

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Sohla El-Waylly

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a [SINGING] brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. [STOPS SINGING] This week, we're savoring the last days of summer with an episode from our archives featuring Sohla El-Waylly. A few important updates since we spoke in May 2021. One: Sohla's now released three seasons, count 'em one, two, three, of her HISTORY digital series Ancient Recipes with Sohla. She's the guest editor of the upcoming collection Best American Food Writing 2022. And Taco Bell's Mexican Pizza is back on the menu! Yay! We really needed this win and we really needed to re-air this episode because it is such a classic. We love Sohla, we're huge fans. We'll have your first taste of new fall programming next week. For now, here's our episode with Sohla El-Waylly, where I ask her: How did you develop such amazing taste? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for this gorgeous guest who I have been just, like, really watching for a hot minute. We love. Welcome to the show Sohla El-Waylly, who is--if you've been living under a rock--a recipe creator, a writer, and a video host. She's currently a resident expert at Food 52 and a contributor to New York Times Cooking and the host of 'Ancient Recipes with Sohla.' How are you Sohla?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:01:25] I think that's the best intro I've ever had. I feel so pumped.

**JVN** [00:01:30] Oh my gosh me too and sidebar, and this is really just a non sequitur. It's out of left field. But is this, like, Venetian plaster? Is it wallpaper? It's so pretty. These, like it's, like, it's, like, soft turquoise-y green.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:01:43] Oh, yeah. This is the office. It's wallpaper and it's, like, blue smoke, and we did the ceilings, too.

**JVN** [00:01:52] It makes me feel, like, [DEEP BREATH] really, like, really calm.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:01:59] Yeah. Yeah. I like to come here and just, like, it helps me focus, just stare at the ceiling.

**JVN** [00:02:03] Ah! OK. So I am not trying to do such a hard right back into my questions, but I'm going to because we have so much to talk about, and I'm just too excited about this series, honey. 'Ancient Recipes with Sohla.' So can you just tell me where were you, how did you get the idea? You were just minding your own business and then you were, like, what happened?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:02:27] Well, History Channel actually has been working on developing this show since, like, last summer, so long before I was involved. So they'd been working on it for a while and then reached out to me early on this year to host. So a lot of the, the recipes were already researched and they already had, like, a game plan of what we were gonna do. But we got picked up for more episodes.

**JVN** [00:02:54] Yes, you did.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:02:56] And for that round, I'm, like, going to get to be more involved with the research and we, we hope to, like, level it up. We want to, like, do some cooking outside, over fire.

**JVN** [00:03:07] Ohhh.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:03:08] Yeah, the first one, I feel like it was really good considering how quickly everything came together, 'cause I just came in and then we shot it all in, like, two days.

**JVN** [00:03:19] Well, I'm not at all surprised that History Channel pegged you to host it because you are a very versatile cooking queen. You do it all. You know how to do all the things so I feel like that's important because a lot of these recipes are very just, like, varied, different styles, different things. But one question that I had just watching it was, like, you learn a lot in the series, so were you always into history? Like, did that always kind of, like, make you interested?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:03:46] Oh yeah, when I heard about the show I was really excited because I love looking up ancient recipes. I think it's just really fun to see how cooking has evolved or in a lot of cases not evolved. Like there are certain things that are still done the old fashioned way, like mochi. And I think it's really cool how some of these traditions from centuries ago have survived. But it's also like a really cool way to get to know a culture,, in a lot of ancient cultures, it's a lot of stews because everything was cooked over wood or over like an open fire. And then there's other cultures that have more, like, baking and they have ovens. So I've always been super into it. And I really, I really am into, like, the kind of weird stuff too, like, there's this ancient cookbook written by Apicius and it's, like, ancient Roman cuisine. And they have some crazy stuff like, I really want to do this but I don't know if we're going to get to, but they have an aspic structure, so it's, like, meat gelatin, and then on the inside there's a live fish. So it's like an edible aquarium.

**JVN** [00:04:48] So I have, like, a basic question and I'm going to have to ask it because I, it's Getting Curious and it's fine for me to not know. What's aspic?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:04:56] Aspic is just jello, but meat, savory meat jello, which was very popular back in the day.

**JVN** [00:05:03] I don't think I've ever had a savory jello.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:05:07] Yeah, me neither, that's what I really want to make it.

**JVN** [00:05:11] Interest!

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:05:12] Yeah.

**JVN** [00:05:13] Wait, so now because I was so stuck on what aspic was the whole time, will you just say what, like what it was again. It's, like, a big aspic what?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:05:19] It's, like, a big fish tank, like, an edible fish tank. So it's made out of this meat jello and then there's a fish inside.

**JVN** [00:05:28] A *literal* fish?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:05:29] Yeah, and this is, like, a real recipe from ancient times. And I was like, *whoa*.

**JVN** [00:05:34] Like, so is the aspic filled with water? It's, like, but it's a dead fish? No, it's like a live fish.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:05:39] No it's, it's a live fish, swimming around-

**JVN** [00:05:42] No!

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:05:43] -In, in a jello bowl. It's really crazy.

**JVN** [00:05:45] So is the aspic see-through or is it, like-

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:05:48] Yeah! So it's a little bit see-through. Yeah. But, like, meat-colored.

