

Blonde chef turns heads — for her cooking

North Toronto kitchen boss bucks industry stereotype that ironically second-guesses females

KELLY GADZALA
Town Crier

Aurora Stranges recalls being interviewed for a chef's job with a Canadian casino about eight years ago, and of 150 applicants her making it down to the final five.

But it wasn't her Italian cooking that caught the attention of her interviewees. It was her blonde hair.

One gentleman, she recounts, said he didn't think she would cook well because she was blonde. Another, after tasting Stranges' cooking, said he never in 25 years thought a woman could fool him by cooking so well.

"I told him to never judge a book by its cover," says Stranges.

That's a credo she has stuck by. Not long after that interview, the Toronto resident, born and raised in southern Italy, was hired at North Toronto's La Vecchia restaurant. Now she's the head chef.

Though she worked her way up the ranks as many chefs do, Stranges says she's still confronted with similar assumptions about cooking and gender.

"Customers are often surprised that the head chef is a female," she said in an interview, adding there's a general perception women can't handle the pressure of working in a professional kitchen. It's a rather ironic perception, she admits, considering the association between women and cooking.

But there seems to be a grain of truth to the idea that, in a professional kitchen, only the strong survive.

"You have to prove yourself," she said. "You have to show you know what you're doing."

"I have a really strong character. I'm very firm. I say what I say."



FRANCIS CRESCIA/TOWN CRIER

READY TO SERVE: Aurora Stranges presents one of her culinary creations at La Vecchia restaurant, where she is head chef.

She is known for being tough and demanding in her all-male kitchen.

"If I was a man, it would be okay," she remarks.

Part of the problem, she suggests, is that the industry is male-dominated to begin with, and "the way it's put out there" by the media perpetu-

ates the imbalance and discourages women chefs.

As evidence, she cites a recent photo shoot covering local chefs where there were only two women.

But she's impervious to such messages. Gordon Ramsay's popular reality TV show, *Hell's Kitchen*, that shows the chef screaming at aspiring youngsters makes her laugh.

"Come and see me on a Friday night," she offers. "I'll make him look like a mouse."

Many female chefs also become "intimidated by the big names" in the industry and don't put themselves out there in the way she has, Stranges said. She recently appeared on *Breakfast Television* promoting Fabiano wines and educating people about how to cook Italian food with wine.

Part of her education program breaks down barriers about what type of wine is appropriate for cooking Italian-style seafood. She says many people assume red wine is just for cooking in the winter and white wine is only for summertime cooking, when really, they can be used anytime.

People also tend to assume that red wine is "stronger" and more masculine, while white wine is more "delicate" and feminine, she says.

Fittingly, Stranges promotes the idea of cooking with red wine in the summer and white wine in the winter.

For aspiring women chefs, she issues this advice, as direct and charming as she is: "Don't be afraid to show you're good. Why hide?"

Ask the Experts

Please write to our experts:

If you would like to take advantage of their years of experience, send your questions to "Ask the Experts" and they will be happy to reply to you in this space. By E-mail: adsales@towncrieronline.ca, by Fax: 416-488-3671 or write: Ask the Experts, c/o Town Crier, 101 Wingold Ave., Toronto, ON, M6B 1P8

Marc Linett, a partner in the personal injury law firm of Linett & Timmis, has been practicing accident and insurance litigation in Toronto for over 32 years.

His firm has established a solid reputation representing thousands of injured victims and their families throughout Ontario.

All that glitters is silver in Davisville jeweller's dream of fashion niche

KELLY GADZALA
Town Crier

Sonia Meza is so far ahead of the fashion game that local celebrities and fashion intelligencia are only just discovering the jewellery technique she practises.

In fact, the Davisville resident could be credited with bringing sterling silver crocheted jewellery to Toronto, if not Canada.

Meza uses almost 100 percent silver wire to crochet intricate jewellery pieces, a technique the business administration graduate learned in her native Peru.

"When I came to Canada and brought this knitted silver technique, I could see, by the reaction of people at first glance, that this was something very unique in North America," Meza said recently, as she displayed her jewellery in the apartment she shares with her boyfriend. "People like it because it's different."

In Canada for only a year, Meza divides her time between working in the Toronto hospitality industry — a vocation she also followed in Peru — and making her distinctive jewellery pieces.

At the moment, several local boutiques carry Meza's pieces. One of them is St. Clair Ave. West's Lucuma, owned by Francesca Ballester, also from Peru.

Silver crocheting is an emerging trend in Peru, Meza says, that has latched on to both clothing and jewellery, literally.

Many Peruvian women are wearing wedding dresses with silver threading woven throughout, she said.



FRANCIS CRESCIA/TOWN CRIER

A FASHION STATEMENT: Sonia Meza displays some of the crochet jewellery she's created.

The new trend derives from a heritage rich in handmade crafts and silver making. Peru is well known for its crochet cotton pieces and has been producing silver jewellery since the Inca period, in the 15th and 16th centuries.

"Since I was a little girl I've seen beautiful things my grandmother made with cotton yarn," she said, adding her grandmother was instrumental in helping her to perfect her craft while in Peru.

In 2005, Meza decided to follow the family tradition and took a course in the silver crocheting. Soon thereafter she developed a small business

supplying friends and family with her woven jewellery pieces.

Many of her supplies, like the blue-green translucent stone of the Andes mountains — called Andean opal — that Meza embeds in her designs by weaving silver threads around them, come directly from Peru.

Peruvian turquoise, a much darker and mottled turquoise than the Mexican kind, and a red Peruvian seed called huayruro are some of the other distinctive elements she works with.

Though her mother sends her supplies often, Meza says she plans to return to Peru for a month in December to visit family and stock up on supplies.

The work can be painstaking, but she clearly has a handle on it. It takes her 30 minutes to a few hours to make a piece, depending on what it is.

She also makes rings, pendants, bracelets and necklaces on a custom-order basis.

Recently, Meza designed a set for a friend's wedding outfit. The earrings, woven silver balls that look like round snowflakes, inspired the matching necklace, bracelet and ring.

For Meza, the possibilities for her jewellery-making venture are as endless as her spool of silver wire.

Though currently taking human resource classes at Ryerson University, she also sees herself specializing in custom-design work and even teaching her art.

She also hopes to launch a crochet jewellery website soon. Right now she's thinking of an official name for her business.



Marc Linett
Linett & Timmis
Personal Injury Lawyers

1867 Yonge St., Suite 1004, Toronto

416-366-5100
1-800-363-5100
m.linett@linett-timmis.com

Q: If I fall and injure myself on someone else's property, am I entitled to compensation?

A: You may be entitled to sue for your injuries under Ontario's Occupier's Liability Act. If the area where you fell (such as a store, public mall, city property, private home or business) was in an unsafe condition, the owner may be responsible for the accident.

Examples of accidents where victims have sued successfully include falling on walkways that have not been cleared of snow and ice, or that are in a state of disrepair, falling on dirty or slippery floors, tripping over misplaced objects or falling on steps that are not properly lighted.

If your fall occurred on municipal property, such as a sidewalk, it is important to remember that there are very strict notice periods that apply. If you want to know whether you have a case, please call us for a free consultation.



If you've got a big story... we've got a big voice!

Tell the Town Crier your local news and we'll tell the whole community.

Call Town Crier news at 416-785-4300. Or email news@towncrieronline.ca