

Cooking Corner: Her own Food Network show is one more treat for Amy Finley

by Maria C. Hunt

With no sense of irony, Amy Finley said her life has changed somewhat in recent weeks, but not that much, really.

The 33-year-old mom and freelance writer from La Mesa, Calif., just won her own six-episode show on The Food Network, beating out 11 other contestants for the title of The Next Food Network Star.

TASTE OF FAME - Amy Finley buys ingredients at Whole Foods in San Diego for meals for a client of her private-chef business. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. FRENCH COOKING - Dishes Amy Finley created included shepherd's pie, shredded brussels sprouts with walnuts, and chicken breasts stuffed with leeks. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. On a recent afternoon, she met her husband, Greg Schaefer, at Whole Foods so they could swap cars and pass off their two kids, son Indiana Blue, 5, and daughter Scarlett Marley, 2.

After tossing her head back to give Greg a dramatic kiss adieu, she grabbed a cart and rolled into the produce department. Finley, dressed in a gray T-shirt, Hudson jeans and olive Converse sneakers, said she usually likes to stroll through the store and see what looks inspiring.

She was shopping for a private-chef client, their former dentist and her husband's fourth cousin, who was recuperating after neck surgery.

"Today he has 2 pounds of organic ground beef he wanted me to use," she said. "I decided I would do a shepherd's pie, what the French call hachis parmentier."

She and her husband are confirmed Francophiles who fell in love in Paris, though they attended the same San Diego-area high school. A mutual friend put them in touch when Finley was headed to France to teach

English. She planned to crash with Greg for three nights when she first arrived in Paris.

"Between five or six dates here and three in France, we moved in together, and that was that," she said.

In the center of the produce department, she grabbed a couple of Russet potatoes, some brown cremini mushrooms, thyme, a couple of yellow onions and two ears of yellow corn.

"It's feeling like fall. Fall gets me on soups and hearty stuff," Finley said. "I think I'm going to make some corn chowder."

She also got brussels sprouts, choosing large ones the size of an egg, though she wasn't sure her client liked them.

Finley hopes to do more private chefing in the future. Her catering has been "freelance and small-scale" - a wedding cake for her sister, a cocktail party for friends.

"I've got two little kids at home, so it's hard," she said.

She grabbed a bunch of Italian parsley from a high shelf, and then pulled a spiral notebook out of her handbag, making sure she didn't forget anything.

Answering a question, she said shooting her show went well, taking just four days total. Her goal was to break people out of their everyday food rut with recipes like French grilled flank steak with red wine-shallot sauce; a Moroccan chicken tajine with stuffed dates for dessert; and a Mexican episode on chilaquiles.

They shot two episodes a day and then finished up with promotions and teasers. Finley said producers were really strict about some things, like not showing cross-contamination between meats and other foods.

"Every time you touch something raw, the next shot must be washing your hands," Finley said. "It's not just preparing food. It's teaching people."

She had thought her show would teach people about Paris and French food. But during critiques, judges said her focus on all things French made Finley seem pretentious.

"I'm still not sure what I think about that," she said. "Steak and french fries is French food."

Picking up a package of soba noodles, she said she ate them constantly while she and Greg were in Japan recently. They spent time in Tokyo in the Daikanyama and Roppongi neighborhoods before going to Kyoto.

HIGH PROFILE

At the meat counter buying breakfast sausage, Finley confided that she still hasn't developed the thick skin required to be in the public eye. She hadn't seen a reality show before her Food Network experience because she doesn't own a television.

"I think I was naive as to what the world of reality TV was like and bloggers and people so heavily interested," Finley said. "I learned very quickly what not to read."

Some controversy erupted when Finley was eliminated from the show and then brought back as a finalist after contestant Joshua "JAG" Garcia was dismissed for misleading statements on his bio. Viewers then voted Finley the winner over competitor Rory Schepisi.

Finley's home life, as a mother and wife, living near her mom and stepfather, a brother and two sisters, helps keep her grounded. And fame has brought some nice moments, too.

"It has been a big conceptual change from thinking of myself as someone who stays home and cooks," she said. "People come up and say, 'Hi, I voted for you.' How could you not be appreciative of that?"

Piling the groceries in the back of her black Mustang, Finley drove the mile or so to her client's restored Craftsman home. Mark Suelflohn, a retired dentist, and his stout English bulldog, Buster, greeted her on the porch.

As she walked in, a woman in a silver Mercury Mariner stopped to ask for directions.

"That's the car I'm getting," Finley said, of her other prize from the Food Network. "Mine is silver with black leather interior."

Inside was a sunny dream kitchen with a large-burner stove, a double oven, back splashes covered in reclaimed tile from a Victorian hotel and pieces of Roseville pottery on display.

