

epicurean



Jamie Lauren

## Amherst to Absinthe

Chef Jamie Lauren sat down recently with Amalia McGibbon to discuss the boss who told her to drop out of college, the best meal she's ever eaten, and why the cooking industry is a lot like the army.

**C**hef Jamie Lauren tinkered around the kitchen as a child growing up in Manhattan, but never dreamed that one day she would be a chef. Flash forward two decades and Lauren, now 30, has become one of San Francisco's rising culinary stars (a title conferred upon her in 2005 by the *San Francisco Chronicle*). As an honors graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Lauren has had the opportunity to work with many celebrity chefs in the past, including Anita Lo of Annisa, New York City; Lance Dean Valesquez of Bendeau, San Francisco; and Jean Michel-Bouvier from L'Essential, Chambery, France. In July 2007, Chef Lauren assumed the executive chef position at Absinthe Brasserie and Bar in San Francisco's Hayes Valley, and her American-influenced French menu—which echoes the chef's commitment to organic, locally grown, and seasonal ingredients—has featured such popular morsels as the Pork Confit, with braised red cabbage, Serrano ham, and crispy mustard spätzle, and the Pan-Seared King Salmon, with creamed corn, braised ham hock, purple potatoes, fava beans, and tarragon.

**Amalia McGibbon: When did your love of cooking start?**

**Jamie Lauren:** I would help out my mom with dinner when I was a kid, and I always liked poking around and getting my fingers into things. I also took a cooking class for kids when I was in the 4th grade at the InterContinental Hotel in New York, which was where I first learned how to make Beef Wellington (not that I would make that nowadays).

**AM: How did you decide to become a chef?**

**JL:** I was studying journalism at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst when I took a summer job as a prep cook at a local restaurant. I was promoted to the line within a month or two, and the executive chef told me I should consider dropping out of Amherst and going to culinary school. So I did, beginning my career at the Culinary Institute of America a year later.

**AM: Do you have a culinary icon?**

**JL:** I really like the food writer M.F.K. Fisher. A friend turned me on to her books when I was living in France, and she has been a great source of inspiration.

**AM: How would you describe your culinary style?**

**JL:** I believe in using the best possible ingredients that I can get my hands on, and tend to focus on sustainable, local, and organic products. Aside from that, I try to stick to the classic French techniques I was taught, occasionally tweaking things to make dishes more contemporary.

**AM: What inspires your menu at Absinthe?**

**JL:** The menu is definitely market-driven. Usually I get inspired just by looking at a purveyor's list and seeing what's available. As a result, much of it is very spur of the moment (which drives my kitchen manager crazy sometimes!). →

**AM: Do you have a favorite dish that you've created?**

**JL:** I am very fond of my crispy pork confit and the braised beef cheeks. I think those two have become signatures for me at Absinthe.

**AM: What is the best dinner you've ever eaten?**

**JL:** Oy. This is a tough question. Probably at Restaurant Pic in Valence, France. It was one of the loveliest restaurants I'd ever been to. The service was perfect and the chef, Anne-Sophie Pic, is the only female chef in France to have three Michelin stars. I can't remember the entire tasting menu, but there was some local pork that was sensational. On the whole, it was definitely a meal that made me want to stick with my career choice.

**AM: Do you have a favorite cookbook?**

**JL:** I like the French Laundry cookbook but really only for the pictures. I generally don't cook things from cookbooks—I just use them for inspiration.

**AM: What is it like being a woman in the culinary industry?**

**JL:** It has been slightly challenging, but not as difficult as I'd been warned. Once you get to the level I'm at, I think people are forced to respect you. But as a line cook it was a little harder. I had my share of sexism but—bottom line—you can't let it get to you.

**AM: What kitchen tool can you not live without?**

**JL:** My yellow Le Creuset spatula.

**AM: What are your favorite ingredients to work with?**

**JL:** Garlic and butter.

**AM: Is there a cooking technique that you have either created or use in an unusual way?**

**JL:** I don't think so. There are so many techniques already in existence, and I am just trying to keep up with what's been done for hundreds of years. Additionally, I am not a molecular type of cook and I prefer to celebrate ingredients for what they are rather than try and change them too much.

**AM: Is there anything else you can tell us about the profession that would be helpful to those with dreams of becoming a chef?**

**JL:** This is a tough industry, and if you aren't committed to the battle, I suggest finding a different career. I equate kitchen life to being in the army; you have to work your way up through the ranks and deal with some really tough drill sergeants along the way. But trust that each person you meet, work for, and work with will only make you a better person in the long run. ■