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Patt Morrison Asks

Susan Feniger: Spice girl

One of L.A.'s über-chefs and one-half of the Too Hot Tamales.

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Restaurant years are like dog years. If a restaurant survives one year, it's like seven in the real world. So when two women chefs make a go of it for nearly 30 years -- not only one restaurant but several, and TV and radio cooking shows, cookbooks, merchandise, catering and a heavy schedule of fundraisers for their favorite charities -- it's nigh on miraculous. Susan Feniger is one-half of the Too Hot Tamales; with her business partner and friend, Mary Sue Milliken, she's entered the pantheon of L.A. überüber-chefs, with Mexican-inspired restaurants Border Grill and Ciudad. Knowing when to hold 'em and also when to fold 'em is a mysterious skill even among restaurateurs, and both Feniger and Milliken possess it (though many Angelenos still mourn the end of their first hole-in-the-wall effort on Melrose, City Cafe).

As of this spring, Feniger has also struck out on her own with Susan Feniger's Street, serving her versions of street food. She makes a daily loop among her restaurants, new and old, and the Brentwood house she shares with her life partner, filmmaker Liz Lachman, and alights at Street to talk shop.

What was your first restaurant meal?

I have a very clear memory of going on my birthday, [at age] 6 or 7, to this place called the Willows in Toledo, and I'd get lobster tail. I fell in love with lobster tail, so it became my birthday dinner.

How did a girl from Toledo, Ohio, cultivate a palate for Third World cuisine?

My mom was a really great cook -- not that she did exotic things, but if she was making a salad, she'd make the dressing and add seasoning. If she was making a lasagna, the tomato sauce would be a complex tomato sauce, not just out of a can. So I learned from her it's all about the seasoning. My first trip to India influenced how I saw food. I love Latin America, love being in Mexico, but when I was [in India], it was like, these are my people. And the colors -- the olive greens and mustards and cayennes.

You describe colors in food terms.

It's true, it's how I think.

Come on, what's your favorite junk food?



One of my favorite things to eat [as a child] was a box of frozen Birds Eye green beans, the French beans. I loved those. I wasn't a big sweets person and I'm still not. I love Cheetos or popcorn. I eat popcorn a lot.

Why don't all chefs weigh 5,000 pounds?

I wouldn't want to sit and have a big meal, because I want to be able to go into the kitchen and taste everything, and once you've had a big meal, things taste very different. My Chinese doctor wants me to eat in the morning, but I just can't do that, because I want to walk through the kitchen and taste every single thing, even if it's just a spoonful, and that's like having a meal. The only time I really eat a big meal is if I'm sitting down and having a meeting. Or I'll eat late at night. If it's not popcorn, I'll have a drink and cheese and crackers and an artichoke and avocado, and it's 1 o'clock in the morning.

You met your business and cooking partner, Mary Sue Milliken, when you both worked at a Chicago restaurant almost 30 years ago; your ex-husband married her. How is it, not working with her for the first time?

It's really great for my own sense of who I am. It's been majorly exciting, inspiring, freeing, invigorating, challenging. What's scary is, now, you can't blame [problems] on anybody [else]! So we'll see. We're in a miserable economy right now, but we have a great company with great people.

You two have had so much going: cookbooks, TV and radio shows, teaching, even souvenir shirts and caps. Do you ever worry about getting too far from the food?

No. I feel I have stayed very hands-on in all the restaurants. When Street opened, I can honestly say my days were 16, 18 hours, seven days a week, for the first four months. Intense. I was in front of the wood-burning oven, 800 degrees, 12 hours a day -- I lost 10 pounds in the first six weeks.

For years in L.A., it seemed like there was just Chasen's and Perino's on the high end and coffee shops and mom-and-pop places for the rest of us. Why did L.A. experience the Big Bang in restaurants?

I started working at Ma Maison in 1978 or 1979. In 1981, I went to France for a year to work, came back, we opened City Cafe and, around that time, Wolf [Wolfgang Puck] opened Spago, and that's when it all started. All of a sudden people started looking to chefs instead of to restaurants. It became very chef-driven.