"Mark, how do you like brussels sprouts?" she asked; she was relieved to hear that he was OK with them.

Unpacking grocery bags, Finley told Suelflohn about her trip to Japan. She plopped potatoes in a pot of water to boil and chopped onions. She would make shredded brussels sprouts with walnuts, chicken breasts stuffed with leeks, and vegetables stuffed with orzo and sausage.

Browning the ground beef for the shepherd's pie in the same skillet with the onions, Finley started slicing mushrooms and talked about her plans to move back to France for a while to research the next book she plans to write. She has just signed with a literary agent, the same one who represents Anthony Bourdain. Her idea is an examination of regional French cuisine in the post-European Union, post-Sarkozy, post-Starbucks era.

"Maybe it's not bouillabaisse anymore," she said, referring to the classic dish from Marseille. "Maybe it's couscous."

Her first book was "Adventure Guide to the Italian Riviera." She and Greg still love traveling, but their lives have changed a lot since they had kids. For a while, she even cooked separate meals for Indiana, but when Scarlett came along, it got to be too much work.

"I make things I can easily modify to convince them they're going to eat it," Finley said.

The other night she made fried egg paninis for the family, but left the arugula out of the ones for the kids.

She sees the trip back to France as a chance for her and Greg to rediscover themselves as young parents and people. Even if her show gets picked up for more episodes, they can easily come back for a couple of weeks for shooting.

"You have kids, and it's an emotional shock to the system," she said. "We're still figuring out how much of our old life we can have."

DUPUY LENTILS WITH CARROTS

1 large leek, white and pale green parts chopped, plus 1 (6-inch) dark green leaf

1 tablespoon olive oil

2 small carrots, cut in 1/4-inch slices on the diagonal

1 cup du Puy lentils (see note)

3 cups chicken broth

4 parsley stems, plus 1/4 cup chopped parsley leaves

1 bay leaf

1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Yields 4 servings.

In medium saucepan over medium heat, saute leek in olive oil until translucent. Add carrots and saute 1 minute more. Add lentils, chicken broth, parsley stems and bay leaf, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until lentils are soft but not mushy, about 40 minutes.

Remove cover, turn heat up to medium and cook 5 to 8 minutes, until most of the liquid has been absorbed. Fish out bay leaf, dark green leaf part of leek and parsley stems, stir in balsamic vinegar and parsley, and season with salt and pepper. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Note: Du Puy lentils are the small, blue-green marbled lentils grown in the volcanic soil of southwestern France. If you can't find du Puy lentils, an equal amount of another small lentil may be substituted. You may need to add 10 or so minutes of cooking time.

EGGS EN COCOTTE WITH BASQUE PIPERADE

2 tablespoons butter, softened

8 eggs

Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1/4 cup cream

1/4 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese (divided use)

1 1/2 ounces prosciutto (about 4 slices), cut in 1/4-inch strips

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 small onion, finely diced

1 red bell pepper, seeds and ribs removed, cut in 1/4-inch strips

1 green bell pepper, seeds and ribs removed, cut in 1/4-inch strips

1 clove garlic, minced

1 (14 1/2-ounce) can diced, peeled tomatoes, drained

1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes, optional

1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil leaves

Yields 4 servings.

Preheat oven to 375 F. In small saucepan, bring 2 cups water to a boil. Smear bottoms of 4 (1-cup) ramekins with butter.

For each serving, crack 2 eggs into small bowl or dish, being careful not to break yolks, then slide into prepared ramekin. Season to taste with salt and pepper, drizzle with 1 tablespoon of cream, and sprinkle with 1 tablespoon of parmesan cheese.

Set ramekins into medium-size glass or ceramic baking pan, allowing at least 1 inch of space between dishes. Transfer to bottom rack of oven and pour boiling water into baking dish, being careful not to splash any hot water into ramekins. Cover with sheet of aluminum foil and bake 8 to 12 minutes, until egg whites are set but yolks are still a bit runny. Prepare piperade while eggs are baking.

In large skillet over medium heat, cook prosciutto in olive oil until it begins to crisp, then add onion. Saute until onion is lightly golden, then add red and green peppers and cook until strips just begin to soften. Add garlic and cook 30 seconds to 1 minute, until fragrant. Add tomatoes and red pepper flakes, if using. Allow mixture to stew over medium-low heat until liquid has evaporated and tomatoes are heated through. Check for seasoning and add salt and pepper, to taste. Remove from heat, add basil.

Divide piperade among ramekins (you will have extra) and serve each ramekin on small plate, piping hot.

- Amy Finley, courtesy of Food Network.

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