


ALUMNI profile in leadership





# Secrets of a Restaurant Chef

Anne Burrell '91 'dishes up' restaurant-quality meals that home cooks can master, in her new hit series on The Food Network.

STORY BY: DEBRA S. PARK MS '06 PHOTOS COURTESY OF: FOOD NETWORK

Ask a savory chef or experienced home cook to identify the holy trinity of cooking and the response will be "celery, carrots and onions." Known as mirepoix (meer-pwah) (two parts onion, to one part each of celery and carrot), this holy trinity is the base of countless recipes from chicken stock to the finest French cuisine.

But **Chef Anne Burrell '91** has an entirely different take on it. In her kitchen salt, bacon and olive oil reign supreme.

Burrell's culinary point of view, rustic and seasonal, aggressively seasoned yet simple and creative, is the focus of the Food Network hit series "Secrets of a Restaurant Chef" (Saturdays at 10:30 a.m.). It's her latest triumph in a meteoric culinary career. The premise of Burrell's show: home cooks can cook restaurant-quality meals as long as they follow the tricks of the trade.

The spiky-haired chef minces no words when it comes to restaurant-style techniques. "Here's a big secret," she says in an episode entitled The Secret of Grilled Pork Chops. "Restaurants usually do pork chops better than cooks do at home because we don't cook the crap out of them. Go to a butcher and tell him, 'I want a big fat pork chop.'" Her direct style, mixed with her talent, knowledge and pure joy of cooking are what make Burrell a culinary superstar.

"She makes it fun," says Bob Tuschman, Food Network's senior vice president of programming. "She makes it approachable and she makes it seem like something that you're going to want to get into the kitchen, as soon as the program is over, and make the incredible food you saw."

Food was a big part of Burrell's family life growing up in Cazenovia, New York. "Food is something that makes people happy," says Burrell. "It's something that can be about family and about tradition. Think about what you do for a wedding or a funeral, or a first date – for anything – you sit down and you eat."

But when it was time for college, a career in the culinary arts wasn't on the plate, just yet. Burrell majored in communication and English at Canisius, and says that what she appreciates most about her Canisius education is that it "taught her to think." Her taste for the restaurant life was also acquired during college when she took a part-time waitress position at the now defunct Jimmie Mac's. A year after graduation, Burrell's father suggested she get a job outside of the restaurant business. "I took a job. A rotten job, actually" says Burrell. But it didn't take long for her to realize that she was "way too young to be miserable." So Burrell embraced her passion and enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA).

"When I decided to go to culinary school, being a chef wasn't the cool thing," she notes. "Chefs weren't rock stars then."

Culinary degree and knives in hand, Burrell then headed for Italy. "I wanted to expand my horizons," she explains. "When I went to Italy it was like 'Wow, this isn't anything like what I know of Italian food and I love it so much more.'" She spent three months at the Italian Culinary Institute for Foreigners in Piedmont and then nine more months refining what she learned as an intern in Umbria and Tuscany.

SAUCES  
Salad Dressings  
ETC

The saucy, newly-trained but not very experienced Chef Burrell returned to the United States and landed her first job at Felidia in New York City. "I remember her enthusiasm and I think that's what really got to me," says Felidia's owner Lidia Bastianich, the Italian-born chef, cookbook author and PBS show host. "You could see that she was in love with Italy and the food, and I said, 'This girl is going to go places and let's help her do it.'"

Burrell worked as a sous chef for Felidia's Executive Chef Fortunato Nicotra who, coincidentally, had trained under one of the same Italian chefs as Burrell. "I was looking, always, for people who know about Italian cuisine and it was not an easy point to find people who really knew about Italian cuisine," says Nicotra.

In the tiny kitchen that can turn out 350 dinners a night, Burrell's first job, like nearly all restaurant kitchen jobs, was really hard work. "I was the only girl in the kitchen," she recalls. "I put so much pressure on myself to do well. But it was a tremendous learning experience."

After stints in other New York kitchens including Savoy, the "a little burned-out" Burrell put her culinary expertise to work at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York. "Teaching was a lovely thing because it really just solidified me as a cook," recalls Burrell. "It made me do research, understand cooking techniques and to understand why I was doing things."

"She definitely did a good, job," says **Alex Eusebio '97**, a Los Angeles-based chef and restaurateur, and season five "chefeftant" on the Bravo network show "Top Chef." Eusebio, who gave up a career in finance to study the culinary arts, was among Burrell's first students. "With her I always had a connection," says Eusebio. "Not many Canisius graduates end up going for a second career, let alone a cooking career, and cross paths doing it." Eusebio poses that Burrell recognized his potential because she understood what it took to earn a Canisius degree.

"I take the values that she taught me in the kitchen and apply them today," says Eusebio.

Clearly the measure of a chef's talent is on the plate. Certainly, super-celebrity Chef Mario Batali and Restaurateur Joseph V. Bastianich, son of Lidia Bastianich, recognized Burrell's talent when they appointed her as chef for Italian Wine Merchants, their New York wine store with event space. The Batali Bastianich restaurants are among the best destination-dining establishments in New York and Las Vegas.

