



CONSUMED

Star Power

We've just watched our second class of Rising Star Chefs, well, rise. Yes, StarChefs.com has once again selected Boston to be one of the cities featured in its annual awards honoring culinary up-and-comers, and what a fantastic set of 14 stars it selected. Toro's Jamie Bissonnette, Garden at the Cellar's Will Gilson, Uni's Chris Chung, Catch's Chris Parsons, Via Matta's Mike Pagliarini, Clio's Andres Grundy, L'Espalier's Jiho Kim, Aura's Rachel Klein, Myers + Chang's Joanne Chang, Oleana's Theresa Paopao, Craigie on Main's Tom Schlesinger-Guidelli, Sel de la Terre's Louis DiBiccari, Tastings' Richard Garcia, and Sofra's Maura Kilpatrick all brought home bragging rights earlier this month.



We're always glad to see Boston's talented toques getting national recognition, but what do the awards mean exactly? Is Joanne Chang rising? Is Rachel Klein, Maura Kilpatrick, or Jamie Bissonnette? Excuse me, but haven't they already risen? My first reaction was to be a tad insulted on behalf of Boston. And then I spent an hour on the phone with Antoinette Bruno, CEO of StarChefs.com.

Bruno's ambition moves at warp speed. She spent a decade or so on Wall Street, got bored, and went to Paris to become a chef. Soon after completing her chef's certificate there, she enrolled in Harvard Business School. After graduation (and marriage and her first child), she met another mommy who had just begun StarChefs.com and joined on to write the business plan. Before long, Bruno bought out her partners and became CEO. She's built a content-rich online food magazine that gets 20 million hits each month, and her advisory board reads like a who's who of fancy chefs. Each year, its members, along with other national and local chefs and experts, create a list of Rising Star contenders in each of the four cities being featured. Formal in-restaurant tastings are scheduled during off-hours, giving chefs the opportunity to excel without the distraction of a full house. "We're not cloak and dagger," Bruno says. "The chefs know we are coming. We do between 50 to 100 tastings of four dishes per chef in each city we visit. Rising Stars is about recognizing that there's a new generation of talent in every city."

Joanne Chang was surprised to be named a "Rising Star." She says she was "flattered, but it felt a little weird. I've been in the industry for 10 years, and I'm sort of out of touch with the young chef's world." But then Chang reconsidered, musing, "When you get nominated for a James Beard, you absolutely go to New York, and all your friends call you congratulate you." Though the Rising Star awards are less well known, they still serve to bring exposure to stellar local chefs, some of whom really are just starting their rise, while others have names that are boldfaced in Boston but less renowned beyond our region. "We live in a little box and think people know us," says Chang, "but they don't know us, nationally, not outside of Boston."

Jamie Bissonnette agrees. "Many of us have been mentored by the last class of Rising Star Chefs, like Andy Husbands and Ana Sortun, and it feels good to get the recognition. People don't think of coming to Boston as a dining destination like do New York or San Francisco. But they should. We are part of the national scene."

The Rising Star Chefs are all stars, but many are moon-shadowed by their mentors, so it's nice for them to stand in the spotlight. Plus, all the national recognition doesn't hurt our city or its chefs. Local dining fans may know who's who, but who knows Maura Kilpatrick or Andres Grundy outside of Boston? Thanks, Star Chefs, for reminding the wider world that if you want to eat well, you can count on Boston. "It's a tough industry, and this is a tough competition. The winners are national-level talents," says Bruno, powerhouse-at-large.

— Louisa Kasdon

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