



This Top Chef Came Home

A PERSONAL TOUCH
PROPELS A LOCAL CHEF

When Ariane Duarte was just a little girl who could barely see over the top of the stove, "I helped my grandmother in the kitchen." Not just once in a while either: "I went to my grandparents' house every day after school, and grandma would plop me onto the counter and together we'd cook." It's one of her happiest and most treasured memories. "I'll never forget the wonderful smells in my grandmother's kitchen," Duarte recalls, "or how the lettuce that we picked from grandpa's garden tasted, and the dressings grandma taught me to make."

It seems when you grow up in an Italian family with immigrant grandparents, "food is a big part of your life," says Duarte, who was born, raised, and still lives in Verona. And it's an extraordinary training ground for a budding chef. One who took everything she learned from her grandmother – not to mention The Culinary Institute of America – and whipped it into a wildly successful career as a restaurateur, and a prime spot on several televised cooking shows. The most notable of these is "Top Chef" on Bravo, and the Food Network's

"Beat Bobby Flay" (she did, by the way).

Duarte's is a household name to foodies and fans of food TV, but her beginnings were small potatoes. "I worked in a deli in high school, but my first paid cooking job was baking pies and dumplings for a local woman who sold them to Bloomingdale's." This was at the ripe old age of 14.

After graduating from cooking school in the late 1980s ("I knew college wasn't for me"), Duarte stirred the pot in several restaurants in New Jersey, Manhattan, and then Dallas, where she met her future husband and business partner. The couple moved to Chicago to fill bellies in his family's restaurant, but Duarte longed for home. "I missed my family dinners," she says, adding, "And there aren't many women chefs in New Jersey."

Back in the Garden State, Duarte and her husband started a catering business out of their home in 2004, and a couple of years later lit the burners by opening CulinAriane in Montclair, with just 30 seats and a menu for sophisticated palates (think: rosemary-crusting roasted rack of lamb with minted gnocchi), and heavy purses.

The reservation lines really heated up following "Top Chef," but after an eight-year run, Duarte decided to cool down the ovens for good in order to open the more casual Ariane Kitchen & Bar in Verona in late 2014. "CulinAriane was a special-occasion place, and I'd like to see my customers once a week, not once a year," says Duarte. "Plus, I wanted to make a burger." She tops hers with cheddar, pickled shallots, harissa aioli, and a fried green tomato. "I get my tomatoes from a farm in Cedar Grove," and all her lettuces come from a hydroponic farmer in Denville.

Duarte loads the menu with local items whenever possible, and despite her success, still considers herself a homegrown Jersey girl. "I'm just me," she says with a laugh. "And the kitchen is my happy place where I feed people and get to do what I love," she adds, clearly taking a page from her grandmother's cookbook.