazuke, developed for this year’s Empty Bowl Hawaii benefit.

Her familiarity with the teas’ flavor profiles made for a rather efficient process when it came to creating the soup. Still, it did take a bit of experimentation. A trial with carrots failed because they dominated the orange and elderflower flavors in the tea, making them undetectable. A broth made with salmon was too strong and oily. And as with every dish and cocktail, she played with brewing time.

CAMPANALE HAS had plenty of that. In a household run by “healthy parents,” there was no ready-made food in the pantry. “If you wanted to eat, you had to cook.”

She started young, about age 8, making rice and soup.

“I always liked cooking, and my parents were very supportive,” she said. “My mom did traditional Japanese home cooking. The food was plain, so I was always adding ingredients. That’s how I do things now.” Campanale’s family traveled, cultivating a love of globetrotting and an appreciation of other cultures that informs her cooking. Right after high school and before culinary school, she and childhood friend Hailey Berkey, coowner and general manager of the Nook, traveled around Europe — “It was amazing just for the food aspect alone,” she recalled. After finishing

school, she did an internship in Napa Valley and then traveled to Fiji. Then, 10 years ago, she came to Hawaii to visit Berkey, who had relocated. “I fell in love with Hawaii,” she said. “We were on a backpacking trip on the Big Island with Hailey’s boyfriend, who was a diver. He caught lobster, and I never ate so well for a backpacking meal. It’s amazing how accessible food is here. We were drinking coconut milk fresh.”

She settled here and built her career in the kitchens of Hy’s Steak House, Formaggio Grill, Taormina Sicilian Cuisine, Alan Wong’s and 53 by the Sea. In between she worked a couple of seasons at an Alaska fishing lodge.

“My food is based on everything I’ve picked up along the way,” she said.

Through the years, Campanale and Berkey talked about opening their own restaurant, a place The organization, which has serviced Oahu since 1999, picks up excess food from 340 donors and delivers it to 182 nonprofit agencies to feed 52,000 people every month.

In 2016 the group provided 1.4 million meals by distributing 2.2 million pounds of perishable and nonperishable food. It has “rescued” more than 18 million pounds of food through the years. where they would deliver flavors they loved. The goal: Do it by age 30.

Three years ago, on Campanale’s 27th birthday, they decided it was time.

“I always wanted to acquire (enough knowledge) before opening my own restaurant,” she said. But she could never get to the point where she felt she had learned enough. Finally, “Hailey said it was OK, that I was at a point where people would buy my food.”

“Now it’s all about perfecting, and creating more and more food inspired by different local products, tastes and travels.”