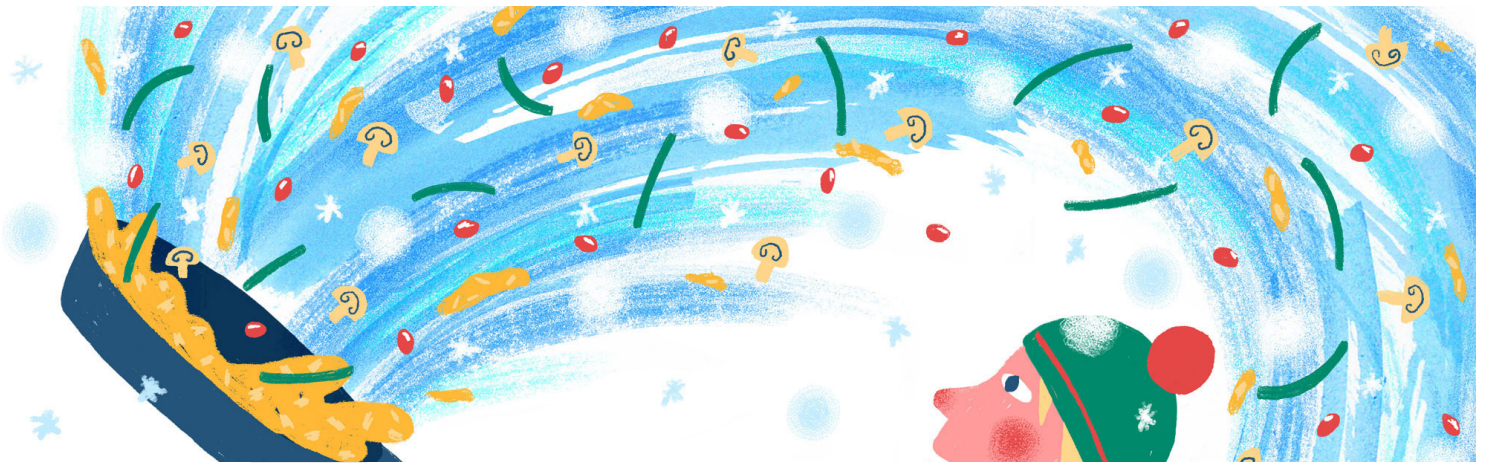


LUCKY PEACH



PROFILES

The Lone Chef of Palmer Station, Antarctica

A chef who follows the winter.

By RACHEL BELLE

Art by MADDIE EDGAR

Mike Hiller doesn't have a tan. It's kind of hard to get one when you opt out of summer. For the past three years, the chef has performed seasonal magic, making summer disappear (poof!) by navigating the globe *just* right, so he lives in a constant state of white and blustery winter.

From November to April, the burly, ginger-bearded chef lives “at the end of the road” in Homer, Alaska. Just as the days start to grow longer, lighter, and warmer, he escapes to Antarctica for a second six-month helping of dark, bone-chilling winter.

Hiller is the sole midwinter chef at Palmer Station, the northernmost and least populated U.S. research station in Antarctica. Every meal, snack, and birthday cake gobbled up by the researchers and scientists there is prepped, prepared, and ordered by him. The biggest challenge isn't cooking and living on an isolated chunk of land in the middle of the Southern Ocean—it's the fact that Hiller can only put in a single food order at the start of the season.

Fresh fruit and vegetables, or “freshies,” are fleeting and eventually fantasized about.

“Two months in, it’s nearly all gone,” Hiller tells me. “I can hold some cabbage back if I’m lucky, maybe some apples or some carrots. Even if the budget was a million dollars, you can’t order four months of produce. Tomatoes don’t last that long.”

