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## TABLE HOPPING

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### First Came the Cookbook, Then Came the Baby

Vanillamore chef/owner Risa Magid Boyer celebrated the publication of her debut cookbook, *Sweet. Savory. Social.*, followed by the arrival of her first child.

By [Maggie Leenas](#) | September 28, 2020



The cover of chef Risa Magid Boyer's new cookbook, *Sweet. Savory. Social.* and her strawberry cream puffs. Photos courtesy of Risa Magid Boyer/Vanillamore

While studying graphic design in college, and with no food experience under her belt, Risa Magid Boyer landed a job in the kitchen of a Boston restaurant—the first step on her culinary journey. As she did both dessert and savory food prep, Boyer learned the ins and outs of professional cooking, and found it was where she belonged. She left school in Boston and headed to the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), where she studied the art of pastries.

After three years of owning and operating her own restaurant, Vanillamore in Montclair, Boyer has made her mark on the world of desserts and savory foods. Her new cookbook, *Sweet. Savory. Social.* (released last month), pools together her cooking expertise and personal recipes for food lovers to enjoy, including many recipes fresh off the Vanillamore menu. Not long after the book's release, Boyer gave birth to her first child, a son.

We caught up with Boyer to talk about the new cookbook, the inspiration behind the unique recipes inside it, and the past and future of Vanillamore.

**Table Hopping:** What was your background in the food industry, before opening Vanillamore?

**Chef Risa:** I grew up cooking at home with my mom and sister. Any time my parents had friends or family over, my sister, Jessica, and I would help with anything my mom was making. In culinary school, I learned about leadership, management, and how to build a career in the food and hospitality industry.

Both before and after attending the CIA, I worked a wide variety of kitchen jobs, including a cupcake bakery, a high-end wedding cake boutique, and large and small, casual and high-end restaurants. At each job, I picked up skills that would lead me towards opening Vanillamore. As a

small step towards restaurant ownership, I had a small specialty cake company as a side hustle for several years.

**TH:** What has it been like for your restaurant during the pandemic?

**CR:** On March 15, when we had to shut our doors for our regular dining operations, I was 14 weeks pregnant! This greatly impacted every decision that we made for the next six months. From the business perspective, switching to take-out was not a natural transition for us. Vanillamore is all about the dine-in experience—that is how the brand was built. We spent a week or so trying to translate some menu items into take-out items; however, we decided that it was not sustainable.

We shifted our focus to our online sales. We always had a line of retail items—marshmallows, shortbread cookies, candied nuts, mugs, Chapstick, conversation cards—so we decided to lean into our shipping operations. After a few weeks, we added items for local pick-up, like our dessert flights re-imagined into layered mason jar desserts, and DIY s'mores kits.

**TH:** Did you welcome back guests when outdoor dining was allowed?

**CR:** We decided to open for limited hours with a small menu. We could only fit about 16 seats outside, compared to the 50 or so seats we typically operated with. And I was about seven months pregnant, which was starting to restrict how much time I was physically able to spend in the kitchen. We operated under these circumstances until mid-August, and we transitioned back to our online sales as I focused on the final weeks of my pregnancy. Now, my baby is two weeks old, and in the coming weeks we will make some big decisions about the future of Vanillamore.

**TH:** What was the idea behind crafting this cookbook with your favorite recipes?

**CR:** The cookbook is an extension of the Vanillamore brand. The educational element of the open kitchen and chef's tasting menus along with creative sweet and savory menu items are represented in the cookbook. The essence of Vanillamore can be reproduced at home with these recipes.

**TH:** I love that you included blurbs about the history of recipes featured in your book. For example, your Grammie's bundt cakes. Was food always a big part of your family growing up?

**CR:** These stories about my family give a bit of insight into who I am as a chef, and where my passion comes from. Food has always been a part of my family life. Even though I didn't realize the impact it would have on my adult life and career, it definitely shaped who I have become.

**TH:** How did you choose which recipes to incorporate in the book?

**CR:** The cookbook tells a story. Each section—Sweet and Savory—creates building blocks from simpler recipes to the more complex. Many recipes also contain variations so that the reader is inspired to be creative.

The Social section takes the recipes and creates a guide for entertaining at home. The final section also shows how to combine sweet recipes to make dessert tapas, signature and seasonal dessert flights and dessert charcuterie boards like we do at the restaurant.

**TH:** What is your process like in coming up with new ways to “put twists on originals”?

**CR:** My pastry background is rooted in classical French training, which influences all of the recipes we use at Vanillamore. Putting a twist on it usually means adding a unique flavor combination or texture. An example of this is the classic lemon bar—this is something that you could find at most bakeries and usually has a shortbread crust with a baked lemon custard, topped with confectioners’ sugar. What we do at Vanillamore is use orange as the flavor base and top the bars with blueberry cream and candied almonds. We create something that is familiar, but unique and intriguing.

**TH:** Please tell me more about your chocolate salami. I’ve never heard anything like it!

**CR:** I have seen chocolate salamis in Europe and Canada, but it’s rare to find in the U.S. It’s essentially chocolate ganache with dried fruits and nuts mixed throughout, and then shaped into a log and rolled in confectioners’ sugar to resemble a hard salami. We then slice it into round coins and serve it on our dessert charcuterie boards.

**TH:** You said you were a little afraid to dive into savory dishes. Since doing so—and becoming successful at it—do you find crafting those dishes is similar to crafting sweet ones?

**CR:** I was tentative because although I have always loved to cook, I was trained in pastry. I quickly found my confidence after being thrust onto the hot line as our savory offerings expanded and I struggled to find the right cooks to fill the position. As time went on, I found myself spending a much greater amount of time on the savory side of the kitchen, which helped me find a whole new passion and perspective on savory food.

**TH:** Do you prefer one over the other?

**CR:** It’s rare to have an equal passion for both the savory and sweet sides of the kitchen, but I feel that my meticulous pastry chef mind helps me refine my savory culinary skills, and my more relaxed culinary mind helps me be more carefree and creative with my desserts.

**TH:** What are you hoping people get out of this cookbook?

**CR:** The cookbook was designed to be approachable. I want readers to be inspired to try new recipes, start with something simple and add their own twist. I also hope that these recipes help to create delicious memories in home kitchens everywhere—especially right now, when so many people are cooking at home.

**TH:** Do you have a favorite recipe in the book?

**CR:** That's not an easy thing to choose! I love all of the recipes, but my favorites are Vanilla Shortbread and Vanilla Pastry Cream—for their simplicity, Blackberry Lemon Frangipane Cake—for its uniqueness, Housemade Ricotta, Corn-Mango Salsa and the Sweet Potato Gnocchi.

*Chef Risa Magid Boyer is the owner and operator of [Vanillamore Restaurant](#), located at 349 Bloomfield Avenue in Montclair. Her new cookbook, **Sweet. Savory. Social.**, is available for purchase at [chefrisa.com](#)*

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