

LESSONS LEARNED

THE FOUNDER OF EYESWOON
REFLECTS ON THE CHEFS
WHO TAUGHT HER
TO COOK BEAUTIFUL

by Athena Calderone
portrait by Johnny Miller

Some people know their life's mission at a very young age. For me, a clear path never emerged. My journey into food was a winding road, one with lots of navigating, forks, and dead ends. Let me paint a picture of my younger self: just like now, I had many interests. I could be laser focused and then distracted in an instant. There was gymnastics in elementary school, my formal dance education in college, acting school, yoga training, writing workshops, interior design at Parsons, and cooking classes. There was no unified vision. These creative ramblings became the insecurity that plagued my 20s and most of my 30s.

I beat myself up daily, comparing my lack of accomplishments to the successes of my peers. I focused on all I was not—not well employed, not articulate, not well read. In social settings I was shy, awkward, and always in my head. I used to feel like I was hiding behind a glass wall, dodging conversations with the fear of someone asking me, "What do you do?" I didn't have the answer.

The one thing I did succeed at was my home life. So I developed myself in that space, designing my home and following my passion for baking and cooking. I might have been hiding from the outside world, but by losing myself in the kitchen, I found myself basking in the creativity of layering flavors and textures. The kitchen became a safe, comforting place. It offered focus, joy, and experimentation—an outlet to grow.

I had no idea my various pursuits over the years were melding into something. But what I did know was that my love of food offered me purpose. Suddenly, through developing recipes, styling, picking up the camera, and writing, doors I didn't even know existed began to swing open. Along the way, I found a network of like-minded friends. We leaned on and learned from one another.

Part of this group includes a number of restaurant chefs who

welcomed me into their spaces and offered me the education I so needed. Working and playing alongside these brilliant, multifaceted minds, I gained technique, confidence, and friendship. Over time, through these encounters, I developed something even more crucial—belief in my own abilities.

Their lessons shaped everything from how I style a plate of food to how I express a particular mood when setting the table for a gathering. They've contributed to my sense of presentation and how I handle myself in the kitchen. One such person is Chef Jody Williams of the Buvette outposts in New York and Paris. She and I collaborated on an event at Westwind Orchard, an upstate farm owned by dear friends of mine. A few weeks before the harvest dinner, Jody and I took a road trip to visit the farm. After exploring the bountiful property and produce, we brainstormed and crafted the entire menu together in the car ride home. I was in awe of this mega chef as we engaged in a ping-pong match of seasonal flavors. Jody conceived an earthy risotto of wild mushrooms, berries, and herbs, all inspired by what had fallen to the forest floor. The memory of that breathtaking dinner—under the stars and engulfed by a blanket of golden foliage—has played a significant role in how I plan both meals and the gatherings themselves. **LESSONS:** *A shared passion can turn a stranger into a collaborator. Let nature and your surroundings provide the inspiration for your menu.*

And then there was the chef I never in a billion years would have dreamt I could work with—Anita Lo of Annisa, which she sadly closed earlier this year. As to be expected, Anita was passionate about her craft, but I was amazed at how attuned she was to every aspect of her surroundings. She cooked with grace, plated our trout with precision, and even knew when to slow down to allow the photographer to capture the action. She was open and descriptive of her process as I peppered her with questions. We got to chatting about social media (she does not engage) and the importance of escaping the city to find some solitude (she loves to fish at her home on the North Fork of Long Island). I learned she always blanches and shocks her basil—and now, so do I. **LESSONS:** *Seek out your heroes and blanch your greens when you want to preserve their vibrant green hue.*

Now, not all my experiences cooking with chefs went smoothly. Case in point—working with Nina Clemente of The Smile di Alba in L.A. Making Nina's acquaintance was like meeting a long-lost soul sister. Our conversations ran the gamut from L.A. farmers' markets to mommying to '80s NYC—all within five minutes of my arrival. Before we knew it, we had ingredients spread out on the floor—strange sounding, yes, but a typical practice for anyone who photographs food. It was an utter swoon-fest... that is, until it all came to such a screeching halt there should have been tire marks on the floor. Alas, in came the health department for di Alba's first-ever inspection!

Immediately, frenzy set in. Food was swept off the floor and into the garbage. Hair got pulled back and wrapped in a scarf. We thought we were fast-paced before—well, now we were in full fight-or-flight mode. Oh lord, oh lord. I could not be the one responsible for anything less than an "A"! Thankfully, I wasn't. Di Alba got its "A", and Nina kept her calm, warmth,



and grace throughout the entire four-hour, highly stressful episode. Nothing like a little drama to build a fast friendship. When we finally got back into the kitchen, I learned how to make pillow, fresh ricotta. It was a first for me, and simpler than I thought. We dolloped the creamy cheese over a delicious roasted asparagus and radicchio salad that she spiked with crunchy pistachio. **LESSONS:** *Stay calm under pressure and keep your ricotta at a slow and steady simmer.*

