

KATY SPARKS / OWNER / KATY SPARKS CULINARY CONSULTING



Let's just come out and say it: it's hard to commit to a career in food when your cohorts are entering "professional" careers. You often encounter long hours with little (monetary) payoff. But Katy is proof positive that it's worth it. She's shaped her skills, experiences, and interests into her own thriving business and loves every minute of it (literally). And that's not something that every so-called professional can say.

What attracted you to a good food job?

I grew up on a small farm in Vermont where we raised a few head of beef and enough chickens to keep up at the 2 dozen a week range in eggs. Growing our own produce in Vermont's short growing season was really humbling: we became all too aware that we were eating like kings, but only until the killing frost rolled in. Family trips to Europe brought me in contact with some of the world's great cuisines and this alchemy between ingredient and the chefs' art would forever inspire me.

But it wasn't until I dropped out of [Middlebury College](#) in my Sophomore year that I seriously entertained the idea of food as a career. At that time (1984), food was not at all glamorous or even legitimized as a career for a college bound person. But despite going against the family grain (brother and sister at Princeton), I enrolled in culinary school in Providence, RI. Wearing a hairnet and steel-toed shoes to class every day was a little hard on the female vanity, I have to say. But I learned enough in 2 years there to make the best decision of my young life: work for people or a place that inspires you- in this case [Al Forno](#) which has always been one of New England's most [Chez Panisse](#)-like restaurants.

In the early days, you have to value experience over net pay. Working with indigenous RI ingredients would set the tone for the rest of my life in food. I've always made it a point to purchase the best Vermont and New York made products for my clients in the city and find huge satisfaction in creating relationships with the farmers and artisans and stewards of the land.

How did your previous work or life experience prepare you for a good food job?

I'd have to say that working hard on my family's farm prepared me for a good food job. It's not for the faint of heart. It takes total commitment because food is so fragile and yet so damned heavy when you're moving a lot of it around! In my 25 year career, I've been a working chef, a caterer, a retail food director, a cookbook author and ultimately my own boss as owner of [Katy Sparks Culinary Consulting](#). All the steps along the way revealed a different aspect of the food world and when I hung my own shingle (4 years ago), I finally felt ready to act as a kind of mid-wife to others who want to create their own baby in the food world- whether it's opening a restaurant, a cafe, a small market or a catering company. But I'm also still open to jumping back into the fray of feeding the public on a daily basis when the time is right.

What advice do you have for others in search of a good food job?

Do some research and work with people whose approach to working with food you admire or want to emulate. We all borrow from one another, and you should borrow only those traits/skills/attitudes that reflect your most deeply held beliefs. Not to say I didn't make my share of misalliances, but this is also a good way to define yourself over time.

If you could be compensated for your work with something other than money, what would it be?

Money is essential, but what I really work for is that feeling you get when you are working with like-minded people to create something positive and meaningful to share. There's nothing that beats that and it is elusive.