

In its energetic new director, Maine Jewish Museum also got a professional cook

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By Peggy Grodinsky September 10, 2023



Dawn LaRochelle, director of the Jewish Museum in Portland, with her husband (and “sous-chef”) Nick Naunton in their kitchen. LaRochelle has always loved to cook, even owning a catering business and restaurant for a time.
Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer

When the Maine Jewish Museum hired Dawn LaRochelle as executive director, the board probably didn’t realize they were getting a twofer. That not only would LaRochelle – a 5-foot tall, exuberantly dressed bundle of unflagging energy – perform the usual duties of executive director (oversee the museum, plan and institute new programs, raise money, conduct outreach and such), she’d also operate as in-house caterer of sorts.

But since starting at the museum in April 2022, [LaRochelle](#) has, in fact, catered several events, both for the museum and Maine’s greater Jewish community, most recently making the food for 200 guests attending the museum’s sold-out [fashion show fundraiser](#) in August. LaRochelle’s many and varied past lives include running a kosher catering business and a restaurant in the Berkshires.

“I don’t think anybody thought she would offer to cater. We thought that was behind her. She’s *not* required,” said museum board member Amy Tinkle, adding that the board was “thrilled” when LaRochelle volunteered to do the food for the event.

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Among the other programs in Portland for which LaRochelle and her “sous-chef” husband Nick Naunton have cooked, at cost and with imaginative menus that reflected the events, were the deli-themed Delancey on Deering, the Maine Jewish Summer Camp Experience, and Chinese Food and Films – that last scheduled for Christmas Day, when it’s a bit of a joke among American Jews that since almost everything else is closed, the perfect Dec. 25 activity is to order Chinese food and go to the movies.

By the way, catering also is a volunteer side gig for Naunton, LaRochelle’s second husband, a tall, blue-eyed Englishman whose “real” job is in IT. In the basement of their house, sharing space with the heating equipment, an entire room has been given over to shelves of glassware, chinaware and cooking equipment – items like trifle bowls, Mongolian hot pots, punch bowls, copper pans and chafing dishes. The room also has shelves for the 19 three-inch thick black binders labeled “Dawn’s Recipes” and organized by categories (soups, salads, poultry, cookies ...). Open a binder and find hundreds of recipes systemized in neat, plastic sleeves.

LaRochelle’s food – and its presentation – are “fabulous!” Tinkle said. “She knocks it out of the park every time.”



LaRochelle in the kitchen of her new home. Did the kitchen help sell her on the house? “100 percent,” she said. She and her husband have added a six-burner gas stove. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

FROM ICE CREAM TO CATERING

If she hasn’t wandered in the desert for 40 years, LaRochelle has taken an improbable, circuitous route to Portland. At Duke University, she studied Japan and China. After graduation, she spent two years in Japan on a Rotary scholarship. When she returned to the states, she enrolled at Harvard Law, which she loved, then worked for several years as a litigator at a large New York firm, which she hated.

She took time off to raise her three boys, now ages 18 to 22, then moved with her family from the New York area to the Berkshires after 9/11 (“I was a wreck,” LaRochelle said), where she launched her catering business and

restaurant. She's also taught English and, before taking the job of museum director, worked for the nonprofit Center for Women & Enterprise.

But if her career has taken many unlikely twists and turns, her interest in food has been a constant.

"I have distinct memories of going to get ice cream at Baskin-Robbins," LaRochelle said, recalling her mostly secular childhood in Westchester County, a New York City suburb. "I have two older brothers and a younger sister. We'd go as a family. They'd pick their ice cream, and I'd be sitting looking at all the flavors and pondering. My dad would be screaming at me, 'For crying out loud! You're not buying the place!'" She mimicked an exasperated dad voice and laughed. "But to me, which flavor I picked was of the absolute, utmost importance."

At 15, LaRochelle became a vegetarian – a diet she later gave up, though she still leans meatless. Her mother, a busy pediatrician, told her she didn't have time to cook separate meals for family members, so she'd need to cook for herself. LaRochelle, who still remembers the first thing she ever made (pasta with roasted red peppers and smoked gouda), discovered she liked to cook and had a talent for it.

At Duke, she regularly blew out the dorm's power with her portable range-top. In law school, she co-founded Harvard Law's Food and Wine Society, which held elaborate dinner parties and wine tastings. How on earth did she have time for dinner parties at the famously demanding school? "I have a lot of energy generally," LaRochelle said (an understatement), "but cooking is how I unwind." Among the things she loathed about her stint as a litigator was that she had no time to cook.

