



Food & Dining

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FOOD & DINING

Beyond BuHi: 4 international restaurants to try across metro Atlanta

Get the stories behind Oliva Restaurant Group, La Bodega and Nakato Japanese Restaurant.



A sushi platter at Nakato. (Courtesy of Nakato Japanese Restaurant)

By Su-Jit Lin

5 hours ago

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Immigrant restaurant stories are rarely linear. When it comes to international food in Atlanta, the history behind each restaurant is likely to be a long, twisting tale.

For some, like the first of our highlights in this month's globe-trotting culinary voyage, it takes some time to land on our shores, and even more time to bring their Middle Eastern past to our city. For others, it starts with sharing one simple Salvadoran dish, which then turns into a greater vision around serving the community. And for our last feature, it's about keeping the flow of cultural exchange open, finding more Japanese traditions to introduce to Atlanta in order to keep them preserved for all time.

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The interior of Rina on the Atlanta Beltline's Eastside Trail. (Courtesy of Oliva Restaurant Group)

Bellina Alimentari & Rina Kitchen

Tal Baum was born and raised in Haifa, Israel, but her journey to her current life as a restaurateur and founder of Oliva Restaurant Group began when she emigrated — for the first time — to Florence, Italy, at the age of 21. When she left to join her parents in Atlanta, Baum found herself most heartsick for Italian cuisine — the food of her first chosen home. That feeling led to the creation of her first restaurant, Bellina Alimentari in Ponce City Market — a love letter to the life she lived for seven years, written in pasta and wine.

It was this concept that paved the way back to her Israeli immigrant roots by way of Rina, a lively, casual spot off the Atlanta Beltline's Eastside Trail that introduced flocks of pedestrians to the beachy street foods of Tel Aviv. But as accessible as it seems, it's also one of her most personal spots, built on real memories, skills and flavors from her upbringing.



Pita sandwiches at Rina. (Courtesy of Oliva Restaurant Group)

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Rina is named after her grandmother, who “had an incredible influence on my love of cooking,” Baum told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, “shaping my connection to food and hospitality.” The menu reflects those “countless hours in the kitchen with her, learning recipes and techniques,” including what Baum still proclaims as the best falafel she’s ever had.

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By Alpine Helen/White County CVB



Jam-packed with fresh parsley and cilantro, plenty of garlic and warm spices, Rina’s falafel is a perfect example of what she’s most proud of bringing to Atlanta: “The freshness and balance of Middle Eastern cuisine; the generous use of fresh herbs, vegetables, spices, tahini, olive oil — food that’s deeply comforting, but also fresh, healthy, and rooted in generations of tradition,” Baum said.



Hummus and other mezze at Rina. (Courtesy of Oliva Restaurant Group)

This and the creamy hummus are both based on her grandmother's original family recipes and have become signature dishes at her namesake restaurant. Try the former in a hearty salad or combine the two in a pita sandwich served with housemade pickles. Or get the hummus topped with chicken shawarma or eggplant and egg as a shared appetizer. But don't stop there — mains like falafel-spiced "fish & chips" and harissa honey wings with decidedly coastal cocktails come together to define the word "happy" — the meaning of the name Rina — for those craving a taste of the Levant.

Rina. 699 Ponce De Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-343-0362, rinakitchen.com

Bellina Alimentari. 675 Ponce De Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-330-9933, bellina-alimentari.com

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Jeannette Flores-Katz (left) and Ken Katz, owners of La Bodega. (Courtesy of La Bodega Market & Pupuseria)

La Bodega Market & Pupuseria

In a cheery outdoor space furnished with picnic benches surrounded by flowers and produce in Atlanta's Sylvan Hills, Ken Katz and Jeannette Flores-Katz have proudly recreated the atmosphere of the communal gardens from the city of her youth: San Salvador, capital of El Salvador. The design, location and menu represent a mindful evolution from their first restaurant, Buenos Dias Café, which opened in 2012 at Georgia State University but closed eight years later amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having lived in Atlanta for more than 30 years, the couple has always been motivated to pursue a balanced lifestyle.

