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Fall 2017

Southern class & Jersey sass

Chef Rory finds her passion in Texas Panhandle

Story and photos by Diane Meyer

There is a distinct difference between a chef and a cook, although both “cook.”

Just ask Rory Schepisi.

“The difference is passion. A person that shows up and goes through the motions—that’s a cook. A person who really cares what’s going on the plate, who watches the person that plate is set in front of, who cares what their expression is when they see it and what their expression is when they eat it—that’s a chef.”

Guess which hat she wears.

The New Jersey native, now Amarillo, Texan, takes pride in her food, especially the steaks. She does not put steak sauce on her tables; a quality piece of beef should not be covered with other things.

That led her to try a famous brand early on.

“I brought Certified Angus Beef into my restaurant, and the consistency and the quality was far superior to any other brand I was using,” Chef Rory says. “People come to my restaurants for simple ingredients to enhance the flavor of a beautiful piece of meat.”

Her chefs are expected to cook steaks the right way, and customers are expected to order steaks the right way: “Anyone who eats a well-done steak, I feel has issues.”

At her former Boot Hill Saloon and Steakhouse in nearby Vega, Texas, a notice under the filet mignon read, “There is a \$5 fine for ordering this steak the wrong way.” She let customers try a rarer option first—after all, you can add but not subtract doneness—and they almost always preferred the “right” way.

Chef Rory developed an appetite for cooking when she was young. At 17, she was accepted into the prestigious Culinary Institute of America in New York City, and at 20 opened her first restaurant. With cooking as her first love and acting an equal second, she set out for Los Angeles.

Her two loves finally fell together and brought her to open Boot Hill, where she competed in Country Music Television’s *Popularity Contest*. Soon after, she was the runner-up on Season III of *The Next Food Network Star*.

However, the rising star was drawn to the western lifestyle more than acting.

“Moving to the Texas Panhandle reinvented me in a way,” she says. Completely out of her element, she learned to work with cattle from ranches to feedyards and “got to see what it took to put a steak on my table at my own restaurant.”

At one point, the chef was vegetarian because of a bet with her cousin “—who still needs to pay up—” but now insists, “eat your beef, it’s good for you.” She’s grateful for experiencing the hard work it takes to raise quality beef, and thanks ranchers for their dedication and passion.

“They’re part of our livelihood; it’s a chain,” Chef Rory says. “I want the cattle industry and the hospitality industry to come together more so we can educate our customers. If we work together, there will be a wider-scale appreciation for agriculture in this country.”

Her passion for the restaurant business and the Panhandle has put her at the forefront of some ambitious goals. She is part of the West Texas Chefs Table, a group that raises awareness of the local food scene in Amarillo and funds scholarships for kids to attend culinary school.

She’s also in the process of opening three restaurants in Amarillo. At the same time.

The Drunken Oyster, a Cajun oyster bar, will feature CAB ribeyes and New York strips. The Rockefeller, a high-end, farm-to-table, New York City-style restaurant will offer four or five CAB cuts, “mostly subprimals.” The Social Bar and Biscuit Company, a retro-feeling brunch concept with everything based on the biscuit, will incorporate a CAB brisket.

Her ultimate goal is five restaurants by 2019, “and I am going to make that happen,” she affirms.

Although its doors closed in Vega, Chef Rory is excited to open another Boot Hill in New Jersey, where Texas-vibe restaurants are becoming popular in cityscapes. “We’ll show those people what real steaks are all about,” she teases.

Glancing down, she studies the “Love Yourself” tattoo scripted on her forearm: “You have to believe in yourself more than anything in this industry. You need to rely on yourself first, no matter how scary it is. When you do, and you get through it, it makes you a much stronger person.”

She may not prefer a toque hat, but there’s no doubt the role fits Rory Schepisi, who embodies the passion, love, confidence and “hint of crazy” that defines a true chef.

There is no doubt opening three restaurants at once will be the best decision she ever made, no doubt she will continue to seize every opportunity that comes her way. And there is no doubt she will retire on a beach in St. Martin, surrounded by family, enjoying a perfectly grilled CAB ribeye.

END

CAPTION Information, Photo with two chefs:

Amarillo Chef Rory Schepisi with colleague on the West Texas Chefs Table, Joey Guzman, Amarillo Country Club.