



# tracy o'grady's recipe for success

by Audrey R. Browka

**T**racy O'Grady first became acquainted with the culinary world when she was just 12 years old. While other pre-teen girls were experimenting with makeup or taking dance lessons, Tracy was mixing with a different crowd — recipes. Her first cookbook — the classic Betty Crocker — was actually a wedding present given to her mother, Connie, years earlier. But when Tracy opened the pages she found more than just simple recipes for soups, salads and casseroles.

She discovered her natural talent to create in the kitchen. Now, more than 20 years later, this *cum laude* graduate from the Class of '89 is an executive chef at Washington, D.C.'s quintessential eating place and her flavor for food has earned her international recognition.

## Her recipe for success?

You must first begin with a few basic ingredients:

## basic ingredients:

### 1. the knowledge of what you want to do in life

Tracy's cooking career began long before her first restaurant job, since she was broiling, basting and baking by the time she was in sixth grade. Her mom worked full-time, so when Tracy came home from school it was her job to get dinner ready for the family.

"She would tell me what to do," recalls Tracy. "She would say 'We're having chicken tonight and this is how you do it.' Then I would get in there and prepare it."

Once she recognized her knack for noshes, Tracy began to experiment with more elaborate meals. At the age of 15, the Mount Mercy Academy high school student surprised her mom with a homemade Mother's Day dinner that included French onion soup, roast beef, twice-baked potatoes and Yorkshire pudding. And every year on Father's Day she would make her dad's favorite dessert – lemon meringue pie.

"I always knew I was going to cook at some point in my life," says Tracy. "But my parents said, 'We don't know about this cooking thing. We think you should go and get a real education.'"

### 2. the passion to pursue your dream

Tracy took her parent's advice and selected Canisius College. She was committed to her studies and excelled in all her coursework. But when it came time to settle on a major, she struggled.

"To be honest with you, I really had no idea," she explains. "I choose communications but when I was a senior, I knew that wasn't for me."

Her craving to work in the kitchen endured. So, when Tracy's friend asked if she wanted to do an internship in Washington, D.C. for their final semester senior year, she saw it as an opportunity.

"I wanted to do an internship in Washington but I didn't want to have to

do it in communication. I wanted to cook," says Tracy. "I went to Marilyn Watt, (the late chair of the Communication Studies Department) and told her my situation. Basically, she broke the rules for me. She agreed to let me do an internship cooking, but I had to do some public relations work as well."

### 3. the determination to make your dream a reality

Dr. Watt arranged for Tracy to intern in a Washington, D.C. restaurant. The experience, however, was not exactly what Tracy expected. Instead of preparing meals off the menu, she was on the floor waiting tables. Disappointed but determined, Tracy convinced Dr. Watt to allow her to find a restaurant that would let her into the kitchen to learn.

"I opened the phonebook and just started calling restaurants," Tracy remembers. "I talked to this one woman and I said 'Look, I'm here. I have to do an internship. I can't get paid. I have no cooking experience but I really want to learn.'" The very next day, Tracy interviewed at Le Pavillon and began her internship on the spot.



## mix in:

lot of long hours and hard work

Interning at Le Pavillon marked the first official step in Tracy's culinary career. Although she lacked even an ounce of professional experience, she worked hard (80 hours a week!) and learned fast. The owner was so impressed he offered Tracy a job when she graduated from Canisius and for the next eight months, she worked split shifts, six days a week.



The long hours, tedious work and double-shift days continued when Tracy left Le Pavillon to work at Galileo's, another fine dining restaurant in the Capital City. But the French cuisine she came to know would not help her here. Galileo's was an Italian restaurant, which meant Tracy had to perfect her pasta.

"I didn't have any experience with pasta," she says. "But normally in kitchens you don't really need people with a lot of experience. You need people who want to work hard and want to do the work. It's so demanding."

It did not take long for Tracy to master pasta as a main dish. Nor did it take long for her hard working, fast-learning reputation to open another kitchen door for her. After three years at Galileo's, Tracy was offered a job in the kitchen of Washington's busiest, most popular and most famous restaurant, Kinkead's. Located only a few blocks away from Galileo's, the menus at these two restaurants were miles apart. At Kinkead's, Tracy would have to hone her skills for seafood and modern American cuisine.