In the early 2000s, in the Berkshires, raising little boys and getting weary of pushing Tonka trucks for their entertainment, LaRochelle noticed a void in the local marketplace. Many strictly practicing Jews vacationed in the beautiful region a few hours north of New York, but there was no kosher caterer. With no professional experience as a cook, but a lot of confidence and drive, she founded Bete' Avon! (Hebrew for bon appetit). "I've never done it before," she told herself, "but I can figure it out. I'm bright." And she did. It went so well, she followed up with a second company, the kosher-style caterer Apogee; kosher-style eating eschews foods like pork and shellfish but takes a relaxed attitude toward many other stringent kosher laws.

But soon the logistics of running two catering businesses that required two separate kitchens were driving the highly organized, detail-oriented LaRochelle crazy. All her problems would be solved, she felt sure, if she only had a restaurant kitchen to work out of so she could streamline things. When a space became available in a beautiful, 200-year-old colonial in South Lee, Massachusetts, she signed a lease, found a chef and in 2009 opened the fine-dining Perigee. She ran it alongside her catering jobs.



LaRochelle has shelves of cookbooks in the basement, and almost 20 thick binders filled with her recipes. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

LaRochelle keeps three art-portfolio-size scrapbooks filled with Perigee memorabilia – menus, effusive thank-you notes from happy customers, advertisements, dozens of newspaper articles, including in the Berkshire Eagle and Boston Globe. But though her pride in the place is clear, she freely admits that opening it was a terrible mistake. Running a restaurant, she discovered, was nothing like running a catering business. She ordered badly, and food

rotted – money out the door. The town put up obstacles. Thunderstorms cut off the power and shuttered the restaurant for days – more money gone. Good kitchen help was nearly impossible to find, and she spent her days dealing with headaches, like fixing overflowing grease traps.

“I was losing my shirt. Every penny I made catering, I was losing at the restaurant,” she said. “Then I made the really bad mistake: I took it very, very personally. I couldn’t let it fail because this was me. This was my food. This was my love.”

By the time LaRochelle finally closed Perigee in 2015, for the first time in her life, she was sick of food and sick of cooking.

“That, for me, was such a blow,” she said. “All my life, I’d always succeeded in things. I went to Harvard. I was on top of my game. This was a real kick in the butt.”



Dawn LaRochelle tops her grandmother Anna’s apple cake with caramel, her own addition to the recipe. “If you really want to go to town on this, a little bit of Maldon salt on top will take it to perfection,” she says. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

BECOMING A HOME COOK

LaRochelle was sitting in her comfortable and lovely white kitchen in her comfortable and lovely art-filled home in the Oakdale neighborhood when she related this long and winding tale that eventually led to Portland – for the museum job, specifically, but it had been a dream destination for the couple, who were wowed by the restaurant scene as visitors. This will be their first time celebrating Rosh Hashanah – the Jewish New Year, which begins Friday evening – in Maine.

She’s long since gotten her cooking mojo back. When asked for an interview on food, specifically food for Rosh Hashanah, she agreed on the spot: “You’re talking my language.”

“Part of what I love about it now,” she said, “is I now have the freedom to cook the way I want for people that I love.”

The Jewish calendar will turn to 5784 this year. Her celebration will be an intimate gathering, only six people including herself, her husband and her oldest son, who is living with them while getting his master’s in education at the University of Southern Maine. But despite the size of the gathering, she has brought every bit of her fierce organizational skills and buoyant energy to bear on the holiday menu and décor. In Judaism, she explained, “so much of what is spiritual and beautiful takes place in the home, and much of it involves food.”

The menu will encompass apples and honey, beets, black-eyed peas, pomegranates, dates, carrots, fish and a [round loaf of challah](#). Each item has a symbolic meaning, much of it based on wordplay. The apples and honey, for instance, represent hopes for a sweet new year. LaRochelle plans to offer her guests a [honey flight](#), including blueberry honey, in honor of her new home, and Rwandan honey, because she and Naunton recently returned from a vacation there. Bees, as it happens, are LaRochelle’s “spirit animal,” she said (think busy bees). You can find their representation around her home: a fat glass bee ornament hanging in a living room window, a daffy bee-shaped clock in the kitchen, spoon and fork handles stamped with bees.

LaRochelle’s partial Rosh Hashanah menu includes Everything Bagel Smoked Salmon Deviled Eggs, Beet Bites, Maine Blueberry Gazpacho shooters, pomegranate-glazed salmon, maybe carrot kugel and definitely her grandmother Anna’s homey apple cake, “the piece de resistance.” The cake has been on her Rosh Hashanah table without fail for decades, though LaRochelle dresses it up with homemade “goof-proof” caramel sauce, whipped cream and Maldon salt. “When I make this apple cake, instantly I’m thinking of my grandmother,” she said.

To barely scratch the surface of symbolism, the round challah represents continuity. The pomegranate and dates are among the seven native fruits of Israel. The Hebrew word for “carrots” sounds like the Hebrew word for “decree,” and “we want God to, when he looks in his little black book, to decree us worthy of another year of life,” LaRochelle said. As for the fish, it used to be thought that fish never sleep and likewise, “we should always be looking for ways to improve, to make the world a better place.”