But Burrell's career came to a rapid boil in 2005 when Batali tapped her to serve as his sous chef, along with Chef and Restaurateur Mark Ladner, for a pilot taping of Food Network's "Iron Chef America."



"Why he asked me, out of the hundreds of people who worked for him, I never questioned it and I never looked back. I was just very, very lucky," remarks Burrell.

The show, based on the Japanese cult hit "Iron Chef," is a cooking competition in which world-class chefs face off against one of the Food Network's Iron Chefs: Batali, Cat Cora, Bobby Flay, Masuharu Morimoto or Michael Symon. Set in kitchen stadium, the show has all the drama of a Super Bowl or World Series but with much better food. The challenger selects an iron chef competitor, the secret ingredient is revealed and with a dramatic "allez cuisine," from the show's chairman, each team sets off to create a five-course meal in 60 minutes. "Clearly, people see me making pasta really fast," says Burrell, who also does all the vegetable prep, pastry or anything with flour. Ladner does the protein fabrication. (That's chef talk for butchering of meat or fish.) Batali does the rest: soups, sauces and plating.

With secret ingredients such as black bass, buffalo and wild boar, it's truly a battle of fine food on the fly. It culminates when judges with discernable palettes determine "whose cuisine reigns supreme."

No doubt this new celebrity chef status helped Burrell realize the next course of her career when she was named executive chef at Centro Vinteca in Greenwich Village, a position she held from its opening in July 2007 until September of 2008. "It took a lot of research, thought and planning," says Burrell of the

menu, which she describes as creative authentic Italian for every sized appetite. "It's building something from scratch. It winds up being your baby and you are very invested in something like that."

"I can say that I have sampled every single thing that came out of that kitchen – in one sitting no less," exclaims Tuschman. "And it was incredible. She is obviously an incredibly talented chef."

Tuschman says Burrell's ability combined with her memorable look, electric personality and connection with the camera made her a natural for a Food Network show of her own. "Secrets of a Restaurant Chef" debuted in June 2008 and is currently in premier runs.

The show features her own restaurant recipes for food such as Pasta Bolognese, Seared Wild Striped Bass and Herb Roasted

Chicken. Burrell tells viewers that "food tastes so good in restaurants because we actually season it appropriately." But it's much more than a demonstration of cooking. There is also a lot of demystification.

"I try to take the fear factor out and let people know that it doesn't have to be this awesome, daunting experience," explains Burrell. "Let's just simplify it and make awesome stuff, so you feel good about it and then people can tell you how great you are!"

So the question must be asked: With a successful show, what's next on the menu for this superstar chef?

"When our viewers embrace somebody, there are a lot of formats and programs that we like to put them in," says Tuschman. "I see Anne's career really just at its beginning."

## Brined Pork Chops with Soft Parmigiano Polenta

### **For the Brine:**

- 1/2 cup salt
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 2 tbsp fennel seed
- 2 tbsp coriander seed
- 1 tsp crushed red pepper flakes
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 carrots, peeled and diced
- 2 ribs celery, diced
- 4 cloves garlic, smashed
- 1 1/2 quarts cold water
- 4 bone-in pork rib chops
- 1 tbsp wild fennel pollen\*

### **For the Soft Parmigiano Polenta:**

- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 1 1/2 cups water
- 1 bay leaf
- Salt
- 1 cup long cooking polenta
- 1/2 cup grated Parmigiano
- 1/4 cup mascarpone cheese

**To make the brine:** In large container, add all ingredients and stir. Submerge pork chops in brine and refrigerate for three days. After three days, remove chops from brine and discard brine.

Preheat a grill or grill pan. Roll fat edge of each pork chop with fennel pollen. Place pork chops gently on the pre-heated grill. Rotate chops 90 degrees after 3 - 4 minutes to create grill marks. Grill chops for another 3 - 4 minutes then turn over and repeat the process. If chops seem to be burning, move to cooler part of grill to allow for longer cooking time without burning. Stand chops up so the fat edge is in contact with the grill to crisp up fat edges. Remove chops from grill and let rest in a warm place before serving. The doneness of the meat should be medium to medium-well and very juicy. Serve with polenta.

*\*If fennel pollen is not available, toasted ground fennel seeds are an acceptable substitution*

**To make the soft parmigiano polenta:** In medium saucepan, bring milk, water and bay leaf to a boil. Season generously with salt - almost to point of over seasoning. When it reaches a boil, slowly whisk in polenta in small sprinkles. Once all polenta is incorporated, reduce heat to medium and stir with wooden spoon. Cook polenta for 30 - 40 minutes; add water if becomes too thick.

When polenta is thoroughly cooked, should look creamy and not feel gritty on your tongue. Remove from the heat, stir in Parmigiano and mascarpone. Serve immediately, or place plastic wrap on the surface of the polenta to prevent a skin from forming on the top.

**For more recipes, visit [www.foodnetwork.com/secrets-of-a-restaurant-chef](http://www.foodnetwork.com/secrets-of-a-restaurant-chef)**