Eight short years later, this 33-year old continues to cook in the kitchen at Kinkead's. Most recently she celebrated a promotion

from sous-chef to executive chef. And although she no longer works split shifts, her days are almost just as long (she averages 60-65 hours a week) and the work is just as demanding.



**add:**

**the desire to always be better**

Part of what makes Tracy such a talented chef is her appetite to continually improve on herself and her work. It is a characteristic that Tracy says dates back to the days when she would make those lemon meringue pies for her dad.

“He would always tell me how good my pie was,” she recalls. “But I always thought there was something wrong with it. I was making it right and following the recipe, but I always thought it could be better. I just didn’t know how to make it better.”

Now a highly respected chef, Tracy still looks for ways to improve herself and her work. It is that aspiration that enticed her to compete for one of the culinary world’s highest honors this past January, Le Bocuse d’Or.

“I did the competition because I wanted to be better at what I do,” she says. “I just think you can always be better and push yourself harder.”

Named after the famous French chef, Paul Bocuse, the culinary competition takes place every other year in Lyon, France and is often compared to the Olympics. Similar to this event, the finals for the Bocuse d’Or are preceded by advance heats in each of the 22 participating countries and require the speed, stamina and style of a trained athlete. Unlike the Olympics, however, the Bocuse d’Or is foreign to most people outside the food world, particularly those in the United States. It therefore receives little if any government or corporate sponsorship. As a result, raising the funds to participate in this prestigious cooking competition (more than \$80,000) came at an expense for Tracy, who would be representing the U.S.

“It took a solid two and a half years out of my life. Maybe closer to three,” states Tracy. “There was more to it than just training for the competition. I had to raise the money to do it. I held fundraising dinners, I ran a raffle and wrote at least 10 business proposals to get corporate sponsorship.”

Tracy worked seven days a week for a full year leading up to the competition, fulfilling her daily duties at the restaurant while training for the Bocuse d’Or. But when the day finally arrived she was well-prepared for the five and a half hour marathon, which would require her to create 13 dishes, including two

main courses; one using a 35-pound baby lamb; one using loup de mer (European sea bass).

When her time was up, Tracy carefully placed each *pièce de résistance* on the silver presentation platter for the palate of each judge. But it was not meant to be. The Bocuse d’Or went to Chef François Adamski of France. Tracy’s intricate and exquisite food innovations placed 10th out of 22 countries and prevailed over culinary entries from Belgium, Switzerland and Japan.

“I would have liked to have done better,” she says, “but my goal wasn’t to go there to win. You might hope you’re going to win and you train to win but you just don’t go to a competition like this to win. You go to become better.”



