



## RESTAURANTS

## These Eight Must-Haves Keep Bento Picnic Chef Leanne Valenti in Balance

BY IVY MOORE • HOLLY COWART • JULY 19, 2019



### Made in Austin, Inspired by Japan

**WHEN LEANNE VALENTI** volunteered at [Johnson's Backyard Garden](#) in 2007 and met Naoko Atsusaka, she had no idea she would find a friend that would set her on an entirely uncharted course. The two women got along easily and started using vegetables from the JBG garden as the basis for meals they would cook together. Valenti happened to be a student at the Natural Epicurean Academy at the time and was already developing an interest in Japanese cuisine. With only so much knowledge to gain from within Austin city limits, Atsusaka suggested that Valenti go live with her mom in Japan. She took her friend up on the generous offer and what she experienced changed not only the way she cooks, but also her entire outlook on life.



Upon returning home to Austin, Valenti dove head first into her new business, [Bento Picnic](#). What started as a one-woman show on wheels is now a fully operational storefront on East Cesar Chavez Street serving up bento box-style meals. We sat down with Valenti to learn more about her life and business over a beautiful tray of fresh vegetables and homemade dips, effortlessly whipped up by the chef herself. She happily shared some of her tips and picks for staying grounded and balanced.



#### 1. Washoku

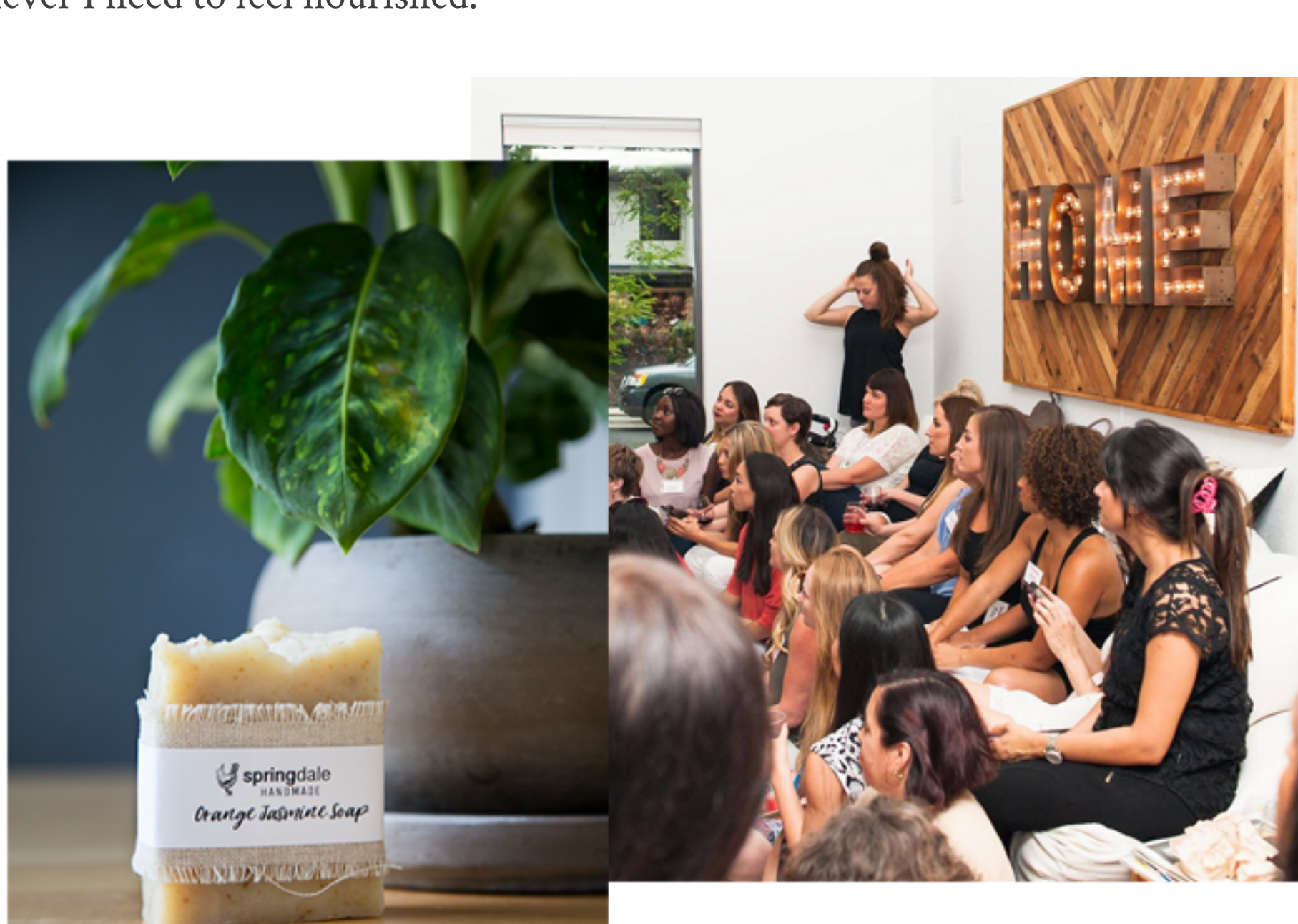
Washoku is Japanese menu design and it serves as the foundation for my culinary philosophy. Through my travels and research, I've discovered that using the colors, tastes and cooking techniques associated with all of the five elements makes for the most delicious, balanced meals. Whenever I am creating a new recipe, I always check off the boxes to make sure I'm following that practice. I love how this framework allows for individual creativity, and lets me ponder combining ingredients in ways I hadn't ever considered before.

#### 2. Reishi Extract

I've been using Reishi extract from [MycoMatrix](#) in my morning coffee or tea ever since Daniel Reyes from Myco Alliance introduced me to it. He told me that it would help keep my immune system strong and so far, so good. I started taking it about six months ago and I haven't gotten sick since!

#### 3. Casa de Luz

I love going to [Casa de Luz](#) because it is an oasis of tranquility right in the middle of the city. I especially love going on Tuesdays when they serve gorditas and pozole! Casa de Luz also holds special significance for me because it is where I took the majority of my classes when I was attending the Natural Epicurean Academy. I am grateful for everything I learned there and love being able to return for a clean, healthy meal made with love whenever I need to feel nourished.



#### 4. Women-led networks

I wouldn't ever have mustered the courage to start my own business or keep it going through hard times without having a strong, supportive family and an amazing community of friends and fellow women entrepreneurs. I'm so grateful for the mentorship and friendship of the women from the [Society of Women Entrepreneurs](#), [Les Dames d'Escoffier](#) and [Global Business Women with Heart](#).

#### 5. Springdale Handmade Products

I absolutely love [Springdale Handmade](#) bath and spa products – they're luxurious and local, made by two of my favorite ladies in town, Carla Crownover and Paula Foore. I especially love their loofah soaps!



#### 6. Hot Water Dispenser

I use a [Zojirushi](#) hot water dispenser for making tea because it holds water at the perfect temperature. A cup of tea in the afternoon is one of my favorite simple joys and this makes it so easy.

#### 7. Barton Springs Pool

Night swimming at [Barton Springs](#) is so refreshing and the only way to survive the Austin summers. Spending time outside with no agenda is something that helps me find my center.

#### 8. Kitchen Scale

Something that makes Bento Picnic unique is that I created the recipes by weight rather than volume. The thing I love about developing recipes by weight is that all you have to do is set your bowl or blender on a scale and jot down how much of each item went in the bowl. You don't have to fuss with measuring cups and spoons – which means there's less to clean up! Because we work in grams, we can easily scale our recipes without sacrificing consistency or quality, which gives me peace of mind.

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