

By Carole L. Chiamp

My Spatula

Learning to cook professionally changed my life. I embarked on an adventure, leaving a successful law practice, family, and friends to attend chef's school at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in New York. I was not ready to retire, but I wanted to make major life changes while I could still enjoy the benefits.

As a family law practitioner with an eight-person staff, I was working 70 hours a week, even after my practice had become successful. I wanted to maintain that level of success and not let down my employees, who depended on me for their jobs.

Maybe it was facing my own mortality, but my feelings about doing less law and more of something else began to change a few years ago. I knew that it was time to slow down; not because I was tired but because there was so little room for me in my own life. I needed to stop and smell the roses—or, in my case, a nice béarnaise.

After a year at the CIA, spending 10-hour days on my feet with my 20-year-old classmates, I returned to Detroit to divide my time between working at my firm, where I'm of counsel to Hickey, Cianciolo & Fishman and cooking at the Rattlesnake Club. At the restaurant, I developed new recipes, especially for soups and appetizers. My family's Italian cooking inspired dishes that the chefs I worked for had never tasted.

In my old life, I would come home at 7:00, eat dinner, then maybe do some work I had brought home. The next day I'd be up at 5:45 a.m. to go to the gym if I had time, then back to work. On the weekends I'd put in a few more hours at the office. In my post-CIA graduation life, I come home, research recipes on the Internet, try to think creatively, forage for interesting ingredients, and jot down ideas for new recipes. Last year I enrolled in a commercial baking class and was able to complete the course, even though it was held for eight hours every Tuesday, motion day for domestic relations cases.

The more I grew in my cooking, the more I found my hard work paying off. I had always wanted to bring a smile to someone's face with a dish I had prepared, and now I could. Food really does warm the soul, and I felt there was no greater act of love than bringing that joy—or at least that moment of pleasure—to both friends and strangers.

As I continued to develop my recipes and refine my techniques, I found another payoff in the form of recognition. My soups and appetizers—such as cream of roasted red pepper and corn soup and Vietnamese spring rolls with two sauces (a huge hit) were finding their way into the dining room. Proud moments—such as the chef adopting my version of my grandmother's Tuscan bean and tomato bruschetta recipe—have become more frequent occurrences.

I don't get paid by the restaurants where I work, which gives me more flexibility if I have to appear in court at the last minute or stay late at the office. But the opportunity to work at Opus One, where I have been for the last two years, is worth working for free. I exist in two separate worlds to be sure. One is filled with telephones, computers, and courtrooms; the other with knives, chevre, and cooking stations. The people are worlds apart, as well.

In the kitchen, my coworkers, mostly men, are a mix of ethnicities and races. They are college graduates and high school dropouts, Muslims and Baptists, career restaurant pros and transient workers, longtime Detroiters and recent immigrants. They are kind and respectful but use swear words more than lawyers use Latin. They ask me for legal advice on deeds and OUILs, and they tell me about their lives. I try to help, especially when it comes to lobbying for the wives of recent immigrants to be able to learn to read and obtain driver's licenses. Sometimes that's harder than it sounds.

The restaurant kitchen is a place with a different cast of characters and rules than the offices and courtrooms where I have spent most of my career. And the creativity I have tapped into cooking professionally is different from the kind of creativity I use to strategize cases.

I still work as a lawyer and am fortunate that my 70-hour weeks of years past continue to pay dividends. I have an of counsel arrangement with a firm that was interested in me for my expertise and the quality of my clientele—not in my ability to manage a law practice. As a result, I now practice law 30 hours a week and still have time for cooking in a restaurant kitchen.

I will always enjoy working hard and be driven to excel, whether in an office, a kitchen, or somewhere else. But now the work I am doing is fulfilling me and satisfying my passions while also allowing me to strike a balance between serving clients and serving a nice goat cheese and roasted tomato terrine. When I get home at night, my feet may hurt, but I feel the excitement of a 20-year-old and the satisfaction of someone living a full life. ♦



Carole L. Chiamp of Chiamp & Associates, P.C., Detroit, practices in the area of family law. Ms. Chiamp is a former president of the Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association and a recipient of the Michigan State Bar Champion of Justice Award. She presently serves on the Judicial Tenure Commission and is an approved mediator. She has been listed in "The Best Lawyers in America" since 1989.



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