**JVN** [00:05:54] I am gagged, gooped, wasn't ready for it this morning, I didn't see it coming. Ok, wait, so Pompeii, like, whenever I hear anything about Pompeii, it just makes me, like, kind of sad, but that cheese bread looked so good.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:06:10] That was really good. And I thought it was really cool how they actually found fossilized bread in the oven. I mean, the whole story of Pompeii is so interesting because people were, like, frozen in time and you can actually see the way they lived in a way that you can't with other historical sites. So I thought that was crazy, that the bread was still in the oven.

**JVN** [00:06:30] Ok, not to be, like, a gross person who, like, asks a question, like, in reference to themselves, but I once did this web series called 'Gay of Thrones,' where, like, I recap, you know, like, 'Game of Thrones.' Did you ever just—

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:06:39] I know I've seen it!

**JVN** [00:06:40] Ok [MUMBLES] could you ever just, could I ever put you on the spot to do like almost like a mini highlight version, like a la Sohla on 'Gay of Thrones,' a la your YouTube series, just about, like, per each one, what was like the most interesting thing that you learned that didn't get on the episode, just, like, referentially or, like, that you learned about, like the time that you were just, like, "What?!" But actually, if it took you, like, ten

minutes I would really intently listen and like most likely not interrupt because I just want to hear you talk about it. You know what I'm saying? So for the first one, Sohla on 'Gay of Thrones' style recap what were, like, all the things about Pompeii?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:07:20] Oooh [LAUGHS] I, it's crazy; I don't remember. So much, we do so much so fast. We did six episodes in two days and it's all a blur. It's all just, like, a big magical blur.

**JVN** [00:07:32] Life be like that sometimes.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:07:35] Yeah, I need a journal!

**JVN** [00:07:37] They say it helps you remember. Ok, but so how, what are, so let's go back, let's, like, smell the bread in your brain. Let's, like, think about those two days. What were some of the things that you learned about Pompeii that you just thought was much fascinating?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:07:51] Hmm. Well, they do make a lot of different kinds of cheese. We just did a really simple one with just rennet and straining it, like, a really fresh, soft cheese. But I thought it was interesting how, like, that's still how you make cheese today, you know. There's so many things that are still the way you did it back then. And it was super simple, but really delicious, because we got, we got really good high quality goat milk. We tried to make it, like, the way they would actually do it and then they would eat it with mint and fig and walnuts, which, like, I haven't, I don't really use a lot of mint in my life, but it made me realize I need to use more mint because it just brightened it up in a nice way.

**JVN** [00:08:38] And it just gives it, like, a little bit of a green.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:08:41] Yeah, yeah. It was dried mint, too. But it's, like, nice freshness to this funky cheese. It worked really well. they would also stamp the bread with a stamp to, to, like, it was, like, the branding of the Pompeii era. So all the bakeries had their own, like, stamp and they would brand the bread. So History Channel actually made, like, a history brand to stamp the bread, which I thought was really fun.

**JVN** [00:09:06] How interest! Because they found those stamps, like, in the little, like in the ruins?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:09:12] Yeah, yeah. Well, the History Channel ordered this stamp from somewhere in the midwest a while ago, but it was when there was a snowstorm. So it actually didn't arrive for me to use it on set. So they later on added the stamp. But I really, I hope I get to play with that again because it sounds really fun to, like, brand some bread.

**JVN** [00:09:33] I mean, that is fun. Of the six, not to make you, like, pick a favorite baby, but did you have one that was accidentally your favorite or that you learned the most on?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:09:43] Yeah, definitely. The last episode was ancient hamburger, and it was a Chinese sandwich kind of thing with, it's called Rou Jia Mo, and it was braised pork belly inside of this bread that was, like, coiled up and kind of flaky. It's almost like an English muffin. You griddle it and then bake it in the oven. And it was really tasty and I actually I'm going to make that, like, in my life because it's just flour, too. You can just make it, it's flour and yeast; we have everything we can do it.

**JVN** [00:10:15] Oh my God. And then going back to, you were just saying with the cheese, um, how do you make cheese?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:10:22] I mean, there's a lot of different ways to make cheese, but I guess it starts by coagulating milk. So you set the milk into a curd, the milk separates into curds and whey, and then you drain it off and then, like, the simplest cheeses, that's it. But then you can just take that curd and then age it, put it in brine, use different bacteria to inoculate it, like, stuff like blue cheese or a lot of washed-rind cheeses have different bacteria inoculated into it that helps develop, like, distinctive flavors. But it all kind of starts with the same way where you create this curd and then you do stuff to it.

**JVN** [00:10:59] This is another, like, really random question. It is, like, I don't know, well, but, just having followed you, like, I bet you're going to know, what's that thing where you, like, can take, like, if you run out of butter, you can, like, make your own butter something? I feel like I saw it on TikTok or something; do you know what I'm talking about?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:11:17] Yeah, making butter's actually super easy. So butter is just made from cream. So when you milk a cow [LAUGHS] or should we go from the beginning?

**JVN** [00:11:25] Yeah, well, yeah, I mean, if you don't mind. I feel like I'm asking all these basic ass questions but I don't know.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:11:32] No, a lot of people don't know. But, like, so when you milk a cow the, the cream rises to the top and then you skim that off. And then in a lot of industrial manufacturing, you start off by fully separating off the fat and then you have skim milk and then they add specific amounts of fat to create two percent or whole or whatever. But then you take your cream and then the way you make butter is you agitate the cream either by, like, whipping or shaking or in the olden days with, like, a big churn. And then the cream eventually breaks and you have the butter fat and the whey.