“We wanted to have a business that allowed us to be home for our kids and to bring fresh healthy food options to an underserved neighborhood,” Flores-Katz said.





A stack of pupusas at La Bodega. (Courtesy of La Bodega Market & Pupuseria)

But there's more to La Bodega, which opened just last year and was further fueled by a desire to "share all that we have experienced in the world of hospitality and retail," Flores-Katz said, sharing with the community an expanded selection of goods and flavors close to her heart.

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Her favorite pupusa — which she calls the heart of Salvadoran culture — is the *Revuelta*, which uses chicharrones made from local pork specially selected for its similarity in flavor to the pork she grew up with, as well as black beans and cheese.

"Add our housemade *curtido* (pickled cabbage) and roasted vegetable salsa, and you have the *exact* dish I ate as a child," she said.

The couple's goal is to share the small country's national dish with as many Atlantans as possible, which has inspired a variety of pupusa adaptations. Those include vegetarian and vegan-friendly options made with sweet plantains and black beans in spinach masa, as well as breakfast combos, like a version made with eggs, cheese and local bacon.



Jeannette Flores-Katz in her shop, La Bodega Market & Pupuseria. (Courtesy of La Bodega Market & Pupuseria)

These handmade, traditionally gluten-free, cheese-stuffed cornmeal pockets aren't the only items flying out of their service window like hotcakes. Central American and Cuban-style coffee and sweet pastelitos in flavors like guava and cheese are also popular. Marketgoers are also welcome to buy frozen pupusas to heat up at home and pick up local products like Barlow's syrup, Georgia Grinders nut butters and eggs, as well as Salvadoran horchata, agua fresca, and — why not? — cat litter and LaCroix.

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1975 Sylvan Road SW, Atlanta. 404-809-4158. labodegaatl.com



The Illuminati roll at Nakato. (Courtesy of Nakato Japanese Restaurant)

Nakato Japanese Restaurant

The longest-running Japanese restaurant in Atlanta may be on its third generation of ownership, but generations of diners have a very determined immigrant to thank for its very existence: Tetsuko Nakato. She opened this iconic spot in 1972, then passed the torch to her daughter, Hiroe Nakato, who handed control of the family restaurant in turn to her daughter, Sachi Nakato Takahara.

“Grandma Tetsuko was touring the South, visiting her son who lived in Charlotte, and fell in love with the green space in Atlanta,” Takahara told the AJC.

With hospitality experience as the former owner of an inn in Japan, Nakato decided to buy what was then Caruso’s and abruptly informed her daughter they’d be moving from Saga Prefecture in the Kyushu area of Japan to Atlanta to open a restaurant.

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A selection of sushi at Nakato. (Courtesy of Nakato Japanese Restaurant)

Fifty years later, the venerable doyenne's instincts have been proven right time and again. The restaurant features one of the only authentic tatami dining rooms in the United States, whose mats have been lovingly restored in Japan as part of Nakato's recent multimillion-dollar renovation. It remains one of the preeminent teppanyaki destinations in the city, now upgraded with state-of-the-art grills and ventilation hoods.

Yet the most important part of what is brought over from Nakato Takahara's ancestral land is not what came with her grandmother half a century ago. Instead, she said, "Since I grew up in the States, it's a reversal of thought. When I visit Japan, I think about what flavors and food I want to bring to Atlanta. I keep up with both trends and classics." This translates into a thoughtful kitchen menu, busy sushi counter serving traditional bites and Westernized originals, and new bar menu (and happy hour!) for a multifaceted perspective of Japanese cuisine.



A chef at Nakato. (Courtesy of Nakato Japanese Restaurant)

"But my passion goes to the food that lines up with cultural holidays and seasons," Nakato Takahara added. Under her leadership, Nakato has become a hub for celebrating traditions with special experiences such as the Osechi New Year meal box, symbolic ehounmaki rolls to be eaten facing the proper direction in silence ring equinox, as well as

old-world relationships between food and wellness, like nagashi somen to cool down during the summer and nabe during fall and winter.