The vegetarians at the table will get pomegranate-glazed, home-smoked tofu. She’s giving it the same culinary treatment as the fish because making people feel welcome is important to her, personally and professionally. LaRochelle recalled that when she was a vegetarian and eating out, she often had to make do with a salad or vegetable plate. “I want everyone, no matter what their food preferences are, to feel they are not the also-ran.”

As the new year approaches, LaRochelle is thinking about how she can improve. Rosh Hashanah, which kicks off a 10-day period known in Judaism as the High Holy Days or the Days of Awe, is a serious season. Though she is a fluent Mandarin speaker, she hopes to practice more this year. Her Spanish is not up to snuff and she’d also like to work on that. LaRochelle hopes her sons will continue to grow and thrive, and the museum will continue to “use our Jewish core as a springboard for outreach to other historically and systemically marginalized communities and immigrant groups.”

“And,” she said, “I want to get back into ballroom dancing with Nick.”



LaRochelle's "Beet Bites," which she'll serve on Rosh Hashanah this Friday evening. LaRochelle normally makes these with candied orange slices, but she happened to have candied lemon peel around, so that's what she used for the photo shoot. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

BEEB BITES WITH HERBED CHEVRE AND CANDIED ORANGE SLICES

LaRochelle says: "The Hebrew word for 'beet' (selek) is similar to the word for 'remove.' They are traditionally eaten on Rosh Hashanah to express the hope that our enemies will depart and/or we will remove our sins in the New Year.

"While I am normally a fan of roasting fresh local beets, in this case the jarred pickled beets work well, both because the vinegary taste marries nicely with the creamy herbed chevre and because they are pre-cut into uniformly thick circles. I like to use my smallest biscuit cutter to turn them into one-to-two bite hors d'oeuvres."

Yield: Approx. 30 beet hors d'oeuvres

FOR THE BEETS:

1 15-ounce jar sliced pickled beets
4 ounces herbed chevre, softened (cut with cream cheese or replace entirely with herbed cream cheese if you do not love the "funk" of chevre)
Chopped fresh chives, for garnish

FOR THE QUICK CANDIED ORANGE SLICES:

2-3 large oranges (organic is best)
2 cups sugar (plus extra for coating)
1 ½ cups water

To make the Quick Candied Orange Slices, wash oranges with diluted white vinegar to remove wax, dirt and pesticides, since you will be eating the peel. Using your sharpest knife, cut the oranges into slices roughly 1/8-inch thick. In a large pot, bring the water and sugar to a simmer; continue simmering until the sugar is dissolved.

Add the orange slices to the sugar water, adding more water if necessary (if you add a lot more water, add extra sugar, too). Simmer, covered, for about 1 hour, until the fruit is translucent and the peel has softened but is not falling apart. If possible, flip the top slices gently a few times as they simmer so they are evenly candied.

Preheat oven to 175 degrees F (or lowest setting). Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

Gently remove the orange slices from the simmering sugar water and place onto the parchment-lined baking sheets, leaving a bit of space between each slice to help them dry evenly – if they are placed too close together, they will steam and not dry. Bake for 1-2 hours, until dry but still slightly tacky. The oranges should have hardened enough to keep their shape but not so much that they can't be bent and shaped. Basically like candied fruit – which is what these are!

Coat in sugar. Cool to room temperature for at least an hour before using or storing.

To make the beet hors d'oeuvres, drain all the liquid from the jar of pickled beets. Line a baking sheet with paper towels and lay the beets out to dry, blotting the top sides. Flip after five minutes and blot again to ensure that most of the liquid has been absorbed by the paper towels. You can also leave the beets uncovered in the refrigerator overnight to dry them out even more.

Using a 1-inch round cookie or biscuit cutter, cut the beets into small rounds. Place the softened herbed chevre in a piping bag fitted with a star tip. Pipe onto the beet rounds. Sprinkle beets with chopped fresh chives and garnish with a wedge of candied orange. Serve slightly chilled but not refrigerator cold for peak of flavor.



LaRochelle's Everything Bagel Smoked Salmon Deviled Eggs. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

EVERYTHING BAGEL SMOKED SALMON DEVILED EGGS

LaRochelle says: “The egg is richly symbolic in Jewish tradition, embodying a resilience despite its fragility that beautifully represents Jewish history. It also symbolizes the circle of life generally and new beginnings in particular, something very appropriate for Rosh Hashanah. Fish is also often served at Rosh Hashanah because according to legend, just as fish swim constantly without sleeping, so should we ceaselessly work toward ‘tikkun olam’ (making the world a better place).”

