

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

Chef: Caryn Stabinsky

Residence: Armonk

Restaurant: Elm, New Canaan, Connecticut

If we were lucky in childhood, we heard parents say, “follow your dreams.” Caryn Stabinsky was luckier; she saw it. Her parents, a teacher and a lawyer, decided to abandon their careers for medical school. She was 4 years old when they packed up and left suburban Hartsdale for the wilds of Tampico, Mexico. For the next three years, Stabinsky dwelt with chickens, lime trees, and roadside tortilla stands. “My grandparents told them, ‘Do what you need to do; we’ll be by your side.’ The experience taught me that everything is possible, that you’re never too old to make a change. My family is based on supporting each others’ dreams.”

Stabinsky had her own dreams, which were literary. At 10, back home in Yonkers, she was writing stories, and went on to study literature and psychology at Purchase College and New York University, with graduate work at City College. She has, she says, three unpublished novels in the proverbial drawer. “My writing was introspective. I think it’s very important to understand who you are, the mistakes you make, and how you fit into the world. To understand other people’s mistakes, you have to understand your own. It makes you a better teacher.”

To find where she fit into the world took a few years. A stint in children’s book publishing and work with the developmentally disabled were unfulfilling. Propelled by the family mantra of change and possibility, she enrolled in a cooking class at Manhattan’s Peter Kump’s (the forerunner to the Institute of Culinary Education), loved it, and signed on for its work-study program. “I delivered food, mopped floors, cleaned dishes...I learned every aspect of how a restaurant and bakery business works. Cooking and baking became a way for me to be creative, to use my hands. It’s intellectual.” She learned a crucial personal lesson as well. “I function better when I’m constantly moving, not sitting at a desk. I can think of a million ideas when I’m touching bread.”

Her future hovered, and a meal at Manhattan’s Oceana clasped it. Seduced by a huckleberry caramel crème brûlée and chocolate pistachio pastry, she externed there and soon joined the staff. Within two years, the cutting-edge restaurant WD-50 supplied another revelatory meal and her next job un-



Chef Speak

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A cherry galette with shiso cream by Stabinsky; Plating at

der maverick pastry chef Sam Mason. “I was floored by the creativity, the attention to detail, the palates,” she says. It also supplied a husband, the fish-station cook.

Stints at Manhattan hot spots followed: Monkey Bar, Jefferson, Urena. “I feel so lucky in this industry,” she says. “To have worked in these restaurants, to have been honored with awards by my culinary school.” She smiles and shrugs. “I keep thinking my luck’s going to run out.”

In 2011, it sort of did. Married with one child and pregnant with a second, buoyed by that family mantra, she and her husband leapt. “My parents said, ‘Our dreams were met, let’s work on yours.’” They moved from Manhattan into her parents’ Armonk home and opened a bakery/café, called Loaf, in town. But they found they had jumped too far. “There wasn’t enough foot traffic, and we made some bad financial decisions,” she concedes. Loaf closed within a year, but family dogma prevailed. “It was a great growth experience. I’ve realized that

life is more than society’s definition of success, it’s about learning, giving, growing, which to me is a huge part of what being a chef is.” She went on to help open Tarrytown’s RiverMarket as consultant and New Canaan’s Elm as pastry chef. And in 2013 she took another leap, into Zested, her on-the-side restaurant-management consultancy. “I love implementing structure, organizing kitchens, improving time management and functionality,” she states. “I realized, with RiverMarket and

Elm, that I loved building other people’s dreams.”

Now again, with Zested, she’s continuing to build her own.

—Diane Weintraub Pohl



SPICE RACK

Discovering unusual spices and herbs, one jar at a time

[**Calamus**]



aka...
sweet flag, flag root, rat root, sweet calomel, sweet cane, sweet grass, wild iris

Flavor Strength



Description: This perennial, reed-like aquatic plant is native to the mountain marshes of India but also grows throughout much of Europe, southern Russia, China, Japan, and the northern United States. It’s found in the shallows of streams, grows up to four feet high, and its green leaves are sword-shaped and sweet-scented. The leaves can be infused with milk for custards and rice puddings in the same way a vanilla bean or cinnamon quill is. The majority of culinary use, however, is made of the roots, which, when dry and powdered, are a pale gray/brown and used for their delicate cinnamon, nutmeg, and ginger notes in Indian and Arab sweet dishes. Calamus can be difficult to find in US stores since the FDA discovered one variety (acorus calamus) contains the carcinogen beta-asarone, which resulted in the labeling, “Not Recommended for Culinary Use.”

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