

quench

**ALL THE WEIRD
THINGS WINEMAKERS DO
ARE WONDERFUL**



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Haalaga taaw ...

These chairs have seated everyone, from famed activist David Suzuki to Crown Princess Masako of Japan, around a generous multi-course Haida feast. Following, “Creator for the food, and for you, I thank you,” a traditional prayer — and traditional Haida songs, if any of the young people serving feel so inclined — Olson likes to whet the appetite with all manner of dried foods; think k’aaw (dried herring roe on kelp), sguu (dried seaweed) and gilgii (dried salmon).

The main course includes spring salmon, halibut soup, ling cod and venison with wild cranberries, among other delicacies. For dessert: homemade rhubarb-berry pie with wild nettle, mint or rosehip tea. All locally sourced and handpicked by Olson, a food gatherer like her parents before her. The wild fish and game on offer may differ depending on the season, but no matter the time of year,

it’s never long before complete strangers commingle like old friends around Olson’s dinner table.

“Food lifts the spirit,” says Olson, something she first witnessed during the 1985 Lyell Island blockade, where Haida, including elders, stood before a logging road in protest of logging practices, and called for environmental sustainability and Aboriginal rights.

“I went down in the wilderness to cook for everybody that was fighting, blockading and stopping logging. It was stressful. Elders were getting arrested, and everybody, held off. And people were in tears. So I’d hurry to the little cookhouse we had and start making fry bread, anything. And that was the start of me realizing I had the gift to make people happy with food.”

In addition to happy patrons in Haida Gwaii, Olson has introduced traditional Haida cuisine to epicures farther afield, at panel discussions and fundraisers at the James Beard Foundation and the American Museum of National History in New York City, among other locales, garnering even more devotees in the process.

Though she admits she never measures anything, Olson would love to eventually write a cookbook. When the time comes, she has decided, fittingly, that much like her and in the spirit of Keenawaii’s Kitchen, she’ll simply advise home cooks to eschew the rules and “go by taste.” *

“THAT’S HAIDA FOR ‘COME EAT,’” ROBERTA OLSON TELLS ME OVER THE PHONE FROM HER WATERFRONT HOME IN SKIDEGATE, BRITISH COLUMBIA. For more than 20 years, she has extended this invitation to locals as well as tourists, travelling foodies and dignitaries passing through the placid island of Haida Gwaii, home of the Haida nation — hosting as many as 30 hungry patrons at a time in her home with the help of her children and grandchildren. Bearing Olson’s Haida name, Keenawaii’s Kitchen has acquired a stellar reputation for its traditional cuisine, unique atmosphere and breathtaking ocean view, flanked by original Haida art adorning the walls. Though the self-taught native chef says she never once envisioned that her living room would one day become a culinary hallmark people from all over the world would flock to.

“Tour operators came to ask me if I’d be interested in feeding tourists some local food because everyone kind of knows I like cooking,” remembers Olson. “My home turned into a private dining room. I had to move all my furniture out and move tables and chairs in.

“It was mostly word of mouth to start. My first few years were quite quiet and just people that I knew. And as time went on, with the [Internet], it just evolved from there. It’s still my ordinary house, just with a bunch of tables and chairs that I set up as need be.”