

the interview



Chef Emily Ellyn Dishes on the Retro Rad Movement

By Stacy Gammill



Chef Emily Ellyn is a farm-raised chef and culinary educator. A native of rural Ohio, this transplant Florida girl started the **Retro Rad** cooking movement to inspire a new generation of chefs with classics from the past.

Chef Emily is a Culinary Institute of America alum armed with two master's degrees and she is finishing up her Ph.D in Food Service Education. Does she look familiar? You might have seen her on Food Network's

"Food Network Star," "Cupcake Wars," "Cutthroat Kitchen," and she even had a cameo on the Simpsons!

Chef Emily will present at **Cook. Craft. Create. ACF National Convention & Show** in Orlando, July 9-13. She'll share her culinary journey, the events that inspired her passion for food and address the challenges of diversity and adversity in the culinary field.



Courtesy of Emily Eilyn



Courtesy of Emily Eilyn

What is the Retro Rad movement about and why is it important to you?

ee: Retro Rad started at a very young age. My aunt made me a poodle skirt when I was in grade school and I wore it until the poodle ran off! I would also beg my mom to draw cat-eyes on me with eyeliner!

At about 10, knowing how excited I was by retro style, my mom bought us both a matching pair of saddle shoes and took me to a real 1950's diner. It was so retro rad, and I fell in love! I had a strawberry shake, cheeseburger and fried pickles. I was also allowed to feed the jukebox with quarters.

The whole era just resonated with me. I loved how seemingly perfect life was and how effortless homemaking seemed — just like on “Leave it to Beaver.”

When I fell in love with cooking at about the same time, it was just natural to dig into my grandmother's recipe boxes and see if I could recreate an old family favorite, or make it better and make it RAD! Now I encourage everyone to do the same: Dust off their pressure cookers and crockpots and embrace the old in a new, rad way. I hope to give everyone I encounter a glimpse into that safe, perfect place in the past where they can create, cook, escape or just be themselves!

What is your food philosophy?

ee: My primary motivation to cook is to feed people through their hearts, minds and stomachs. Whether on TV or at a culinary event, I want to teach people to cook and get them excited about cooking. But more than that, I want to touch and improve the lives of as many people as I can in this lifetime. I believe that television can be a great platform for this.



Courtesy of Emily Eilyn

opposite from left:

Ellyn in her Retro Rad element.

clockwise from top:

1. Thanksgiving

in a bite. **2.** A twist on a Bloody Mary includes a ham garnish and pickled cherries.

3. Easy cheesy shepherd's pie.



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Get Chef Emily's
Candied Fennel Upside
Down Cake Recipe

above from left:

1. Candied fennel upside-down cake with citrus chocolate pudding 2. Ellyn's summer sipper, the fig newtini.

opposite from left:

1. Ricotta gnocchi with fresh pea pesto.
2. Peanut butter caramel corn cheesecake.

Most of all, I want people to feel comfortable and to have fun cooking. Cooking should not be intimidating. We all have to eat three meals a day, so why not do it in a way that makes us happy and keeps us healthy?

My favorite thing to remind people is to eat and taste. You can't cook if you do not know how things taste!

Did growing up on a farm have an impact on your career as a chef?

ee: Growing up on a farm influenced my love of cooking and desire to be a chef immensely! My family grew and raised nearly everything we ate. We cooked daily and everyone gathered around the dinner table to celebrate the food we grew and harvested. As a result, I know where things come from and fundamentally understand how things are made. I lived and breathed the process from seed to table!

On the farm as a toddler, it was my job was to stomp the soil around baby tree saplings. I teethed on spring onions from the garden. I could kill and dress a chicken by the age of 5.

I am what I eat and understand food as being a fundamental part of life. With a good understanding of basic, raw ingredients, I'm confident in doing new and interesting things when I work on remixing a classic or an old family recipe.

Another important part of growing up on a farm is learning to work hard. You just do it from a very young age and you don't question it because everyone you know is working just as hard or harder right beside you. From this you learn a sense of community and hospitality. You raise your food from a small plot of land and then you cook it up and preserve the extra yield to sustain you through the winter. It's like the old tale of the ant versus the grasshopper. Adopting a hardworking mindset means you are always stocked with delicious food and prepared to feed your family and community at a moment's notice.

What advice can you give to chefs who are just out of culinary school?

ee: First I would ask, are you ready to work hard? Work long hours with little money? Are you ready to work



Courtesy of Emily Elynn



Courtesy of Emily Elynn

in extreme conditions where you are burned, cut and yelled at while working to create amazing food?

If so, you'll experience instant gratification, more so than possibly any other job. Through it all you'll experience the closest friendships ever bound by a love of the craft, sweat and tears!

You pursued a culinary degree, but I suggest you try it out first before committing a lifetime to it. Also, take the opportunity early in your career to explore the many avenues offered in the field. Work in the areas of business you are interested in and those you would not think to pursue. You never know, you may become a corporate chef or restaurant owner; a food photographer or food critic; or maybe even a line cook on a cruise ship or an educator!

How should chefs leverage social media to promote their own brands?

ee: ACF members understand the strength in community and social media is no exception. Chefs should not only be using social as a way to

stay informed in the industry, but also as a way to promote their brand and grow their business. Nothing replaces personal relationships and word-of-mouth referrals, but you need to at least understand how it all works and ensure you are represented well. It's very likely that social media will influence your next opportunity and you want it to be in the right direction.

You're working on your first cookbook. What has the experience been like and can you tell us a bit about the book?

ee: Cooking up a book is a difficult process. My personal challenge has been letting life (and work) keep me from tackling the task, so it's been a slow process.

The first book, "TV Tray Chic," will be a collection of remixed oldie-but-goodie recipes displayed in a fun, 1950s Americana collection. There will also be kitschy photographs and stories from the bygone era with practical tips and tricks to keep you looking fabulous when you host. ■

trust the chef!

Chef Emily's favorite chef-driven restaurants in Orlando:

- **The Rusty Spoon** has great food and its amazing female chef/owner Kathleen Blake is elevating the scene with farm-to-table food with finesse. Try the delightful pickled watermelon salad with charred octopus.
- **The Ravenous Pig**, by husband-and-wife dynamo team James and Julie Petrakis, continues to rake in the James Beard nominations. Grab a bite at their Winter Park location or at **Cask and Larder** at the airport.
- Try Kevin Fonzo's **K Restaurant** in College Park for brunch.
- For drinks and juicy burgers, there's **RusTeak** in College Park.
- Pay a visit to **Audubon Park** to sip and sup your way through **East End Market** or visit the many small eateries in **Mills 50**. I really like the barbacoa at **Pig Floyds** right now.
- For Orlando's home-brewed libations, be sure to check out **The Bear & Peacock Brewery**. You can toast the end of any experience with a glass of wine from **Quantum Leap Winery**.