In the Kitchen with Royal Caribbean’s Latest Culinary Star Maureen “Molly” Brandt, CEC

By Leah Spellman Craig

A LOT CAN CHANGE in a short amount of time. Just ask Maureen “Molly” Brandt of Stillwater, Minn. The psychology major from the University of Colorado at Boulder was a junior in college when she stumbled on cooking. She went on to attend The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, N.Y., to pursue her new passion.

Six months ago, the 30-year-old chef was running Cook in the Kitchen, a successful catering and personal chef business in the Minneapolis/Saint Paul area, when she entered Royal Caribbean’s Allure of the Seas Culinary Challenge open to the CIA’s 40,000 alumni. Brandt won the eight-week competition and cook-off against six others in Hyde Park in August 2010, receiving a one-year contract with Royal Caribbean to work as chef de cuisine of 150 Central Park on Allure of the Seas, which set sail in December 2010.

“I still have pinch-me moments, because there has hardly been any time to reflect on how incredibly different and exciting my life has become in the last few months,” Brandt says. She put her life on hold for the opportunity to run her own fine-dining restaurant aboard the largest cruise ship in the world. Here, Brandt, who describes herself as determined, ambitious and competitive—and, on a personal level, a “goofball” who smiles a lot and wears her heart on her sleeves—opens up about her life on the high seas, her inherited passion for traveling and the one college party that changed the course of her life.

After you won the contest, you spent time on Oasis of the Seas planning your menu for Allure of the Seas. What was that like?

In Miami, my homework assignment from Josef Jungwirth, CEC, CCA, culinary director, was to have five to six recipes/ideas per course for the 150 Central Park menu. I spent one day in the office transferring as many recipes as I could to Royal Caribbean’s standard format, and then boarded the Oasis the next day. Once on the ship, I had to cook those items. The learning curve was steep, but completely necessary. Considering I had no time beforehand to order any special items, it forced me to learn where each provision room was, what was in them, how to requisition items, what could be substituted and, of course, where to find all the cooking equipment I needed. It might seem basic, but when you consider the size of the ship, it was a pretty daunting task. At the end of the week, after all the tastings, Josef told me I could choose whatever I wanted for a menu and asked if I could change it for 150 Central Park on Oasis the next day. I asked him for three more days, and on day 10 as a Royal Caribbean employee, I changed the menu for the restaurant. It was a great experience, albeit intense.

Following the menu change, I had the opportunity to listen to what guests had to say, determine how the galley actually functioned with my recipes, and adjust my ideas for 150 Central Park on Allure of the Seas.
You attended the CIA and were a teaching assistant after graduation, but tell us how your passion for cooking started? When did you decide to make it a career?

I started pretty late in the game, to be honest. While I’ve worked in the restaurant industry for 15 years, I was strictly front-of-the-house until about eight years ago. Before that, I think the only thing I really had ever cooked was Swedish pancakes and whatever I could microwave.

My junior year in college, I suggested we throw a real party with food and not just a keg for my friend Kate, whose birthday was on Halloween. She asked who was going to be making this food, and I unwittingly volunteered. As soon as I realized I was in over my head, I ran out and bought my first food magazines and rifled through them to come up with a menu. I picked some items that I thought were seasonally appropriate and made my first grocery list. I definitely didn’t take into account that I was a complete amateur, and ended up skipping classes to make all the food. I followed these recipes to the letter. I will never forget the leaf-shaped hand pies (thank you, Martha Stewart) stuffed with leeks and cheese, with homemade pâte brisée that turned out golden-brown and delicious.

At the party, I started passing out food to good reviews, and I was hooked. I loved seeing how surprised and appreciative people were. That near-instant gratification is addictive. I learned the definition of hospitality that day, and I really haven’t turned back since. After college, I spent about a year working in kitchens so I could go to the CIA. I really started late in life compared with some others, so I’ve been running to catch up. But I consider myself very lucky to have figured out what I am truly passionate about, and I enjoy the race.

In the Allure of the Seas Culinary Challenge, your entry video was named “Fan Favorite.” What marketing advice do you have for fellow chefs?

