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10 Questions with . . . Jamie Lauren

By Susan Dyer Reynolds

In 2005, Jamie Lauren burst onto the San Francisco food scene as the executive chef of Levende Lounge, where she won critical accolades and developed a base of devoted diners. She currently helms the kitchen at Hayes Valley favorite Absinthe and has made it through 10 episodes on *Top Chef*, "New York," the fifth season of cable television's highest-rated food show. *Top Chef* has become part of the American vernacular – even Kickie, my late father's 78-year-old girlfriend, has heard of it. "That's the one where the woman says, 'Please pack your scissors and go,'" she said when I mentioned I was interviewing one of the contestants. I think she had it confused with *Top Design* (one of many imitators), but just the fact she was familiar with it says something about its popularity because she doesn't watch much television at all.

Lauren comes off on the show exactly as she does in real life – confident but not cocky, strong but not hard; she's a no-nonsense, no pretenses, talented chef who takes her work very seriously, but not herself.

Fun Fact: Jamie once trained to be a strong woman and was able to pull a truck.

Last thing you cooked for yourself?

Pasta with artichokes and sundried tomatoes – it's the first thing I've cooked in my new apartment and I've been there two months. I almost never cook at home.



photo: Katina Papson

Favorite food from your childhood?

Hot dogs at Papaya King in New York City. My mom would take me there before we went to the movies.

How would you describe working in your kitchen?

Loud at times – not me, my cooks. Messier than I'd like – I'm the one always cleaning it up . . . I'm neurotic. It can be overwhelming when it's busy. I'm usually there from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Something in your 'fridge or freezer that would surprise people?

Bagels and Jamaican beef patties from New York. I bring them back and never eat them because I'm never home.

A meal or a dish that, as a young chef, was an inspiration or a revelation?

Working with Mike Selvera at Bar Crudo opened my eyes about

working with raw fish – the way he is able to make it really shine.

Last restaurant you ate at?

Well, it's not a restaurant, but I had nachos and French fries at the zoo! The last restaurant I ate at was Doobu in Japantown. I had the Korean soup with tofu.

What is your signature dish?

At Absinthe I would say it's the pork confit.

Favorite offal?

I don't eat any of that stuff! I know I'm a bad chef, but it freaks me out. I'm a really picky eater – I'm adventurous, but I just can't get into offal.

What are your staff meals at Absinthe?

When I cook a staff meal, there's a theme, like Indian or Thai. When the cooks do it, we have red chicken with tortillas, and it's always overcooked and served with at least three different types of starch.

If you had to eat one thing for a week, what would it be?

The No. 6 from Turtle Tower – pho with caramelized noodles and onions.

What is your fantasy meal?

It would include Madonna, because I have to meet her – we would be on the beach in India, eating something southern Indian.

Have a favorite chef you'd like to see interviewed? Send your suggestions to susan@northsidesf.com.