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LA Cooking Examiner

LA food folks: Betty Fraser and Denise DeCarlo

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Full disclosure: I first met Betty Fraser and Denise DeCarlo in 2006, when they catered my 40th birthday party. And a great job they did, too, because weeks later my very fussy foodie crowd was still talking about the food they served. Betty had engineered the menu but was off filming season 2 of Bravo TV's Top Chef by the time of the party, leaving Denise to run the show. It was chaotic but completely elegant and delicious.

As co-owners and executive chefs for Dish Functional, Inc., Betty and Denise run a catering company (As You Like It Catering), a restaurant (Grub, in Hollywood), and a restored historic event venue (the Fountain Court). And they do it all with sass and smiles.

Here, Betty and Denise talk about how a California girl and a southern belle found a way to get along, making hors d'oeuvres at sea while turning green, and resolving business disputes by fighting with bread. And thanks, Grub gals, for sharing your recipe for Grub's Friggin' Amazing French toast!

LA Cooking Examiner: What and who got you cooking?

Betty Fraser: Well, there weren't a lot of other little girls named Betty around when I was growing up, so I always felt a kinship to Betty Crocker. I can still see my mom's copy of that red-and-white checkered book in the kitchen - I used to love to read the recipes. That was the start of it for me. It's all in a name.

Denise DeCarlo: For me it was genetics. I come from a line of chefs on my father's side. I actually wasn't planning on being a chef. I wanted to be a veterinarian. But on a trip to England when I was 25 I found a beautiful cookbook that just pulled me in, and I haven't stopped cooking since.

LA Cooking Examiner: What's the first dish you remember making by yourself?

BF: My first solo dish was Mexican Wedding Cakes. It was all about licking the melted powdered sugar off my hands after I rolled them!

DD: Is microwaving brussels sprouts after school considered a dish? I do remember always making sure to plate them in an attractive way though.

LA Cooking Examiner: How did the two of you meet? How long have you been working together?

BF: Denise and I met when we were waitresses at California Pizza Kitchen, and, in all honesty, we didn't get along very well. And here we are, 16 years later, and still going strong.

DD: Didn't get along? We were polar opposites. She's a San Francisco girl and I'm from Arkansas. But then we started discovering the things we had in common and realized we might make a good team. This is seriously the longest relationship I've ever been in. We have a lot of the same problems that married people have...like her always leaving the toilet seat up.

LA Cooking Examiner: How do the two of you split the responsibilities of running your business?

BF: I do most of the menu creation for the restaurant and catering, handle the marketing and pay the bills. Denise deals with the day-to-day books, oversees the kitchen and floor, and is the perfect "mom" to the employees. But when we're behind the line we just do our thing. It's also where we have the most fun. On the line, there are no other responsibilities: just making good food and getting it out on time.

DD: We've got a lot of different balls in the air, and I don't know how we'd make it without each other. Every morning we go over our day and check things off the list. But the list is constantly changing, so we both just take care of what we need to when it comes up. We've been together so long we can step into each other's shoes pretty easily.

LA Cooking Examiner: Partnerships aren't always easy. Do you battle? How do you resolve conflicts of opinion?

BF: Have you ever seen two grown women having a fight with a loaf of bread? It happens. We're working in a high-stress business and occasionally our emotions get the better of us. But we've become so much better at handling that stress. We try to nip it in the bud before it turns into something bigger.

DD: We've had some arguments where the panes of glass in our restaurant started shaking. A few years ago we had a pretty bad fight so we started going to a business coach. It's actually more like couples counseling. It's been great for us. Neither of us has ever been called mellow, so we try to take that energy and point it in a positive direction.

BF: It's helped us see each other's positions more clearly and how working together is the key to the success of our business. So we listen to each other and then discuss it through.

DD: Usually.

BF: Bitch.

DD: You are.

BF: You are.

LA Cooking Examiner: You do both the restaurant and catering. Do you have a preference?

BF: I like them both for completely different reasons. Our restaurant Grub is our baby, and I just love being there. Our staff and guests are like our family, and because we're in a converted 1920s bungalow it really feels like home. When we're catering it's usually for a special event and if we can provide something that makes it memorable it's a great feeling. It's like having your mom say, "Darling, how wonderful. You cleaned your room." It's satisfaction for a job well done.

DD: I feel the same way. They both have their rewards. I really enjoy preparing for the event, being a part of the team in a big kitchen and just cooking. All the business stuff I have to deal with goes away and I can just have fun. And the restaurant totally scratches my social itch because I can just bop around from table to table visiting with people. I love it.

LA Cooking Examiner: Denise, how did you keep the business going while Betty was off doing Top Chef? Betty, how has the TV show changed the business?



DD: I was like a hamster on crack running on a wheel. It was one of those perfect storms: As soon as she left, we had a few mini-disasters come at us at once. And on top of that I was sick for most of the time she was gone. We were used to divvying up the responsibilities, but there was no way to communicate with her, so I was on my own. It was like an insane lunch rush that happened for a month straight. But anyone who has worked in a restaurant knows that eventually the last customer leaves and you take that sigh of relief. So I sighed when she came back.

BF: I felt so bad about the workload Denise had, but we had decided together it was something I should do. It has been good for our business, particularly with tourists who are fans of the show, and it's opened some doors for cooking appearances and TV interest for the two of us. I'm still kind of involved with the show through a weekly appearance I make on a Sirius radio show called Out Q in the Morning where we talk about the episodes. I really wasn't prepared for the amount of attention being on the show would bring, but Denise and I are a team, so it's not something we use to promote our businesses. But it is fun to get recognized at an event we're catering or by someone in the restaurant and answer all their Top Chef trivia questions.



LA Cooking Examiner: Okay, you're Hollywood chefs. Who's the biggest celebrity eating at Grub, and what does he/she eat?

BF: With our location we get a lot of celebs in who are taking meetings nearby, as well as a lot of big-name producers and directors. But our whole thing is about giving people a little home away from home, so we treat all our guests the same. Kind of like not favoring one child over the other. One of our biggest fans and nicest guests is Topher Grace. He comes in with his friend Richie and they go nuts over our "Friggin' Amazing French Toast." Of course, he eats it for dessert. Actors!

DD: We also always love seeing the actor Joe Reitman and poker player Annie Duke. They're a couple and just the greatest people in the world. We've noticed that a lot of our celebrity guests really enjoy being treated like "one of the family," which is why they keep coming back.

LA Cooking Examiner: What's the biggest disaster you've had to deal with, either at the restaurant or on a catering job?

BF: I was asked to cater a dinner party on a yacht. I mentioned to the host that I had never cooked on a boat before and she told me I'd be fine. I was fine...until I got incredibly seasick right between serving the appetizers and preparing the entrées. I was a mess. I got so lucky that the captain of the yacht knew how to cook a little bit, and he saved the day. I was literally on the floor shouting out instructions: "Sauté the green beans now!" We somehow made it through.

DD: There is always something coming up in this business, but most of our craziness comes from catering jobs because there are so many intangibles you can't control. We had an event for 300 guests one time and since there wasn't a kitchen on site we had to cook outside. There was a mix-up with a tent we had ordered because there was a slight chance of rain. The slight chance turned into a downpour. We packed up all the food to take back to the restaurant to prepare and started caravanning back and forth. I was literally cooking appetizers in my truck. But the show must go on. I don't think any of the guests knew what we were going through.

LA Cooking Examiner: Any really strange requests for events or at the restaurant?

BF: At our new event location, the Fountain Court in Hollywood, we had a couple holding an Indian-themed wedding. They wanted to know where they could rent an elephant.

DD: We told them we didn't have the necessary elephant permits.