Marketing is extremely important; however, what is even more important is making sure it reflects your professionalism. Something I learned from my father long ago is that it is best to use your talents and pay others for theirs. I can cook, I have learned to network fairly effectively, but when it comes to everything else in terms of marketing and branding, I am a complete neophyte. It doesn’t even need to cost a thing; there is definitely value in barter—especially when it comes to good food.

Beyond that, people tend to forget that meeting people is marketing. Of course, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention online social networking, which is an extremely valuable tool, particularly for chefs who have limited time to spend at events or are somewhat allergic to face-to-face networking. While you may not see direct sales from it, there is great value in staying at the top of your audience’s mind.

When did you start Cook in the Kitchen? What aspects of catering do you enjoy most?

I started Cook in the Kitchen in the spring/summer of 2009, mostly because my mom and I also started a villa vacation package to Italy, Flavors of Italia [www.flavorsofitalia.com]. They are weeklong vacations at a villa in Tuscany, and I am the private chef. I figured that if it really took off, I wouldn’t be able to work in a restaurant, because my schedule would be too inflexible. The solution was to be my own boss and make my own schedule. I loved that part of catering and being a personal chef. The other thing that I loved was being able to make something different every day.

What’s the best part of working on a cruise ship so far? How about the one thing that will take getting used to?

The best part is working with such an international crew. Learning about where they are from and hearing their stories has been a big highlight. We may be sailing in the Caribbean, but with 80 nationalities represented onboard, it has an international feel. The one thing that will take getting used to is not being able to just hop in the car and go somewhere.

What’s the one tool you can’t go without in the kitchen? Ingredient?

I love a slightly offset, heavy duty serrated bread knife. Wusthof makes a great one. I learned the value of this knife at Café Boulud, where I first saw the entremetier use it for all his vegetable preparation. I thought he was crazy at first, but then I tried it out and realized how effective it was. As far as an ingredient, I may be passé in saying bacon, but I say bacon, anyway. I

150 Central Park is Allure of the Seas’ premier fine-dining restaurant.

Guests enjoy an upscale dining experience at 150 Central Park for $35 a person, which includes a seven-course tasting menu.
just love any cured, dried, salted or smoked pork product. It adds depth to anything and is the perfect foil for all vegetables. Beans without bacon? That should be a crime.

What’s it like running your own kitchen?

It reminds me of when I was a teaching assistant at the CIA. Lou Jones largely let me run the kitchen, from ordering to expediting to demonstrations, and even to some menu changes. Being the chef de cuisine and managing a team that is preparing my recipes for my menu comes with a big feeling of responsibility, and I take it very seriously and personally. I may not be the one preparing everything anymore, but I am vigilant and make sure I taste each component before service. When I go out to the dining room, I want to be sure the guests are enjoying the food. I find myself watching plates come back from the dining room. I like to see empty.

How would you describe your cuisine?

Probably, for lack of a better definition, I would say Modern American. There’s influence from all over the world, as I love to try different cuisines. I read, and collect cookbooks like a fiend. There is a something old, something new, something borrowed quality to my cuisine.

What are one or two things most people don’t know about you?

My first love is downhill skiing, and it is the only other thing that I am truly accomplished at. While I used to competitively race in high school, as well as instruct, I now only go for fun, and still make it out at least once a year. I love the Rocky Mountains. Blue Sky Basin in the back of Vail is the epitome of peace for me, with deep powder, steep runs and incredible views. Also, I am an avid Minnesota Vikings and Twins fan—perhaps even a bit more than avid. I have to bribe my friends with food for them to watch a game with me because I get so fired up.

One of your goals was to run a fine-dining restaurant. What are some others?

The list is long. Most are lofty, but that’s the point of having goals. A few of the things I would like to accomplish someday are:

- Compete to represent the U.S. at the Bocuse d’Or
- Become a Food & Wine Best New Chef
- Cook dinner at the James Beard House in New York
- Compete for the ACF Chef of the Year Award
- Have a few recipes featured in Art Culinaire
- Be a James Beard Award nominee
- Be the commencement speaker at a CIA graduation
- Be reviewed by the Michelin Guide, ideally, with a star attached
- Run a successful bed-and-breakfast and/or inn that serves a well-reviewed dinner

What’s one piece of advice for students just starting out?

