



The Avant-garde Chef

For some people, food is something you must have to fill your stomach and satisfy your hunger. Yet for Chef Carrie Nahabedian, food is much more than that: food is art. The ingredients are like different paint colors – the kitchen is the studio, and the palate her canvas. Everything she creates is a unique culinary masterpiece.

Text: Ani Garibyan

Chef Carrie Nahabedian is not your typical chef or cook at the usual Armenian restaurant. She is the head chef and owner of NAHA restaurant in Chicago. Before digging deeper into NAHA, let's understand the story behind its star and creator, Chef Carrie. Her grandparents, originally from Sivas, fled to the United States as a result of the Armenian Genocide, but continued to instill their traditions and customs in their children and grandchildren. Carrie, who was born and raised in Chicago, grew up around great food. "My mother Helen is an incredible home cook with a great palate and love for entertaining. Though my cooking is on a refined professional level, my mom instilled in me at an early age the same values that I instill in my



cooks. Her cooking is 'from the heart' and you can feel every bit of passion and love in her cooking," said Nahabedian. "She always sets a stunning table without pretense, but with beauty and style. I don't believe our entire family ever used paper or plastic unless we were at a picnic." She continued with stories of her grandmother and added, "My grandmother Rose was an amazing woman and I have such vivid and loving memories of her Armenian cooking. She cooked traditional Armenian dishes every day for my grandfather. She also taught many women at our church how to make the specialties of our heritage so that the tradition could continue." "I became a chef because I had and still have an intense love of cooking and

culinary history," said Nahabedian. She took an unconventional road to becoming a chef. Though she was accepted to a culinary university, she decided to travel throughout Europe instead. There, she was able to learn from top-notch chefs, and advanced her cooking skills. Upon her return to the United States, the chef continued to work for well-known restaurants such as Le Perroquet, Le Francais, the Park Hyatt Hotel and Sinclair's. She also took her fine-dining skills to Atlantic City – the Vegas of the east. There, she opened Resorts International Hotel and Casino, as assistant chef of the garde manger. The resort, being the first casino in the city, experienced a massive line outside its doors on opening day. "My experience in



Paul Stramling

Note

September 22 is "Carrie Nahabedian Day" in Chicago, which was proclaimed by Chicago's mayor, Richard Daley. She was nominated three consecutive times for the nationally coveted James Beard Foundation Awards and won the Best Chef Great Lakes award. In 2008, Chef Carrie was one of the

featured chefs at the Charleston Food and Wine Festival – one of the premier festivals in the United States. In 2009, the chef was inducted into Chicago Culinary Museum and Chefs Hall of Fame. Also in 2009, her restaurant, NAHA was initiated into the Fine Dining Hall of Fame by Nation's Restaurant News.

Atlantic City taught me that large volume cooking was not for me," said Nahabedian. She headed west to California to the Four Seasons Hotel as Executive Chef and managed three of the company's properties. The chef incorporated everything that had to do with California in her cooking – the sun, mountains, water and landscape overall. In collaboration with her cousin, Michael Nahabedian, she headed back to her hometown of Chicago where she opened NAHA. This family run restaurant quickly grew to the top of Chicago's best restaurants. Michael's brother, Tom is the architect of the restaurant, and the chef's sisters and nephews also work at the restaurant. "NAHA is the first four letters of our last names, it is also the nickname of all the Nahabedian men throughout the generations – so it was only fitting that this would be the name," she explained. The restaurant has had great reviews. Zagat rated NAHA's food as 27 out of 30 – an excellent score. Ron Kaplan, a food blogger said, "In many ways that meal changed my life." As he sat down at the table, he remembered thinking, "The menu is problematic in the most fantastic of ways. I cannot focus. Everything looks delicious and interesting...really interesting. I can't absorb what I'm reading. There are 11 appetizer choices and each one of them looks to be worth trying. There are nine entrée choices and each one of them looks to be worth trying." He continued, "As we walk to the door, the hostess asks me 'how was everything?' I laugh. I tell her 'words cannot describe it.' Maybe what I should have said was 'I'm going to have to write 5+ pages just to describe this experience in a completely inadequate way.' But what choice do I have? The meal is now a memory that I want to hold on to forever. In documenting it, I hope to prevent it from fading away and savor it for as long as possible."

Chef Carrie enjoys traveling and has done so greatly through NAHA and the Four Seasons. Three years ago, she, with her parents and older sister, traveled to Armenia. "We had a tremendous time visiting Yerevan, the countryside and the holy city of Echmiadzin. It was quite memorable, the beauty of the Dilijan Forest, the luscious fruits being sold at the roadside stands, the heritage and the people. We had many good meals in Yerevan, but the cooking was much more 'Eastern' Soviet in style than what I was expecting," she said. "We did have great hearth baked breads that reminded my



Dad of the bread his mom used to bake. In one village, I saw *rojig* (soujoukh) hanging and drying out on the patio. It was so cool to see. Another home had an 'oven-pit' dug into the patio that they used for baking bread." Aside from her regular duties at the restaurant, Chef Carrie Nahabedian has many side projects. She grew up with wholesome meals at home and would like for all children to have what she had. She explained, "I would love to be able to spend more time on teaching kids to



cook, so many children eat processed food at home and at school they don't know have the experiences of a great meal." She is also actively involved in the Green City Market here in Chicago which is according to the chef, "one of the best farmer's markets in America," and the only all-local, sustainable and organic market in Chicago. "My cousin Michael and I also represent Chicago and the Chicago Bears at the 'Taste of the NFL' each year at the Super Bowl raising funds and awareness to fight hunger nationwide." This past summer, she took her nephew Colin on a trip throughout South East Asia as a graduation present from college. "While we were in Cambodia, we became involved in the Water Well project of Siem Reap. We have since helped sponsor seven wells for families in remote villages that otherwise would be without clean drinking water," said Nahabedian. Chef Carrie Nahabedian has already had an amazing career. Her future seems to be even more eventful and successful. She enthused, "My dream project is to do a great cookbook on the foods of the Middle East, Greece and Africa. I would love to take two years off, travel and explore – but that is another story." ■



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