



Chef Laurent Manrique raises funds to preserve Tibetan culture

By: [Paul Gackle](#) | 10/29/11 11:54 AM

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Laurent Manrique is a chef who 10 years ago envisioned a new kind of charity dinner in which The City's top chefs would prepare gourmet, four-course meals right in front of their guests. The proceeds would help the Tibetan Aid Project preserve Tibetan culture by sending sacred texts, art and prayer wheels to exiled monks in the Himalayas. On Nov. 18, 23 of the Bay Area's most-talented chefs will gather at the Four Seasons Hotel for the 11th annual Taste & Tribute Benefit Gala.

Taste & Tribute is your brainchild. Where did this idea come from?

It was in 2001, I'd just moved from New York to the Bay Area and I started to take classes at the Buddhist Center up in Berkeley. I was wondering how I could help this charity, the Tibetan Aid Project, financially. I proposed the idea of doing charity dinner and I would invite some of my chef friends to participate.

Why does the Tibetan cause mean so much to you?

I'm really interested in Buddhist philosophy — and it's about allowing the culture of a country to continue. For me, books are very important. Without books, the traditions and philosophy of a country cannot exist. Preserving traditions, preserving cultures for generations to come is very important to me. When I first had this idea, my chef friends and I were already doing dinners for Meals on Wheels, dinners for HIV — over the course of the year, we do a lot of dinners for charity — so they were saying, "Why another one?" and I tried to explain to them, when someone tries to destroy your country, all the books, every trace of it ... we have to help.

How did you get introduced to Buddhism?

By curiosity. Somebody gave me a book written by the Dalai Lama. It's funny because I grew up in a Catholic family, but it wasn't a religion I felt comfortable with. Buddhism worked for me. My beliefs were very similar to that philosophy. I felt comfortable studying it and practicing meditation. It's not a label that I attach to myself — I'm a Buddhist — that's not the case. I'm not a monk, I'm not living in a cave. I do my job and try to be a part of society and the community and I just try to give back as much as I can.

What makes the Taste & Tribute event unique?

Usually when you go to these events, you're sitting at a table with people you don't know. You share some food, you share some wine, you pay for your ticket and go home. I thought, "If we're going to do something, we better do something different." I wanted interaction with the chef. I wanted everyone to get to know each other. So I thought, "Why not do a dinner where the chef is in front of the guests, talks to them and the guests can watch as he prepares the meal?" There won't be this separation between what's happening in the kitchen and what's happening upfront. It's a lot of fun.

Is it fun as a chef to get out of the kitchen and interact with your guests?

The guests were kind of intimidated during the first couple of years, but now we have a lot of people who come year after year. They get up, look around and get to see what all the different chefs are preparing. It's a good energy, that's what it's all about.

Was it hard to get other chefs on board?

In the beginning it was because as chefs, we're solicited all year to do these things. But they like it because we only cook for 20 people and it's really fun to be at the table. Now, a lot of chefs are coming up and asking if they can participate, but we're usually full right away.



Laurent Manrique (Joseph Schell/Special to The Examiner)

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