Yield: 24 deviled egg halves

12 eggs (preferably local and cage-free – you will taste the difference!)
½ cup mayonnaise (Duke’s is my go-to, but Hellmann’s is also acceptable)
2 ounces Philadelphia cream cheese (block, not whipped), softened
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
2 tablespoons Everything Bagel seasoning, plus extra for garnishing
1 tablespoon chopped fresh dill weed
1 teaspoon white wine vinegar
Kosher salt to taste
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
8 oz. cold-smoked salmon trimmings – these are the fattier pieces that aren’t pretty but full of flavor (more if you, like I, sneak pieces of smoked salmon into your mouth while prepping!)
2-3 ounces “pretty” smoked salmon (more if you, like I, sneak pieces of smoked salmon into your mouth while prepping!)
Snipped fresh dill weed, to garnish

Make an ice bath: Fill a bowl with cold water and a lot of ice.

Boil water in a large steamer pot. Once the water is boiling, arrange the eggs in a steamer basket, place the basket on the steamer pot, cover, and allow the eggs to steam for 12 minutes. Immediately submerge the cooked eggs in the ice bath and allow to cool completely before peeling. Steaming eggs instead of boiling them ensures a gentle, even cook and gets you perfect creamy, yellow yolks every time! Steamed eggs are also much easier to peel than boiled eggs.

Cut the eggs in half lengthwise. Carefully remove the yolks and place them in a mixing bowl; set the whites aside. Mash the yolks and mix in the mayonnaise, cream cheese, mustard, Everything Bagel seasoning, dill weed, vinegar, salt and pepper until well blended.

Put the smoked salmon trimmings into a food processor; process until very fine (almost a paste). Add to the yolk mixture, and mix well.

Put the yolk mixture into a piping bag fitted with a star tip and pipe into the whites (alternatively, you can just spoon the yolk mixture into the whites for a more rustic look).

Top with thin slices of “pretty” smoked salmon, snipped dill weed and extra Everything Bagel seasoning. Refrigerate at least 30 minutes to allow flavors to blend.



Nick Naunton cuts a piece of his wife's apple cake, which appears on their Rosh Hashanah table every year. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

GRANDMA ANNA'S APPLE CAKE (WITH GOOF-PROOF CARAMEL SAUCE AND WHIPPED CREAM)

LaRochelle says: "Every Ashkenazic Jewish family I know has an apple cake recipe passed down through the generations, and every Ashkenazic Jewish family I know THINKS their apple cake recipe is the best. I, however, KNOW that MY apple cake recipe – passed down from my maternal grandmother, Anna Edis – is the best! The deceptively simple ingredient list yields a moist and robustly spiced cake that is more than the sum of its parts... and the almost cookie-like crisp topping seals the deal! I like to serve this cake with a goof-proof caramel sauce (no seizing, no crystallization) and handmade whipped cream, but it is equally delicious unadorned if you want a dairy-free dessert."

Yield: Approx. 12–16 servings, depending on how you cut it.

FOR THE CAKE:

- 1 ¼ cups oil
- 2 cups granulated sugar (I like Domino's)
- 1-2 eggs, depending on size (my grandma always went with 1; I usually go with 2)
- 3 cups all-purpose flour (I like King Arthur's unbleached)
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon salt (or more if you prefer – I like a bit more)
- 1-2 teaspoons cinnamon, to taste (I often sub in pumpkin pie spice)
- 3 cups Granny Smith apples, peeled and cut into chunks
- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- At least 1 teaspoon vanilla (I tend to go hog wild with vanilla, but this is a matter of personal taste)

FOR THE CARAMEL SAUCE:

½ cup salted butter

1 cup dark brown sugar

1 14 ounce can sweetened condensed milk

½ cup dark or light corn syrup (or a combination – depends on how dark you like your caramel sauce)

Make the Apple Cake: Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease and flour a 9 x 13-inch pan (not glass).

In a large mixing bowl, blend oil, sugar, and egg(s). Add flour, baking soda, salt and cinnamon or pumpkin pie spice. Fold in apple chunks, nuts and vanilla.

Spread in prepared pan (batter will be very thick!). Bake approximately 1 hour – cake is done when deep golden brown and a cake tester inserted in the middle of the cake comes out clean, with no more than a few moist crumbs. Cool on a rack; loosely cover with foil at room temperature.

Make the Caramel Sauce: Melt the butter and brown sugar together in a medium saucepan over medium-low heat until the sugar melts. Add the sweetened condensed milk and corn syrup. Mix constantly for 5 – 7 minutes until thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. Take off the heat and allow to cool slightly – the caramel sauce will thicken as it cools. Thin with heavy cream if it gets too thick.

To serve: Cut the apple cake into squares. Spoon caramel sauce on top (a sprinkling of Maldon Sea salt kicks it up a notch!). Serve with homemade whipped cream.



LaRochelle's grandmother Anna, originator of the apple cake recipe, is the little girl at right. The photo hangs in LaRochelle's home. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

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