

Area Food Scene Finds Its Champion

Love of food and the culinary scene is a winning recipe for Judi Gallagher.

by Shellie Terry Benson
Regional Publication Senior Manager

When you walk into a restaurant to meet Judi Gallagher for a meal, you know right away that you're in for a special experience. At spots such as The Table Creekside on U.S. 41 or Café Gabbiano on Siesta Key, the staff likely already knows who you are and whisks you right over to the best table where you're attended to promptly and expertly.

But the special treatment isn't paid to you solely because your dining partner is a respected chef, well-connected marketing genius and recognizable television personality from ABC 7. That might, indeed, be part of it, but more likely because of the woman herself.

Tall and svelte with a quick smile that lights up below her perfectly coiffed blonde hair, Gallagher is as gracious and welcoming as she'd be if she were inviting you into her own home.

She's likely scoured the menu before you land in your seat, and is ready with recommendations based on your culinary preferences, plus the eatery has probably prepared some special dishes for the occasion.

"I'm a chef and a Jewish woman," she said. "I want to please people and make sure everyone's well fed."

Of course, it's more than that. She has a way of making you feel special — along with anyone who crosses her path.

While dining, servers will often stop in their busy tracks to come and greet Gallagher like an old friend. She asks how their wedding plans are coming along, how their kids are, how their recent vacation was ...

"Everybody knows Judi and Judi knows everybody," said Amy Berlin, assistant vice president at Phillippi Creek Village. "She remembers people. She's a good person to be around. She's funny, witty, intelligent ... and you can talk to her on a really personal level."

That, plus her unwavering business acumen and love of the growing culinary scene throughout Sarasota, has made Chef Judi one of the area's most lovable and respected personalities — and a successful brand, as well.



"Which One?" Chef Judi Gallagher asked on her Instagram page of the various options of pies at Yoder's Amish Restaurant, where she filmed a Friday segment, "Lunch with Chef Judi" on ABC 7 in November 2013. Pumpkin cream is one of her favorites, she said.

Photo courtesy of Judi Gallagher

A Coastal Culinary Career Flourishes

In the mid-1990s, Gallagher and her husband, Paul, decided to move to Sarasota after he had visited during baseball's spring training. Gallagher, a graduate of Johnson & Wales College's culinary arts program, left the Boston, Mass. area, where she had owned several restaurants and her company, Just Desserts.

"We first came and visited Sarasota in the late 1980s, and we just fell in love," Gallagher said. "The arts and culture were important to us ... the food scene wasn't really happening yet."

She didn't want to jump back into the 24-7 restaurant world again, but pitched an idea for a part-time general manager gig to Ophelia's on the Bay on Siesta Key, and the restaurant owner went for it. Soon, she was consulting for restaurants near and far, and began writing about cuisine in local magazines. "This career really just dropped in my lap," she said, still beaming over her success.

She developed Judi Gallagher & Associates, a firm focused on helping restaurants flourish through hospitality excellence

and media exposure. One of her early local connections was Sean Murphy, owner of Beach Bistro and Eat Here. "I met Judi maybe 15 years ago when she was working at Ophelia's," Murphy said. "We chatted for 10 or 15 minutes, and a month later I get a Christmas gift — my favorite Jamaican beer and cookies that I like. The beer was Red Stripe — nobody knew what that was back then. That says a lot about Judi."

In 2005, Gallagher worked with Murphy when he was invited to do a James Beard Foundation dinner presentation in New York. "It was a relatively big event," Murphy said. "Press members traveled with us and we also took 15 couples. It was like a traveling circus. She was very helpful in both conducting it and promoting it."

In the Sarasota area, Gallagher works with many local dining spots, including Murphy's two Eat Here restaurants, to promote special events and dining news to create excitement about their offerings.

"We're all in the hospitality business — it's about food and products, but it's also about hospitality," Murphy said. "Judi is very sincerely hospitable. She's glad to see you, and she tries to be helpful — whether you're a client or not."

With her connections in both the culinary world and among members of the media, Gallagher regularly orchestrates meals with editors, writers and other foodie types at various restau-

rants. The goal is to introduce them, or remind them, of the tantalizing menu items her clients have perfected. No matter if it's a cocktail, appetizer, entrée or a dessert that's served to the group, Gallagher often insists, with genuine enthusiasm, "You have to try the ..." and she's right every time.

These carefully crafted get-togethers create a flurry of tasty-looking tweets, Facebook postings, Instagram uploads, blog updates and printed articles gushing about the savory, spicy, saucy and sweet offerings the foodies are being served.