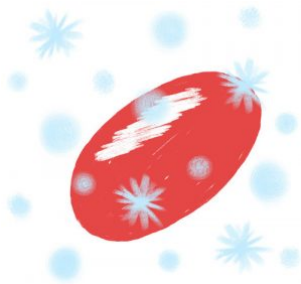


After the last of the mango cilantro salsa is lapped up, it’s up to Hiller to fight against beige-plate syndrome—to create meals that entertain, boost morale, and hold up on a buffet line. “Working in these remote places, I’ve had to definitely disregard any kind of purism I’ve had in the past,” Hiller says. “I can’t use artisanal flour ground by horses rescued by the former Ottoman Empire. I have to just use what’s available to me.”

He transforms slumping sacks of sugar into vivid red, spun-sugar roses, artfully arranged in vases on the dining room tables. He’s rolled penguin-shaped sushi, using snips of nori to create beaks, eyes, and wings, and stuffing their little bellies with raw tuna.

“People nonstop request my green chili pulled pork,” he says. “They absolutely love it. Sometimes I make my own tortillas so they can make tacos. I let people ask for it for a week or two before I put it out. There’s no better spice than hunger and desire.”

Though Hiller will valiantly attempt to cook any dish the researchers request, sometimes he doesn’t really think it’s food they’re after.



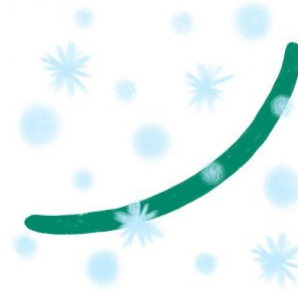
“Sometimes I can completely tell, right off the bat, that they really just want their mom to cook it,” he says. “I look at the recipe and I tell them to their face, ‘I can’t recreate that.’ They’re like, ‘Why? Here’s the recipe.’ But what you’re tasting from that meal is not what I can cook. What you’re tasting is your cousins running around your kitchen, the 3-D image of Jesus on the wall, the way your mother’s apron hangs. Those flavors I don’t have in my pantry.”

For the most part, Hiller works alone. Last winter, for a four-month stretch, there were only eighteen marine scientists and researchers bunking at Palmer Station, each of them obligated to help Hiller clean up the kitchen after meals. On his one day off each week, they fend for themselves, usually choosing to warm up leftovers pulled from the refrigerator endearingly nicknamed Debra

Jo. But there's one special holiday meal that nearly everyone helps cook: the midwinter's meal for winter solstice.

"It's been celebrated and revered since the old days of [explorer, Sir Ernest] Shackleton. They saved up their special foods to celebrate the winter solstice and had their biggest, best meal of the year, even if they were under severe rations. It's our biggest, greatest meal, on par with an American Thanksgiving, but I would say a couple steps above that."

This year Hiller roasted a whole hindquarter of guanaco (similar to an alpaca) that he ordered from Chile. There were cheese platters, king crab legs that he had kept hidden (so the crew wouldn't eat them in the middle of the night), roasted tenderloin with mushrooms, and a giant table full of desserts.



Living in isolation, with so few people, is interesting, to say the least. Hiller says you can easily make friends for life, but you also can't avoid your enemies.

"It can be really difficult and trying when you have so few people, so few outlets for escape," he says. "You have to see the same people every day, no matter what. You can't avoid them. Some interesting and unique social situations arise from that, and sometimes you do get a little depressed, sometimes you do long for home. We're trying to make the best of it and we're also trying to be very professional—it's a major U.S. scientific research base."

These days, Hiller is back in Homer, getting ready to open a restaurant with the only living thing he was allowed to bring home from Antarctica: his new girlfriend, Emily, the scientific lab supervisor and one of only three women living at Palmer Station last winter. He says he probably won't return to Antarctica.

"I did three winters down there. I actually got a congressional medal for going down there during the winter—an Antarctic Service Medal. Each winter you get a bar that goes below your medal but there's only three, one for your first, second, and third winters. Well, I got the third one," he says. "I don't need to go back anymore. I think I want to see a summer. I want to see what those are like."