If you don’t have a list of goals, write one. If you never say them out loud or never actually have them written in a place where you can refer to them, they’re that much easier to forget. Personally, I make mine pretty crazy and then break them down into smaller, more achievable pieces. Sometimes the success of those is more important than the original goal, and it may lead you in a totally different, but incredible, direction.

ON THE MENU

Two seven-course tasting menus with an optional wine pairing for $35 run weekly at 150 Central Park on Allure of the Seas, and new menus are announced every three to four months. Here’s a taste of what’s currently satisfying cruisers:

- **Shellfish Bloody Mary**—olive oil-poached shrimp and baby clams, housemade pickles, pale-ale froth
- **Smoked Sweet Potato Velouté**—brown butter/sherry cream, Serrano ham, almonds
- **Crispy Duck Cigar**—fig/cranberry marmalade, walnut butter and balsamic caramelized fresh fig
- **Pan-Seared Fillet of Sea Bass**—fennel purée, red wine/port reduction, orange segments and fried capers
- **Beef Duo**—braised beef short ribs, celeriac pommes Anna, creamed Swiss chard, seared filet mignon, braised red cabbage, mustard seeds au jus
- **Chocolate-Raspberry Crunch Cake with vanilla ice cream**
- **Cheese Selection**
For example, I wanted to compete for the U.S. candidacy for the 2011 Bocuse d’Or. Part of the application process is to submit two letters of reference from chefs. I asked my mentor and friend Chef Jones for a letter and, to my surprise, he said no. He had a good reason, however; he wanted me to get some more competition experience before he signed his name to mine. I immediately signed up for a continuing education class at the CIA on culinary competitions. Following that, I entered every competition, ACF or otherwise, I found interesting. One of them was the Allure of the Seas Culinary Challenge. I may have taken a detour from my original goal, but I accomplished another big one along the way.

You’re a member of ACF Minneapolis Chefs Chapter. What is the benefit of professional organizations?
There is definitely something to the phrase, “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” Being a member of this organization and others puts you in immediate touch with people who care not only about food and professional advancement within our industry, but, even more importantly, about helping their community and educating others. There are so many opportunities that are available with ACF, and it’s worth any extra time you put into it. You never know how assisting at an event may benefit someone who has a real need or, conversely, put you in touch with the right person who can help you personally or professionally.

You’re a Certified Executive Chef®. Why did you decide to pursue certification?
For selfish reasons. I liked the challenge. I achieved certification through the ACF partnership with the CIA’s ProChef certification. When I was a teaching assistant, the temptation to be the first one to take and pass the ProChef levels II and III, and subsequently receive my CCC and CEC certifications, was too great. I felt, and still feel, that because I began my career a bit behind those who have been cooking since they were 10 with their mothers, that I would like to do as much as I can to develop professionally in my stunted timeframe. I truly believe that the benefits of certification are great and varied. If you take the time to advance your knowledge, it underscores that you really care about what you do. Your colleagues will see that, and, maybe more importantly, potential employers.

What is one thing you hope to gain during your tenure with Allure of the Seas?
Maybe it’s not so much what I want to gain as much as what I want for the restaurant, which is for it to be a successful and well-liked concept. The most valuable lesson so far is determining what people enjoy eating. My next menus will reflect that. Beyond that, I have ideas for the restaurant that I hope will improve the already special experience. But, one thing at a time.

GET CONNECTED
Learn more about Molly Brandt at www.cookitkitchen.com. Connect with her on Twitter at http://twitter.com/cookinthekitch and on Facebook at Cook in the Kitchen.

View Royal Caribbean’s video of Brandt in action on Allure of the Seas on Youtube by searching “Fine Dining on Allure.”

Discover all that Allure of the Seas has to offer, from a zip line to an ice rink and from two-story lofts to 25 restaurants and bars, at www.royalcaribbean.com.

CULINARY TIP

“Never, ever throw anything out until the day is really over. I can’t tell you how many times this advice has saved me from disaster.”
—MOLLY BRANDT