And then you just, so you can do this, I remember doing this in school, we had just, like, a jar of cream and we just shook it. You just agitate it long enough with a hand mixer, shake it up in a jar, whatever you've got, and then it breaks apart and then you can strain off the whey and, or that's the buttermilk. The liquid that's left behind, it's like that's the buttermilk. And then you take the solids and you just rinse it in cool water. The buttermilk needs to be fully rinsed off because it can make the butter go rancid. And then once, you just massage it in ice water, keep rinsing it until it's clear, and then you got butter. You can add some salt, put it on bread. There you go!

**JVN** [00:12:45] This one time I had, like, two percent milk and I, I thought that I could do that. And I shook it and, like, whipped it and whipped it and whipped it and shook it and shook it and shook it, and nothing ever happened because I think, because it must not work if you do it with two percent milk.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:13:01] No, there's not enough fat. You've got to do it with cream, heavy cream.

**JVN** [00:13:04] I, I thought it was close enough, I didn't realize. So can we, can we talk about that, the gorgeous pizza on a shield. Well how did they do, what, what did they tell you on that from that History Channel about the shield? They, so what if there was, like, blood and guts on it from, like, a battle and then they would just, like, wash it off and just, like, grill up a piece of bread on there?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:13:26] Yeah, I mean, I guess so. It wasn't, I thought it was going to be crazy, but it actually it bakes up just like a sheet tray, so it makes sense. I, I want to do that again, like on a fire, because they said that the soldiers would make these fires and this was just, like, a quick, easy meal. They would throw the shield on the fire, put the bread on it, that bread though, you can still find that bread. It's, like, pretty common in a lot of Persian grocery stores, and it's really delicious. So, that's, like, another one that I thought was really cool because it hasn't changed a whole lot. It's still around.

**JVN** [00:13:58] Ok of these six episodes, and then, like, just, like, other ancient recipes that you know about, what would you say are some foods that were just, like, really commonly used then, that was just like, like, you know, how we use, like, a cottage cheese or just, like, stuff that's very common now that you just don't hear as much about anymore. I mean, aspic sticks out to me, like a savory meat jello.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:14:19] Well, I mean, everyone's really into fermented stuff now because we know it's good for you. And I really want to make garum, which is this fermented, it's kind of like ancient Roman fish sauce. And they would just like, I've never made it before but I've read some like ancient recipes for it. And it just sounds like you let a bunch of stuff rot for a really long time and then you strain off the liquid and use that. And I'm like, that sounds cool, I want to try that because that's pretty much fish, fish sauce. You just salt some fish and it hangs out and it ages and then you strain off that liquid and it's like magic. So I think garum would be really fun to try. And then I also really want to try one of the ancient ketchup recipes.

**JVN** [00:15:04] Is that maybe in the works for-, is that one of the ones that you really want to do?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:15:09] Yeah, we're still, we're still figuring out, we're definitely going to do like a grilling blowout for the summer and we're trying to figure out exactly what we're gonna do. I really want to cook a whole lamb over an open fire, but I think we have to figure out the permit situation for that.

**JVN** [00:15:28] Yeah because you don't want to start, like, a whole situation, honey. Like you lose a leg and then it, like, knocks the steak over and then, like, it's, like, a fire, you can't have it. You got to keep it safe. But I do feel like you could do it. I feel like if, I feel like you can do it, put your mind to it.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:15:42] Well, yeah, in, in South America, they do this thing where they filet a whole lamb and put it, you know, like, 'Game of Thrones' style. And then you put it on, like a, you stretch it out on a wooden thing and then you just have the lamb near the fire and you just keep rotating it and slowly cook it. I would love to try that.

**JVN** [00:16:07] Ah, yes. Ok wait-

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:16:11] It must be a little intense.

**JVN** [00:16:12] No but it's gorgeous. I mean, you know, I just have to, like, yeah, it's weird, like, I was, like, a, like a, I read that book 'Skinny Bitch' when I was like 23 and then it, like, traumatized me and I didn't eat any animal products for, like, four years until this one day I walked past this like chalkboard that said 'steamed clams with butter sauce.' And next thing I knew I was at that bar and I was hoovering down steamed clams with butter sauce, like, they were running away from me. And then next thing I knew, I was, like, eating a steak and the next thing I knew, I wasn't a vegan and I've never looked back.

That was, like, so, you know, but still some days I think, yeah, whenever I hear about, like, a, I mean, it's interest, it's just, huh, but then it's still interest. And also, like, I fucking wear leather so, like, what am I talking about, you know what I'm saying. Um, ok, so I feel like you're adventurous with the stuff that you're try, you're, like, "Ok garum, like, I'll do some rotted fish stuff, like, I want to cook with that." Because you're very science-y, 'cause you really know all the things. But do you have, like, ever, like, a "Eugh, gross," but then you just, like, do it anyway? And what was, like, the most hardcore time where that ever happened? Or do you just not think things are gross because you're so science-y?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:17:13] Well I, I, there are certain things, like, certain raw things that I'm like, I have a little bit of trouble with, but I'll try it anyways. Like, I don't really like raw squid or raw octopus and I know that it is, like, a traditional cuisine in a lot of places, but it's just so much chew; I don't like stuff that's a lot of chew. It's like, "Ohhh," and then there's this other thing: sea cucumber.

**JVN** [00:17:38] Oh, I've seen that.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:17:41] It's something that they have in China and it's just, like, it's a lot of chew again. Things that just keep chewing I struggle with, but I do try it, I always try it. And I think it's just one of those things that, like, if you grew up with it, it's a texture you're into, you know.