**spread:**

**your wisdom**

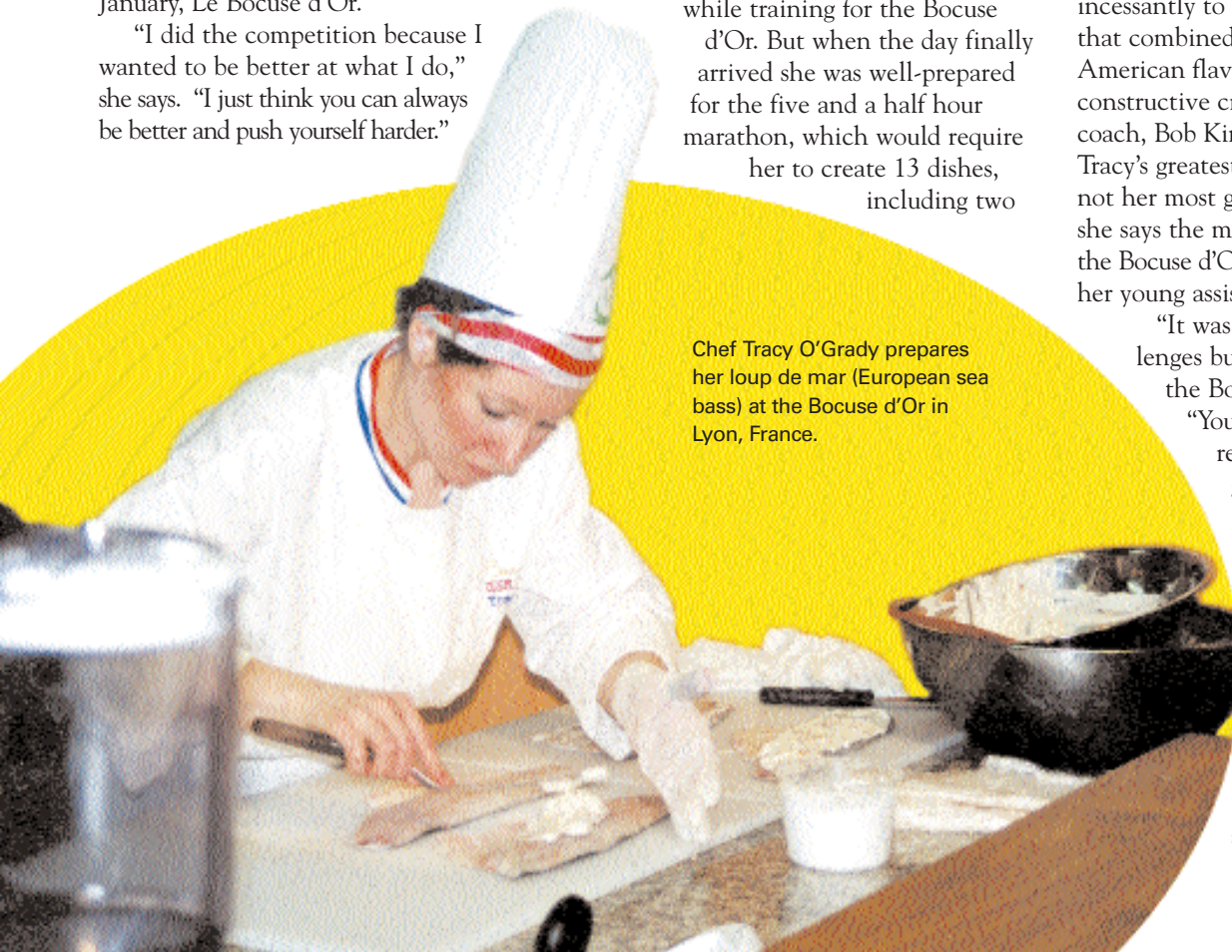
Participating in the Bocuse d’Or presented several, somewhat painstaking hurdles for Tracy. She sacrificed her personal life to dedicate hours securing corporate sponsorship. She worked incessantly to select an intricate menu that combined French technique with American flavor and then withstood the constructive critiquing from her boss and coach, Bob Kinhead. Still, these were not Tracy’s greatest challenges. They were not her most gratifying either. Instead, she says the most rewarding element of the Bocuse d’Or experience was mentoring her young assistant, Melanie Parker.

“It was one of the biggest challenges but one of the best things of the Bocuse d’Or,” she explains.

“You get to take someone who really knows very little and get them up there ranking with the best in the world.”

The rules of the competition entitle each chef to one assistant. But to prevent them from recruiting a master chef to masquerade as a novice, the assistants are required to be under age 21. Melanie, then 18,

Chef Tracy O’Grady prepares her loup de mer (European sea bass) at the Bocuse d’Or in Lyon, France.



came to Tracy straight out of culinary school in Maryland. She had a lot to learn and no idea what she was about to encounter. So for more than a year, Melanie shadowed Tracy's every step and fine-tuned her basic culinary abilities until she could slice, dice and sauté like a skilled professional. Together, the two made history as the first team of women to compete in the Bocuse d'Or. Still, Tracy hopes the experience for Melanie was about more than simply cooking.

"This is not someone there just to help you do the competition," says Tracy. "This is someone there to learn because they want to do this as their profession. And if I could have given her anything, I hope it would be confidence. The confidence to know that if she works hard enough and tries hard enough she can do anything she wants to do."