Is there anything you won't eat?

Drinking turtle blood, something like that! I don't need to try every single thing just to say I tried it. Some people do. I don't. I'm curious, but if it grosses me out, that's not a challenge. If I truly spent the time thinking about it, I would be a vegetarian, but I love meat so. ... So much of street food is vegetarian. Many of our dishes are either vegetarian or have a little bit of meat, minimal. We almost use meat as a condiment.

One criticism of Street is that it's expensive for street food.

This is a restaurant with employees and workers' comp in a high-rent area. This is street-inspired food; we put it in a restaurant environment that has a great wine list, a great beer list. I'm not saying, "Look this is street food, just like you're there with a cart" -- I love to pay three bucks for a pupusa, but [for

that] I go down to Grand Central Market, I don't go to a restaurant where someone serves you.

Why do we have such a problem with obesity in America?

Personally, getting a Starbucks with soy milk, I'm addicted, and it's for sure the sugar in the soy. I crave that combo. You think about McDonald's, you think of all the sugar in everything; I think our taste buds have shifted and gotten used to [that]. And we're taught from the time we're kids about making money and working long hours. So people are constantly working and picking up food on the run to go to a meeting, eating fast food, food that's loaded with crap. It's the food we eat, but it's also that our culture is so fast-paced that people don't have time [to cook properly].

What's your role in the new ethics of food, like slow food and local food?

Definitely shopping locally at farmers markets. And sustainability. We don't purchase any Canadian seafood because of the beating of the baby seals, and we put that word out there because of our partnership with the Humane Society. Part of our responsibility is to say [it] to the customer. We don't serve any fish unless it's on the good choice or best choice from the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Not many chefs have their names on their restaurants. You do. Are things better for women chefs now?

I'm probably not the best one to say. When I started, there were no women in French kitchens. I went to the South of France over 30 years ago, working in a three-star restaurant with a bunch of 18-year-old French boys. They were brutal to me. After two or three months, I sort of worked my way into their hearts. I definitely made less money than guys I probably had more experience than, but for me [it] was, I'm going to get as much experience as I can.

In high school, I was a big reader of Ayn Rand, but I've learned since! I never thought of myself as being discriminated against [as a woman]. I know it's there. But I think, yes, it's easier. [Still] in the investment world, bankers look at the men before they look at the women. How many big women in the restaurant industry are growing their companies [the way men do]? You need big money to do that. It just doesn't happen.

What's the restaurant world's definition of success? That customers can't get a reservation? They have to wait an hour and a half for a table?

In the ideal scenario, yeah, you've got an-hour-and-a-half wait, you're so busy no one can get a reservation -- all that's great, as long as the customer has a great time, great food and feels their experience is fantastic. And you know, that is fleeting. If you ever start to take that for granted, that you think you can be snooty or you don't have to be respectful to people, that is the downfall. Don't ever believe that that's not going to go away, because it will. [It's] the nature of the restaurant business. Making money is critical, and surely I'd love to get investors paid back. If I drive past Mozza and see they're busy and we're slow, aaaagh, I want to kill myself. And then I have to go, "There's plenty out there for everybody. We just need to do the best we can do and make sure we watch our costs and run smart."

What cooking disasters stay in your mind?

Screw-ups that, now that you look back on, are funny. One time [Mary Sue and I] were driving downtown, doing an event. We had two 5-gallon buckets of hollandaise. We slammed on the brakes and the buckets went all the over the floor of my old Datsun. It was just, "Crap, oh, crap!" We scooped the

top of it -- not the bottom, the *top* of it -- and used it.

Do you observe the five-second rule?

Here [at the restaurant] we don't. If something falls, we throw it away. Our standards are way more meticulous than at home. At home, if it's *more* than five seconds, I pick it up. I'm not worried about contaminating me or my girlfriend. I leave food out at home all the time. I don't get sick.

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