**JVN** [00:17:54] Because it's comforting. You just have to, like, yeah. Ok, so most favorite food ever of yours?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:18:02] Most favorite food?

**JVN** [00:18:04] You can do, like, a top five if it's too hard or, like, a top three.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:18:07] I eat a lot of cheese. I love cheese.

**JVN** [00:18:10] What kind of cheese is your favorite? Are you, like, a blue queen? Are you like, like, a cheddar queen, a swiss queen, what kind?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:18:17] I like a nice washed rind, like, aged cheese, like, my favorite is Jasper Hill Farm's harbison. And when you get it, like, when you let it temper really nicely overnight, you slice off the top and you can just like, spoon it out. And it's just like fondue instantly.

**JVN** [00:18:38] Can I just say usually I'm not embarrassed asking what words mean, but there's been, like, 16 words that you use that, like, I just: temper, like, that just means like we let something get room temp?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:18:49] Yeah, yeah. Cheese in particular is best if you let it come to room temp before you eat it, because then you can taste all the, like all of the aromas are just like more alive if you let it take the chill off. But, like, if I'm being honest, a lot of times I eat cold cheese because that's a lot of planning.

**JVN** [00:19:06] Mmh, it's true. I mean, we, I keep definitely the cheese in the fridge and sometimes you just got to make some cheese and crackers right away. What would you say for people that are, like, new to cooking, like, they're just, like, brand new up in their kitchens, like, they're, like, maybe they really resisted in, like, 2020 and they were like, "I don't want to cook stuff at home," and now they've just started or they're just still beginners. What are, like, the things that people do as beginners where you're, like, "Ahhh, like, uhhh don't do the meat and the vegetables on the same cooking thing without cleaning it," or, like, what are the biggest things that people do where you're, like, "Oh my God, that's food poisoning waiting to happen." Or, like, "that's going to be horrific." Like, what, do you ever notice that? It's like when I notice, like, you know when, it's like chinstrap for me when people cut their beard right underneath their jaw, like, what are things you notice as an expert?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:19:58] I didn't know that was a thing you're not supposed to do, but a lot of people do that!

**JVN** [00:20:03] Well yeah, yeah 'cause really, like, you want it to be, like, down here where your face meet your neck, you don't want it, like, tracing your jaw because then from the side it starts lower and then it just like it emphasizes the part that you want to, like, kind of come in. You know, this part.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:20:16] Yeah!



**JVN** [00:20:17] What are, like, your top expert, you know, cooking things that you don't want beginners to do, like, most common mistakes that make you cringe?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:20:25] Well, I've seen a lot of people wash meat, which I, I don't know how to stop it, like a lot of people are convinced you have to wash meat to make it clean, but, but you're just kind of spreading the salmonella everywhere when you wash a chicken or you wash ground beef, the water makes everything like splatter and you're not actually killing anything. You can't kill it until you cook it. If you're concerned about food safety, you just get a thermometer and make sure everything's cooked through. When you wash meat, you're just making, you're making a mess. There's a bunch of videos online where people wash chicken and then they come back in with one of those infrared lights to show you where all the salmonella is and it looks like a crime scene. And if you don't believe me, if you head over to the CDC's website, they have a whole detailed thing about all the reasons why you shouldn't wash your chicken. So I wish people would stop doing that. Do you wash your chicken? You're looking at me like-!

**JVN** [00:21:25] No, but I do worry about, I mean whenever, like, I get it out of the package and I see, like, the liquid, like, splatter, like, I do really feel like in my brain, I'm, like, "The second I get this chicken in the pan, I'm getting my bleach water and, like, going ham." And I eat a lot of bleach water accidentally 'cause I do worry about it.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:21:42] Yeah, I mean, I think a good way to keep it a little bit clean when you're working with raw meat is: I always, I open up my meat on a rimmed baking sheet so that it'll just, like, catch all the juices and it doesn't run all over the place. And then and then I put that right onto another rimmed baking sheet with a rack. And then if, if it's feeling kind of wet, like, if you didn't get air chilled chicken, sometimes it's a little wet, it's good to dry it off with a paper towel 'cause it's just going to brown better.

**JVN** [00:22:12] So when our chicken's very wet, because sometimes when you do get it out it is just wet up in that pouch, you, like, we do want to kind of want to maybe pat that off with a paper towel?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:22:22] Yeah, yeah. It's going to help you get a really nice sear, it's going to get nice and brown and crusty, but yeah always, always dry your meat, never wash your meat, always dry your meat, and you'll be in a good place.

**JVN** [00:22:34] Ok, I have been having this issue with, like, mashed potatoes. How do you do a mashed potato?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:22:42] Mashed potatoes I think are, like, harder than people think.

**JVN** [00:22:46] Yeah! I keep fucking them up, I keep turning it into gum. No matter what I do, it turns into fucking gum. And all I want is mashed tatties, very nice homemade mashed tatties. What am I doing?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:23:00] Well, are you using russet potatoes?

**JVN** [00:23:03] I use any potato, I just, I just, I boil them and then I strain the water and then I mash it to oblivion and then it's ruined every time.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:23:14] Well, I like to use, like, a creamy, like, a Yukon gold potato. But russets are good, too, if you want, like, a fluffy kind of situation. And I think it's, it's gonna take longer but the best way to make mashed potatoes is to cook it in the oven with the skin on. But if you, it *does* take forever, like, lay down a bit of salt, prick your potatoes, put your potatoes on the salt and then let it roast until it's nice and tender and then cut it in half and scoop out the flesh. And it's gonna, it, like, concentrates the potato flavor, it dries it out so you can add more cream and butter.