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1776 Cheshire Bridge Road NE, Atlanta. 404-873-6582, nakatorestaurant.com

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Su-Jit Lin

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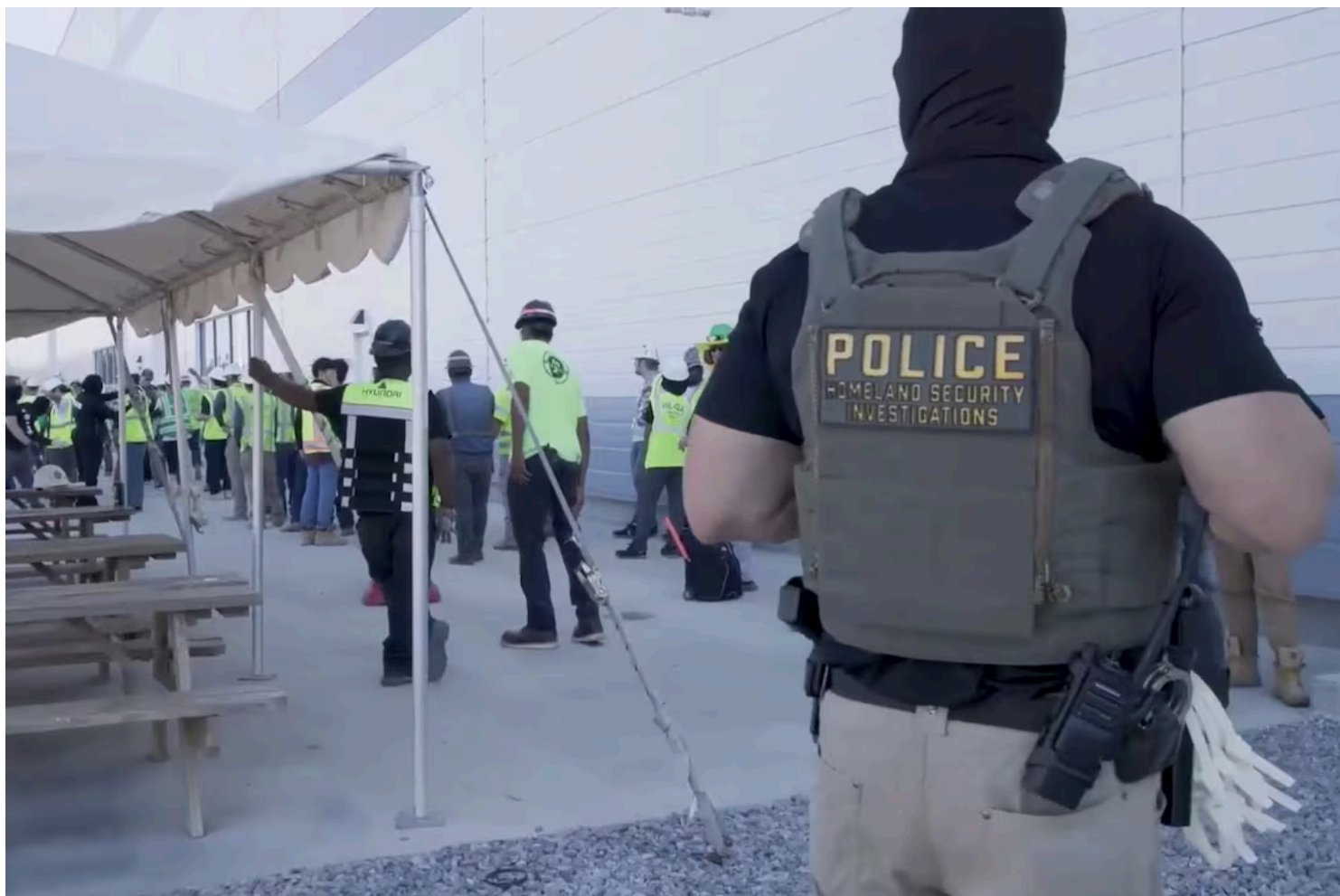


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