

by Ron James

THE CHEF

On Christmas 2004, Cat Cora was on top of the world. The attractive young chef had risen from humble roots in Jackson, Miss., to the rank of superstar chef. She was, and still is, the only female chef in the history of the "Iron Chef" television show. She had written her first cookbook, "Cat Cora's Kitchen" (Chronicle, \$23) and was entertaining the idea of her own cooking show.

CAT CORA - Cat Cora, in her fifth year as an Iron Chef and about to launch her new cookbook "Cooking From the Hip: Fast, Easy, Phenomenal Meals," co-founded Chefs For Humanity, a grassroots coalition of culinary professionals that would provide services and resources during emergency and humanitarian crises. CNS Photo. Then, on the morning of Dec. 26, an undersea earthquake in the Indian Ocean and the devastating tsunami that followed took her on a path that changed her life and the lives of thousands.

"I wanted to do something," she said. "I called UNICEF and they suggested that I send out a press release to my fellow chefs to make them aware of UNICEF's efforts. The response was incredible. They gave to UNICEF, but they wanted to do much more. 'How else can we help?' they asked me."

That experience convinced Cora of a need for an organization to enable chefs to make a difference when disaster strikes.

"We needed a culinary Peace Corps so to speak," she explained. Little more than a year later, Cora co-founded Chefs For Humanity, a grass-roots coalition of culinary professionals who could provide services and resources during emergencies and humanitarian crises. She recruited an executive director, Debra Rainey, and a star-studded advisory chefs council that included Ming Tsai, Rick Bayless, Norm Van Aken, Bobby Flay and Marcus Samuelsson.

"I figured it would take us at least five years to get the organization ready for a major disaster," Cora recalled. "But Katrina happened. It was amazing that we were able to do anything significant."

But they did. The group focused on the Gulf Coast and worked with local chefs to feed thousands during the critical aftermath of the storm.

Still on top of the world, Cora is in her fifth year as an Iron Chef and has completed her new cookbook "Cooking From the Hip: Fast, Easy, Phenomenal Meals" (Houghton Mifflin, \$30). Restaurant and television deals are in the works and she is executive chef for Bon Appetit magazine. Plus, she is a UNICEF spokeswoman.

But they all take a back seat to Chefs for Humanity.

"It's my baby," she said. "It's the thing I do that is the most rewarding. I pray that it is going strong long after I'm gone."

THE DISH

"Alma Brother, my mother's mother, was famous on Swan Lake in Jackson, Miss., for her spicy, sweet mustard," Cora writes in "Cat Cora's Kitchen."

"She'd make a big batch every Christmas, and people in the town would call and beg to be on her holiday list. When I was a girl, I thought her mustard was way too strong - but Alma didn't make it with children in mind.

LAMB CHOPS - Cat Cora's™ lamb chops are served with delicious fruited mustard. CNS Photo. "Now that my tastes are more sophisticated, I love this sweet-hot blend. Its flavor has more clarity than the store-bought mustards you're accustomed to. I used her recipe as the base for my fruited mustard, making it richer with rosemary-browned butter and fresher tasting with the addition of tart dried cherries. My mom and I bring out Alma's mustard every holiday, which makes me feel at every gathering that Alma's spirit carries on."

THE WINE

Lamb chops bring to mind a bold red wine - especially a wonderfully fruit-forward syrah like the Napa Valley 2003 Darioush Signature Shiraz (\$64). The rich, fruity flavors and silky texture of the wine are a great match for this sweet and savory dish.

While American winemakers call their syrah just that, the Australians call it shiraz just to be a bit contrary. But winery owner Darioush Khaledi grew up in Iran's winemaking Shiraz region, where his father made wine as a hobby and young Khaledi used to sneak sips.

"Darioush will only drink shiraz with lamb," said winery president Dan De Polo. "It's a great match with any meat dish using Mediterranean spices."

The wine is made from their old vine estate vineyards in southern Napa Valley. The wine is elegantly bold with complex spice and dark berry flavors.

LAMB CHOPS WITH FRUITED MUSTARD

1/2 pound baby carrots

1/2 pound green beans

2 bulbs fennel, sliced

1/2 pound Red Bliss potatoes, halved

1/4 cup olive oil

Sea salt and pepper, to taste

Lamb chops:

8 (4-ounce) lamb chops

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 teaspoons minced garlic

1 tablespoon finely chopped rosemary

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Yields 8 servings.

Prepare hot grill and preheat oven to 400 F.

Toss vegetables in olive oil, salt and pepper, and roast in oven until tender, about 20 to 25 minutes. Remove from oven and keep warm.

Rub chops with oil, garlic, rosemary, kosher salt and pepper. Place on hot grill and cook, 4 minutes per side. Put on baking sheet and finish in oven, about 5 minutes or until desired doneness.

On plate, place vegetables in a mound and lay chops across them. Serve immediately with Fruited Mustard beside the lamb or spooned into small ramekins.

FRUITED MUSTARD

2 pounds (8 sticks) unsalted butter

2 bay leaves, chopped

1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary

1 cup chopped dried cherries

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 cup Alma's Sweet-Hot Mustard (recipe follows)

2 cups Dijon-style mustard

Yields about 8 cups.

In saucepan over medium heat, melt butter and cook until it reaches a caramel color, 3 to 4 minutes. Add bay leaves, rosemary, dried cherries and pepper. Mix in mustards. Refrigerate while lamb chops are grilling.

ALMA'S SWEET-HOT MUSTARD

1/2 cup dry Coleman's mustard

1/2 cup sugar

1/4 teaspoon kosher salt

1 tablespoon all-purpose flour

1/2 cup apple cider vinegar

1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted

1 cup plus 2 tablespoons prepared yellow mustard

Yields about 1 1/2 cups.

Mix together dry mustard, sugar, salt and flour. Stir vinegar and melted butter into dry mustard mixture. Add prepared mustard. Blend well. Refrigerate mustard for at least 24 hours to allow mustard powder to come to its full heat and meld flavor with remaining ingredients.

- From "Cat Cora's Kitchen: Favorite Meals for Family and Friends" (Chronicle Books, \$23).

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Food and Wine: Lamb chops and shiraz - a bold and beautiful pair by Ron James