**JVN** [00:23:52] I'm shook.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:23:54] And then once you have your cooked potato, don't overwork it. The best thing to use is a ricer. So it's this, it's like, it looks like a giant garlic press. You put your potato chip in there and push down and it pushes it through these little holes so you get a nice mashed potato without too, going in too many times. So if you break up the cell walls of a potato, it releases all this starch and it starts to get gluey. Like, the worst thing you could do is put it, try and do it with a hand mixer. I've seen some people do that. That's, like, instant glue.

**JVN** [00:24:33] Hmm. That's what I, it's literally what I use. It's either that or a blender.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:24:36] You use a hand mixer? No--

**JVN** [00:24:37] Yeah, like the immersion blender like [MAKES BLENDER NOISE] Yes. And then it's glue, it's like glue and it's, like, always ruined.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:24:44] You're better off using a fork or a potato masher.

**JVN** [00:24:47] Well, I'm thoroughly gooped and obsessed with that. I have another question about, like, food things. I love oysters and obviously, like, you know, we're not going out to eat as much and hopefully, like, you know, in vaccination land, that's gonna change. What about trying, like, adventurous, different things that you like at restaurants? But, like, I don't even know where to buy a fucking oyster.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:25:04] Yeah, yeah. I mean, that's kind of what we've been doing a lot 'cause we miss eating out so we're trying to recreate it at home. And there's been a lot of new companies that sell stuff online, so you could, like, get fresh fish delivered. There was this one company that used to supply exclusively to restaurants, but because of the pandemic, they've started to sell to home cooks. This is not sponsored, I don't work for them. It's called Regalis Foods. But if you want to get, like, any kind of fancy thing and, like, splurge, that's the place to go. Like, if you want to get uni or good caviar, they have,

like, all of the fancy hams, lots of different seafood. It's a nice way to, like, treat yourself. It is pricey, but it's, like, a nice give yourself the eating out experience, in.

**JVN** [00:25:51] I want oysters out but in! Like, I just want to put it on some ice and, like, put on all the little sauces and, like, you know, have fun with some little oysters. Not the big ones but little ones! Ah!

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:26:02] Yeah. And I think it's really fun to pop your own oysters.

**JVN** [00:26:06] So, oh, ok I'm going to take too much time on that, I need to get back to you, to the series. So what, did you learn so far about contemporary cooking from the series. Like, what do people glean about now from then and what did you glean about now from then?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:26:22] What I've learned is that a lot of the food we're used to now, like fluffy white bread or soft cakes and things, like, that, it really depends on modern tools and ingredients. You know, like, they didn't have baking powder back then so if you buy Rou Jia Mo today in China, that dough's gonna be a little bit fluffier and softer because they use baking powder. And back then they just did, everything was just, like, heartier, you know, dense. They lived, they lived hard.

**JVN** [00:26:54] That makes sense; I love that story. Ok, I have a, this is like another hard left; bear with me. Are you familiar with Taco Bell?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:27:05] Oh yeah, I love Taco Bell. Wait, so, my dad actually worked at Taco Bell for 25 years, so I love Taco Bell.

**JVN** [00:27:13] Do people know this?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:27:15] No, I don't think people know this, yeah.

**JVN** [00:27:18] So you, like, because I grew up, like, on some Taco Bell.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:27:24] Oh, yeah, yeah.

**JVN** [00:27:26] Deep comfort, like, comfort and all seven chakras immediately. Some people will be like, "Oh Taco Bell hurts my stomach," I'm like, "Taco Bell will cure a stomach flu in me." Like, if there's something crazy going on with my stomach, like, and I, like, Taco Bell is actually, like, an equalizing force in my diet because my body is, like, so integrated with it. I just feel like we are one, we are one, Taco Bell and I. So I'm sure that since you love Taco Bell, you, we all, you know 2020 was an intense year, a lot happened. But one thing that happened that did not get the press coverage and, you know, I think in hindsight it really makes a lot of sense why it didn't get the press coverage, because there was, like, a lot more important things going on. But sometimes, like, you know, joy is important. And one of my joys was the Mexican pizza. Did you like the Mexican pizza?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:28:13] The Mexican pizza was my standard order. I *always* got the Mexican pizza so I'm very upset. I don't know, like, why did they get rid of it? They have all of the ingredients to make it.

**JVN** [00:28:23] I don't, I, I, honestly cannot wrap my head around it to the point where it just occurred to me we should probably try to get like some executive from Taco Bell who makes those decisions and like get them on Getting Curious and give them the Judge Judy riot act and really just do a, "You can't handle the truth!"

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:28:40] I don't know what they were thinking. It just doesn't, it's a great, great menu item.

**JVN** [00:28:46] It was crispy, it was soft. It was-, that and the double-decker taco are the two things that I can't get over. And I think what that tells me is that, like, I do love, like, crunchy but soft at the same time. But again, the question is, I swear to God, I can ask questions; I do this sometimes. How can we recreate a Mexican pizza? Is it even possible? How do they source those, I don't know if it's, like, cheap ingredients that taste expensive. I don't know if it's cardboard cheese, I don't know, I don't know if it's NASA meat, what is it? Or is it just normal meat? What is it?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:29:22] I don't know if it's meat!

