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## **Culinary Career in Progress**

A personal chef traces her start to family biz

**By Sylvie Bigar**

Originally from Washingtonville, about 60 miles north of Manhattan, Dana Minuta grew up around her parents' growing catering business. "I remember being 5 years old, surveying the world from the stack of crates I was standing on to help wash dishes," she said.



Chef Dana Minuta, right, with Alex at the Seafood Shop in Wainscott. SYLVIE BIGAR

At first, that view of the world was more expansive. "I wanted to become a lawyer, then a judge, then the first woman president," said Ms. Minuta, today a 30-year-old private chef, pushing her long brown hair off her face with her chic sunglasses. Things turned out a bit differently after her first law class in Albany: "I realized that a lawyer's job was mainly to interpret the law in order to help the client. I didn't like that, so I switched to an Italian major."

With a father from Sicily and an Irish-American mother, tempers and food were often flying about, but whatever the situation, the client was always right. Even though neither parent had formal training, "when guests asked for some elaborate dish, Mom would run in the kitchen, grab a bunch of cookbooks and figure it out," she said.

She also talked about the inevitable Sunday lunches at her grandmother's house. "You were invited to eat, but you had to work at it," she said. "Raviolis, sopressata, tasting the sauce 40 times, cannoli from scratch."

Chef Dana was never one to keep to a conventional route. She first came to Manhattan via the Hudson River as a hired hand on a 78-foot schooner. The trip took 18 hours and changed her life. The boat anchored downtown and was used as a charter. The night that wine heiress Caroline Kluge threw a lavish party was the night that Ms. Minuta first tasted champagne. "I watched what guests were eating—I didn't know that kind of food existed," she said.

The next years were spent on charter boats in the Caribbean, first as a deckhand, but she soon started cooking on board, remembering childhood recipes and looking for new ones.

I bought the original Dean & DeLuca cookbook, and that's really what inspired me to become a chef," she said. "It's an ingredient book, and everything stems from having the right ingredients."

She also quickly understood the power of the chef on board. "Everyone loves the chef, and when the chef needs to get some spice or a different kind of oil, the crew and the captain abide."

As she moved to better and bigger yachts, the pressure grew. “I was traveling with 20 cookbooks and fudging it as best I could, but I really didn’t have the technique,” she recalled. Soon, it was time to drop anchor.

Ms. Minuta enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. There, everything came together. She won scholarship after scholarship and was even awarded the coveted M.F.K. Fisher Award for excellence in food writing, for an essay on catching tuna from the deck of the sailboat Oasis.

Next came the restaurant life. As an externship for the CIA degree, Chef Dana found herself peeling carrots and slicing chives in the basement of Gramercy Tavern under star chef Tom Colicchio. “I saw how fast people moved, how smooth they were,” she said. She ended up being called upstairs—to the real kitchen—to work on the vegetable station, then the meat and fish stations.

“Here is my Gramercy Tavern scar,” she said, laughing and displaying a large brown spot on her right hand.

After graduation, she started to freelance and discovered the East End of Long Island.

“My desire to work in restaurants was fulfilled at Gramercy Tavern. The pay was horrible, the hours even worse,” she said. So Chef Dana became a full-time private chef for a Southampton family and settled in Sag Harbor.

Becoming part of a community opened her eyes to the purveyor’s side of the business. “Shopping and relationships is 90 percent of what I do,” she said. During the season, she goes in for a lot of blanching before freezing, and even canning, so that she will have local ingredients year-round. When she takes the bus into Manhattan, she lugs a large cooler around; it holds everything she needs to cook in her employer’s city kitchen.

Nurturing relationships, with both employers and local vendors, is key, she said. “Sitting down with my boss, my attitude is ‘Yes is the answer—what is the question?’ When I first stepped into the kitchen of the private home I am working in right now, I found Knorr bouillon cubes! ... Who are you kidding?” she asked with her arms extended, Italian style. She makes her own broth, of course.

Fish is her favorite thing to cook. “I love fluke, sea trout, black bass,” and she always buys it from the Seafood Shop in Wainscott. “For vegetables and produce, I often shop at Pike Farms or at the Green Thumb. I use Iacono chickens from East Hampton and get my mushrooms from Dave Falkowski.”

For meat, she favors Hampton Prime Meats in Southampton. This week, she is making cardoon and fish soup, and she’ll serve Peconic oysters with a lemon granita. For dessert, she is planning a lemon verbena panna cotta.

One of Ms. Minuta’s employers, Allison Johnson, said of her cuisine, “You can just taste the love.”

Asked about her future, Chef Dana said, “I’m thinking about a line of organic frozen baby food, and at the end of September I taped a pilot for the Food Network. It seems as though everyone is looking for women chefs these days.”

She reaches into her tote and pulls out a cookbook: “Do you know ‘Cooking by Hand’ by Paul Bertolli?”

Chef Dana doesn’t travel by boat anymore, but it seems she still lugs cookbooks around.