**serves:**  
a community



Throughout the days, weeks and months of preparations for the Bocuse d'Or, Tracy says she frequently depended on her Canisius education. Her business classes helped when she needed to draft proposals for corporate sponsorship. The

computer courses she studied saved her when she needed to become proficient with processing information. But the most significant lesson Tracy learned at Canisius was a sense of responsibility to her community.

"It's a huge problem with American society today," she says. "That there is so little sense of community. Other cultures are so rich and they're networking with church and other social functions but here it's becoming a thing of the past."

Prior to the competition, Tracy volunteered for a Washington organization called Share Your Strength. Once a week, she would visit people living in disadvantaged communities and teach them ways in which they could feed their family a balanced, nutritional meal on \$10 a week. Eager to reinitiate her involvement in community service, Tracy is currently considering volunteer work in the children's ward of a local hospital.

"I would like to read stories to the children or talk to them about cooking," says Tracy. "It would be difficult but somebody needs to do it. And that's what I mean about community — everybody needs to do something. You need to give blood, you need to vote, you need to



## chef's tip

"Cooking is a feel for the food. When it tastes good to you, it's done."

be involved."

While dedication and determination may be key ingredients in this recipe for success, the end result will not compare if one simple step is overlooked. What makes Tracy's recipe so unique is that she is not the only person to benefit from her labor. Nor is the restaurant where she works the only place to profit from her talent. Instead, Tracy's recipe for success feeds a community and that, she says, is what everyone must remember.

"There are other things out there than cooking. There are other things out there than Wall Street. Whatever we are doing in our career, we have to understand that the world is a big place and your career is not the only thing." ■

### SIMPLY STEAMED LOUP DE MER

2 - 5 lb. LOUP DE MER  
2 BOTTLES ROSÉ WINE FROM PROVENCE  
4 qts. COURT-BOUILLON  
12 BEAUTIFUL SLICES OF FRESH CEPES  
FRESH CEPE TRIMMINGS  
THYME BOUQUET  
PRESERVED MYER LEMON  
BLACK PEPPERCORNS  
SALT

Wash, scale and fillet both loup de mer. Trim each fish so that each filet is perfectly rectangle. Slit each filet three times (basically you are portioning the fish, but leaving it in tack to cook it), but do not cut completely through.

When ready to serve bring the wine, court-bouillon and the aromatics to a boil. Place the court-bouillon into to a hotel pan with a perforated liner. Place the hotel pan on the stove top and bring to a simmer. Put four filets of fish on each perforated hotel pan and top with your cepes, gently steam for about 8-10 minutes or until fish is translucent inside. Lift the perforated hotel pans out and blot fish gently. Arrange the filets on the platter.

### NAPOLEAN OF IDAHO POTATOES & WILTED GARLIC SPINACH

6 IDAHO POTATOES	2 lb. YOUNG LOOSE LEAF SPINACH (DE-STEMMED AND CLEANED)
1qt. EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL	4T. EXTRA VIRGIN OLIVE OIL
THYME BOUQUET	2T. SLICED BLANCHED GARLIC
1T. BLACK PEPPERCORNS	SALT, TO TASTE
1 HEAD OF GARLIC	12 SMALL RING MOLDS
1 HEAVY PINCH OF SAFFRON	

Peel and trim the potatoes, cut each potato in half length wise. With a round cookie cutter punch out your potatoes, then slice the rounded potatoes on a mandolin (each potato should be about 1/2 inch thick and you should have 36 pieces). Toss the potatoes in salt and immediately place in the extra virgin olive oil, garlic head (cut in half), saffron, peppercorns and thyme. Bring the oil to a gentle simmer and remove from heat. Allow the potatoes to stay in the oil until you are ready to form the napoleons.

Heat 2 large sauté pans until moderately hot, add 2t. of extra virgin olive oil to each pan and your slice blanched garlic, immediately add the spinach and season with salt. Wilt the spinach quickly and cool down immediately.

Take the 12 ring molds (which have been buttered) and place them on a parchment lined 1/2 sheet tray. Place one potato round on the bottom of each mold (make sure you drain the potatoes to remove some of the excess oil), then add some spinach, then another potato. You should have three layers of potatoes and two layers of spinach. When ready to serve warm through.