**JVN** [00:29:25] Some, like, dehydrated cardboard chopped up with some garlic powder?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:29:31] Yeah, I mean I feel like the magic about the Mexican pizza is the, the tortilla, like, the tostadas that they use because they're so light and crisp. But I, I, really, I really wanted to make it myself so I remember, like, looking it up because it tastes like it's a flour tortilla, right, because it's so light and crisp. It's not like the dense corn tostada you get. But it's one hundred percent corn. It is corn. So I think my guess is that it's very, very high hydration. If you have more liquid in your dough it, like, it's lighter and you get more, like, bubbles and puffs like that. When you're making, like, a tostada at home, like, the traditional way with the tortilla press, you can't have your dough too wet or it's gonna stick and, like, make a mess. It's just like the ancient recipes. The key to their corn tortilla or tostada is the, they probably have, like, really fancy machines that extrude the dough and can, like, I think, I don't know, I haven't been to a Taco Bell factory, but that's what I'm guessing. I think that they use a special extruder for a very high hydration tostada dough and that's how they get it so light and crisp, because I, if you just take a regular tostada and put them on top of each other, like, that is too much, it's too heavy.

**JVN** [00:30:48] Could we make a very wet dough and then just, like, plop it on a very, like, hot frying pan, like, almost like a pancake, but, but skinnier or something?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:30:58] Oh, like a crepe? Like a corn crepe.

**JVN** [00:31:00] Yeah. But like, like do you think that could, could do it?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:31:04] Yeah, I think it's worth trying. Totally.

**JVN** [00:31:06] I mean how are we going to do it?! I wonder once we get vaccinated if that's really our truth is to, like, figure out the world again. Because also Hardee's, which I think I've said this on this podcast, and then, like, we've had to edit it out like 75,000 times, but like, I realized they were like covert Trump supporters so that was, like, another, like, one-two punch for me, like, in 2020. But they also discontinued the cinnamon raisin biscuit, which was, like, equally as comforting and, like, one with my intestines as, like, Taco Bell; it just really made me feel whole and complete and that's another-

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:31:37] I've never had that before.

**JVN** [00:31:39] It, um, you know, like, so it's, like, like, you know, bacon, egg and cheese biscuit, like a breakfast biscuit, that like an American one, not a British one like that you get at like a fast food place. So it's a fluffy buttermilk biscuit but infused with tons of cinnamon sugar and then raisins and then covered in a liquid hot, if you touch it when you first get it from a Hardee's like it will fucking take your skin off, so do not touch it like, and like, and sometimes like the outside of that icing would form like a very light filmy case. And then there would be a volcanic magma breakthrough of the liquid hot icing from the inside that would burgeon out and like would burn you. But it was, it was so worth it, like I have had blisters on my hands in so many different eras from trying to like palm a cinnamon raisin biscuit like whilst driving because I couldn't even wait to get home. I mean, just coul-, I mean, just coming unglued. Yeah, they're gorgeous. And now I've said it to you, you probably won't ever have one because they were fucking discontinued and replaced with a shitty basic cinnamon roll that they've never even had before. I'm off track. But so, is your professional opinion, is what I'm hearing you say about the Mexican pizza that it could be almost impossible to replicate that Taco Bell sort of crispy perfection at home because we don't have, like, an industrial extruder, which is another one of the list of words that-

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:33:01] I think that, like, unfortunately, with so many of these fast foods and, like, packaged goods, it's so hard to recreate at home because they're just heavily dependent on machinery, you know. But I want to try. I really want to try. I like the idea of going for, like, a batter.

**JVN** [00:33:19] I thought, I was envisioning, like, something really like wet, like, I don't know what they're called, but if you just, like [MAKES NOISE] and, you know, like, kind of melted into a [MAKES HISSING NOISE] and, like, went very flat because it was very, like, runny. But I don't know. I literally don't know.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:33:36] I think I want to try that, like, cook, cook, like a, make, like, a masa crepe batter and then cook that and then deep fry it, and hopefully we get all those bubbles.

**JVN** [00:33:49] And then we just put our meat and our refried beans on it and then we cover it in cheese and then we put other stuff on and it's so tasty.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:33:57] I feel like my favorite thing about the Mexican pizza is that it was just so fun to eat it. You know, if it's like a nice, clean eating experience; you feel fancy.

**JVN** [00:34:09] Oh my God, wait, but did your dad, he doesn't still work there?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:34:14] No, no. But he did until I was, like, eight years old and then they got a Baskin-Robbins. So I'm, I'm, like, very into this world of food.

**JVN** [00:34:22] I fucking love Baskin-Robbins! You really had, like, a, no wonder you turned out to be obsessed with food, you just had, like, access to, like, some of the most tastiest American classics, like, Taco Bell and Baskin-Robbins; it's a wrap. I'm actually really impressed because, like, I would have never been able to have escaped, I really wouldn't have. So congratulations. I, like, I think that's major. So I think one thing after just watching the way that you approach writing and food, it really inspires me because you are so curious and you're such an expert. But I think it's, you have such an approachability to the way that you approach food because you are a literal expert at it. But you still have this, like, joyful curiosity when you approach it.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:35:19] I don't think I'm an expert. I really don't like to think of myself as an expert. I know everyone calls me an expert, but I just, I like to keep learning, you know.

