

## Cooking From a Suitcase: An Alvin Ailey Dancer's Tour Menu

By: Noah Rothbaum

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New York is famous for its holiday traditions, including the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, the ball drop in Times Square, the midnight run in Central Park and the over-the-top window displays along Fifth Avenue. But my personal favorite is the residency that modern dance company Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater does each year at City Center.

While Ailey embarks on annual domestic and international tours, its final performances of the year take place in New York—home to its school and headquarters and where its founder, Alvin Ailey, started his eponymous company in 1958, with a performance at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA.

The City Center engagement, which runs through January 5, is no easy task to pull off, with eight performances a week and just one day off. And that's not to mention that Ailey has traditionally offered pieces from a range of choreographers that push both physical and emotional limits, including its signature Revelations.

Dancer Akua Noni Parker, who has been with Ailey for 12 years, knows how to prepare for the rigors of the schedule. One of her keys to feeling healthy and energized? A vegan, gluten-free diet. "I just tend to feel better when I don't consume meat. I thrive better when I don't have much gluten in my body, as well," she told me recently. What she eats affects, "how fast I heal, how good I feel and how well I sleep."



Parker loves to cook and takes it quite seriously. She recently took an intensive five-day vegan cooking class in Mallorca, Spain, and when she's on the road she often prepares her own meals. "I kind of cheat and cook in my hotel room," she admitted. In fact, her travel trunk is filled with the workout clothes, stretch bands and yoga mats you'd expect from a professional dancer, as well as pans, a hot plate, spices, cutting boards and utensils, including a peeler, a knife and a spatula. While her in-room cheffing normally works out quite well, things happen: She inadvertently burned a bit of carpeting in a London hotel with a hot pan, which she had to pay to fix.

During the City Center performances, she spends her one day off cooking. Generally, she'll run her errands on Monday and prepare three meals, which will be eaten during the rest of the week. A favorite is what she calls "one pot wonders," like bean chili, Thai curries and (dairy free) sag paneer. "Of course, you get bored if you make the same thing every week," she says. "My staple really is a curry lentil dal. It's one of my favorite things."



Her performance schedule can make eating a challenge, too. "I don't like to dance on a full stomach, but there are plenty of people in the company that would prefer to eat right before the performance," she says. "So I tend to snack more. I've been experimenting with some granola bars and nuts and berries and things like that. I try to eat heavier in the morning." She'll often start her day with homemade soy milk yogurt or oatmeal. Thanks to her cooking course, she's also been using vegan egg replacements and whipping up tofu scrambles.

Her love for cooking is not a complete surprise given that her mother, "cooked dinner every night and we had breakfast every morning," said Parker. "She would actually chart out a menu with a ruler. It would be on the refrigerator so we knew what we would have." And her father now owns a Cajun seafood restaurant in St. Louis called Gulf Shores Restaurant & Grill.

While her cooking class expanded her culinary horizons, she's still trying to master one aspect. "Gluten-free baking is difficult," she said, "so I'm still trying to figure that out." Judging by the delicious chocolate-chip banana bread she brought when we met, I think she's well on her way.