Camille Becerra is the only chef I already knew before stepping into her kitchen, making our time together fun from the get-go. Despite our levity, one thing was always clear—Camille is a true artist. She doesn't falter while computing 10,000 processes in her mind. Dashing from the kitchen, with one swift look, she would immediately know what was needed to amp up the visual intrigue of our dish, a charred beet and raspberry salad. Then she'd bop right back into the kitchen without skipping a beat—or beet, I should say! She offered many words of wisdom about the presentation of our meal; she chars the beets after they are cooked to add more flavor, roughly chops them into geometric shapes for a sculptural yet effortless quality, smushes the raspberry over the beets to add to the rusticity and plays with the tone-on-tone hues, and includes nuts for some welcome crunch against the creaminess. **LESSONS:** *Make a visual statement, play with color, texture, and negative space, and don't be too fussy.*

I found common ground when cooking with The Smile's Melia Marden, since we both express Mediterranean flavor profiles in our food. Together we made a fall roasted root vegetable dish, employing a technique I learned early on in my culinary education—separate any ingredients that cook at different times and temperatures. In this case, we put apples, shallots, and herbs on one roasting pan and root veggies on another. We also made sure to never, ever overcrowd the pan. **LESSONS:** *The kitchen always provides common ground. And it's impossible to get that coveted golden exterior if your veggies are too close together and steaming against one another!*

Last but not least, I had the opportunity to learn from the pastry goddess across the Atlantic, Claire Ptak of Violet Bakery in East London. Claire enjoys a varied creative background in film, fashion, and art. Drawn to baking, she eventually found herself working with the legendary Alice Waters of Chez Panisse. I saw in Claire a bit of myself, as we both continually consider the way our food will be visually consumed. While taste and presentation matter to just about every cook, Claire and I both take a particular interest in aesthetics. Together we baked the swooniest chocolate croissant bread pudding—despite a few mishaps along the way involving oven temps and wonky baking racks. All the while, her lack of pretense made me admire her more. She admitted that despite being a baker, she's too impatient to be overly precise, and she skips sifting flour! **LESSON LEARNED:** *Go with the flow, laugh along the way, and whisk dry ingredients instead of sifting to save time.*

In so many ways, magic happens in the kitchen. Raw ingredients turn into intoxicating concoctions. Strangers become friends. The kitchen is where I feel most like myself, perhaps because the fast pace prevents my mind from wandering. Working beside these crazy-talented women has undoubt-

edly expanded my creativity and technique, and as they have embraced me, I've slowly become a bit more forgiving of myself. I've come to understand there is no right way to build your skill set, no recipe for a life. Regardless of how many avenues you explore, the living is in the learning.

BIGGEST LESSON LEARNED: *Do what you love and find your own way.*

WINTER VEGETABLE ROAST

Makes 6 servings

- 2 large sweet potatoes (about 1½ pounds/680 grams), quartered and cut into 1-inch wedges
- 2 parsnips, quartered lengthwise
- 1 bunch carrots (about 8 ounces/225 grams), tops removed and halved lengthwise
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt and freshly cracked pepper
- 4 sprigs fresh rosemary, divided
- 20 sprigs fresh thyme, divided, plus more for serving
- 6 large shallots, peeled and quartered
- 3 medium McIntosh apples, cored and sliced into 1-inch wedges
- Flaky sea salt, for serving

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Arrange the sweet potato wedges, parsnips, and carrots on a large baking sheet and drizzle them generously with oil. Season with salt and pepper and half of the herbs and toss until the vegetables are evenly coated. Place the shallots and apples on a separate baking sheet and drizzle them generously with oil. Season with salt and pepper and the remaining herbs and toss to coat.

Roast the vegetables for 15 minutes, then remove the baking sheet from the oven and shake to redistribute the vegetables. Return it to the oven along with the apples and shallots, and roast until everything is golden brown and tender, 25 to 30 minutes. (The apples often need a little extra time to brown.) Remove both sheets from the oven and set them aside to cool slightly before tossing everything together in a large bowl. Before serving, finish with flaky sea salt and a sprinkling of thyme leaves.



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CHEF CAMILLE BECCERA
PHOTO BY WINNIE AU



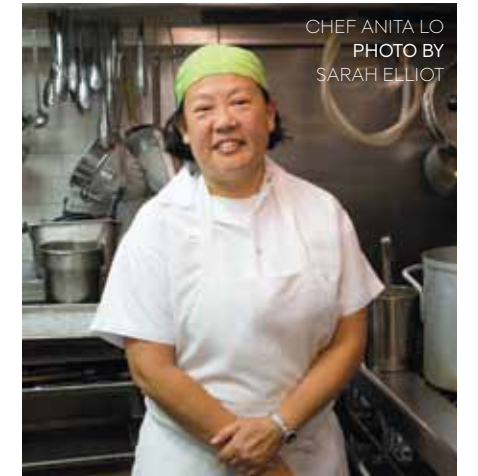
CHEF JODY WILLIAMS
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CALDERONE'S
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