**JVN** [00:35:27] I do, too. But I will, I'm going to call you out on one little teeny tiny thing that Taylor Swift did to me this one time. This one time, Taylor Swift came to my house, literally, and she made me this, like, coconut lentil amazing, like, stew. She's, like, the most amazing cook. And she made me this, like, coconut lentil stew with, like, sour cream and it was, like, so good on it. And then we were talking about, like, fame and I said, like, "Oh God, like, because, like, I was, like, I hate referring to myself as, like, a celebrity or, like, famous. It still, like, sends chills down my spine because it makes me feel, like, someone's going to, like, judge me or make fun of me for, like, referring to myself as that." And she was like, "Honey, like, you are though, so I don't know why you're even regaling me with this." I mean I'm paraphrasing here, but she was, like, "You are so, like, you don't, like, you're past that, like, you know, I've been famous since I was, like, 16 so, like, yeah, it's like I, I just, you know, the sky is blue queen, like, I'm famous, you're famous."

And so you're an *expert* at food because you are. I mean, I mean you, like, you are literally and even compared to anyone else. And then just, like, also because you are, so sometimes when you put in that 10,000 hours queen, you can't help it that you mastered a, like, but that also doesn't mean you can't keep improving and keep learning. But I will just say, even though you don't want to refer to yourself as an expert, as someone who's been watching, I can verify that you are a literal expert. So, and that's fine! And I just want to, I just want to hear about how you came up with that and just some of, like, your life philosophies of how you became so fucking cool.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:37:01] I mean, I don't think I'm cool, so I don't know!

**JVN** [00:37:05] Maybe that's why we think you're so cool, because you just are passionate about what you're passionate about and you do what you do. And that's really lovely.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:37:13] Well, it's kind of weird because I've always been, like, growing up, people thought of me as kind of weird because I just was super into my hobbies, you know. And now all of a sudden my hobbies are cool, you know, so it felt like it happened overnight because I used to be really embarrassed about cooking. My mom would throw a lot of dinner parties. She loved, she's an amazing, amazing cook, and I would always help and make some. I would make the appetizers and desserts but I'd always tell her, "Please don't tell anyone I made this, please, no one needs to know that I did it." I was so embarrassed and so ashamed. And it was, like, overnight it became cool to do this and I'm still the same loser, you know what I mean deep down inside, I'm still a nerd.

**JVN** [00:37:58] Why, I'm, I'm surprised to hear ashamed come out, like, come up because it's, like, why because just, is it because it was so good that you were like, "I don't want people to know how good that I am." Or were you worried that they were going to judge you or something?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:38:11] No, I, it just wasn't, like, a normal thing for a kid to do back then you know. All the kids did things like, I don't know what kids did. They were up on the AIM, you know, messaging folks!

**JVN** [00:38:25] Oh my God, that's definitely what I, because where did you grow up?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:38:28] I grew up in the San Fernando Valley. In LA.

**JVN** [00:38:31] That's in Cali- yes! I'm so Midwestern, I grew up on a cornfield, I still, like, even though I've lived in LA for nine years, I still struggle with, like, neighborhoods. So that's just, like, literally the Valley, where I used to like-

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:38:42] Yeah, the Valley.

**JVN** [00:38:43] Oh my God, an LA native; that's why you're fucking cool! LA natives have been through it, all that traffic and all those people, I mean. So you are, that actually makes so much sense to me. I always noticed that my favorite clients from when I did hair all the time were my LA native people. Most cool, most laid-back, because you've just been, like, I mean 'cause, and you went through that earthquake probably when you were little, like-

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:39:10] Yeah, yeah, we, we lived in the epicenter. Our whole house fell down. It was crazy.

**JVN** [00:39:15] It did not?! In the Northridge earthquake when you were a little girl?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:39:19] Yeah, we, we had just moved into that house, like, two months before the earthquake. And it was just really sad because it was my parents' first

house and literally everything, like, all of the exterior walls collapsed, all the windows broke, there were cracks running. There's still cracks that they haven't been able to afford to repair. But, eh, you know, at least we didn't have any furniture yet.

**JVN** [00:39:43] I didn't see it coming. So you guys survived that and your house got all messed up. That's so dev.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:39:51] Yeah, yeah. But, you know, the great thing was, though, we, my dad had a heart attack during the earthquake and, and then my mom—and I was, like, seven or eight, my sister was young, too—and my mom had to, like, run out and turn off the gas line on her own and, like, the bricks were falling on her. And then the whole neighborhood was concerned because we didn't leave our house yet and they all came together to help us, which was incredible. And I still remember that. And there was a doctor in the neighborhood who ran over with his little doctor kit and helped us out.

**JVN** [00:40:29] Did your house get, like, the most messed up, like, on the block?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:40:33] No, it was, it was, everyone's house was messed up but I guess because, because my dad had a heart attack, too, like they all dropped everything to come help us, even though they were in trouble too. So that was just, like, an incredible moment because we didn't know any of these people. We just moved in. And it was just, it was, it's crazy. I, I love how people come together, like, in the worst situations. Like, we were here during Sandy in New York and it was just, like, the most beautiful thing. Everyone who had power put power strips out so other people could charge their phones. I don't know, whenever stuff like this happens it makes you realize everyone's great, you know what I mean.