At a recent media meal at Phillippi Creek Oyster Bar, Berlin arranged a seemingly unending parade of food that included crab legs, fish tacos, soups, Oysters Rockefeller, a variety of fish dishes and salads, followed by desserts and coffee that left these special guests stuffed, satisfied and certainly filled with a bevy of story ideas for upcoming publications.

"It's local grassroots marketing in the area, and it works out really well," Berlin said. "She has brought in great groups of journalists who we've pleased with a fantastic meal, and they've helped us out with fantastic publicity."

It's a strategy that's brilliant in its simplicity, and extremely effective. But it's only someone like the well-connected Gallagher who could pull it all together.

'First and Foremost, She's a Great Chef'

It's not by accident or luck that Gallagher so successfully wins over her clients in the hospitality business. Plain and simple: She's got the culinary chops to back it up.

This is what landed her a dining segment on SNN and later the title of culinary director of ABC 7, where she now prepares recipes on air, schedules guest chefs and takes the show on the road each Friday for the live "Lunch with Chef Judi" at various restaurants in Sarasota and Manatee counties.

"First and foremost, she's a great chef," said Steve Sabato, news director at ABC 7. "She's innovative; she's able to take complex recipes and make them simple and easy to understand. And she's a good communicator. That plus she understands the food scene here."

"She's innovative; she's able to take complex recipes and make them simple and easy to understand."

— Steve Sabato, ABC 7 news director

Her easy, on-air personality is as endearing and authentic as she is in person. Whether she's grilling up swordfish in the ABC 7 kitchen or trying the latest sushi roll at Kumo Japanese Steak House, her appreciation for the food and the local dining scene pours out of her.

She not only instructs viewers on how to prepare a meal, but offers endless tips on where to find ingredients (that swordfish, for instance, came from Sarasota Seafood Company on 12th Street, she explained).

Gallagher's expertise, connections and good business sense also have helped Sabato to develop ABC 7's digital platform,

Continued on next page

Clockwise from top left: Adrian Fochi from Peperonata Pasta describes some fresh options to Judi Gallagher at the Sarasota Farmers Market; sunflowers brighten up the day for Gallagher and Chris Worden at the Worden Farms booth at the farmers market; a sampling of scallops and sweet potato puree from the chef at The Table Creekside; Gallagher, in right-hand corner, lends a hand along with other chefs during a Thanksgiving preparation MySuncoast help line for ABC 7; Gallagher with Amy Berlin, assistant vice president at Phillippi Creek Oyster Bar; a seafood sampling from Phillippi Creek Oyster Bar; Gallagher and long-time friend, celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse.

Photos by Shellie Terry Benson and Nicholas Benson and courtesy of Judi Gallagher



Continued from previous page

MySuncoast.com, where Gallagher blogs, encourages viewer interaction and posts recipes and dining tips and web extras from her various shows.

“Food isn’t just about eating anymore. Food is a form of entertainment,” Sabato said. “The ability for them to easily go online and find recipes and get ideas — it helps us engage them and help them entertain and use food as the focal point for social relationships as well.”

‘Work Hard and Be Nice’

As illustrated on reality television and cooking talent shows, the culinary world can be full of, shall we say, strong personalities. While any industry has its divas, Gallagher steers clear of what she calls “ego-driven” or “one-hit wonder” types and strives to develop long-term relationships, instead, she said.

While she admits that she’s not always the best judge of character at first blush, Gallagher said she’s learned to trust her gut feeling over time when deciding who to work with. “There were times when I could have taken a job for the money,” she said. “But I say ‘no’ more than I say ‘yes.’ I have to really believe in the product, and you [the restaurateur] have to be nice to people and treat your staff well.”

Her guiding principles? “Work hard and be nice,” she said. And that goes beyond day-to-day business dealings. For the past three years, she’s worked with Beverly Bartner, Molly Schechter and Margaret Wise to put together the Men Who Cook charity event that benefits Asolo Repertory Theatre. The event features 20 men from Sarasota and Bradenton who will prepare their favorite dishes for event attendees.

This year’s event, planned for May 4 at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, will feature a Contemporary Flemish Stew made by none other than Gallagher’s husband, assistant principal of Riverview High School, Dr. Paul Gallagher.

To get in on the dish and find out what Chef Judi is up to next, check out the dining section at MySuncoast.com, visit JudiGallagher.com or learn more about the Men Who Cook event AsoloRep.org./menwhocook



Like this story? Tell us why.
hibumagazine.com/survey