**JVN** [00:41:10] That is so sweet. I didn't expect to have that moment in our interview! Didn't see it coming. [CROSSTALK] I will say, no, no, I love it. But I will say this: I hope that, from our first time getting to, like, really chat and I hope it's the first of very many, it reminds me of my little cousin Sullivan, she's, like, she's so cute. She was, she was, like, the student council president, like, 16 million years in a row, she's so funny. So she has an older sister who's my same age and we used to like make up dances and we were like, "You can't learn the dance with us because you're not, like, you know you're, like, two years younger." And, like, we were, like, mean to her when we were, like, little because like you know like little kids are mean. And then all of a sudden, like, two years later, she was just, like, "Fuck you, you guys aren't even that cool." And I always have felt, like, I've always been, like, reasonably sure since I was, like, ten, and she was eight, and, like, she's way cooler than we will ever be, and she, she was! 'Cause, like, and she, and she I, I, you kind of you, you and my little cousin Sullivan, like, are giving me similar vibes if you actually, that has always made you cool that you knew what your passions were and that you knew what, like, made you really like you know interested. And I also think that we're the same age 'cause I think I was also seven in 1994. Oh, were you born in 1987?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:42:21] In 1985.



**JVN** [00:42:23] Oh I think you were, like, nine in, yeah, but whatever, we're still, like, very same generationally. That's so cute. So ok now I think I only have two more questions. What is the thing that you want more people to learn? This is very different question, but, learn or try when it comes to cooking?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:42:49] Mmh, I, I think, the main thing, I feel like it's hard right now if you're learning how to cook because of social media. I think it's, like, too much of an influence on people and I think a lot of people are, like, stunted because of it because you're really concerned with making stuff look nice. And I want people to try ugly food; ugly food is delicious and it's, like, getting forgotten. You know things like stews and braises; they don't get any love. If you know, like, 'video killed the radio star,' I feel like social media is killing the cook because we're just worried about making things that look pretty and a lot of delicious food doesn't look pretty. So I want people to try stuff that, that they're not going to photograph, you know. Go make some Japanese curry. You know?

**JVN** [00:43:33] Yes, which also I'm obsessed with that answer so much I can't stand it, but that also brought up another question I forgot to ask. What is mochi? How, what is that? 'cause I love it. But what is it?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:43:35] Mochi, it's crazy, because it's just rice. It's just rice that's pounded. I think it's so cool because you're just taking this one thing and just doing something to it. And it turns into something totally different-

**JVN** [00:43:56] Ok, wait. That frozen, that frozen, like, strawberry mochi or, like, like, that frozen little bowl of, like, ice cream stuff, that's rice?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:44:08] Well, the, the ice cream is ice cream, but, like, the, the chewy, the chewy dough around it, is made with just rice. So it's, it's a short grain rice that's very sticky. And then traditionally you just pound it and pound it and pound it. But nowadays people make rice flour and then hydrate it. And it, it just has this, like, chewy sticky texture. And actually, like, after doing that episode um some people reached out to me to tell me that they actually have mochi in other cultures, too. I didn't even know. But in Bangladesh and India, a lot of the regions there have a kind of mochi that they make with the first harvest, early harvest rice. They don't have the same kind of sticky rice, but the early harvest rice, I guess you can pound and get a similar texture. So I thought that was really cool that they have the same thing in so many different places.

**JVN** [00:45:02] Oh my God I love that. That kind of reminds me of Elizabeth Gilbert's book about, like, how, like, if you look through history there's been, like, a lot of incredible ideas even, like, before telephones and before Internet, like, that populated at the same time, like, across the world from each other, like, just, just to kind of illustrate, like, human connectivity. Ok, so Yogini recess: is there anything that we would just be, like, remiss, or like what's coming up for you, I, you're going to do another series of gorgeous 'Ancient Recipes with Sohla,' but is there any, like, Yogini recess that you would just be remiss not sharing with us that we like just didn't go over?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:45:34] I'm working on a book, that's, that's happening.

**JVN** [00:45:40] When's it out? Do we know?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:45:42] Well, the goal is for it to come out next fall. But I, I, I just keep going down these rabbit holes, like, I don't get anything done. I'll be, like, "I just discovered this cool thing about rye flour," and then I'll just, like go into this rye flour, like. I was thinking I want to do a series on my Instagram called 'Sohla Procrastinates' where when I'm supposed to be working on my cookbook and I just find something else interesting that I just, just keep digging at it. Maybe people will be interested in that. I don't know!

**JVN** [00:46:16] I, I would, I would watch it. I, totally, are you a scheduler? Do you like to schedule or is that not, like, your thing?

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:46:25] I do. I start the week with a schedule and then it completely goes away because I just, like, I like to go with what I'm the most interested in in the moment. And sometimes you don't know what it's gonna be until you start working.

**JVN** [00:46:40] Oh, my gosh. When your book is a number one best fucking seller because it's so good because you realize that, like, that's how you create best, will you please, like, let me interview you, like, once on your tour? [JVN CLAPPING]

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:46:50] I want to do this, like, every week. This is great.

**JVN** [00:46:54] I feel it, I feel it. Sohla I love you so much. Thank you so much for giving us your time and coming on the show. We love you so much. I can't wait for this episode. I can't wait for the next episodes of *your* series. I just love you so much and thank you so much for your time.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:47:04] Thank you so much for having me. I'm such a big fan, so this is great.

**JVN** [00:47:08] I'm a big fan of you.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:47:10] I wanna cook for you one day; that's the goal.

**JVN** [00:47:13] You, we will have to cook together, in New York. When I'm there we have to hang.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:47:17] Yeah, for sure.

**JVN** [00:47:18] And we'll cook.

**SOHLA EL-WAYLLY** [00:47:19] I'm into it, yeah.

**JVN** [00:47:21] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Sohla El-Waylly. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, please show them how to subscribe. You can also follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriousWithJVN Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.