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Chatting With Radish's Katy Sparks on Working With Judith Jones, NYC Restaurants, and What, Exactly, a Consulting Chef Does

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Katy Sparks

Chef Katy Sparks rose to prominence in the late '90s when she was executive chef at Quilty's, for which she was named a *Food & Wine* Best New Chef and received two stars from Ruth Reichl at the *Times*.

Since then she's designed the food offerings at Balducci's and turned herself into a consulting chef, hopping from project to project, including a stint at 10 Downing. For just a month last winter, she was the executive chef at Bussaco, which has recently closed. Now she's working on Radish, a new specialty foods and gourmet takeout shop in Williamsburg.

We caught up with Sparks recently and asked her to explain what, exactly, a consulting chef does, what it was like to work with legendary editor Judith Jones, and how she's seen New

York restaurants change since she was at Quilty's.

Check back here tomorrow for the second half of the interview.

What is the role of a consulting chef?

The role is varied depending on the needs of the client. The one common thread is that my expertise can make all the difference in delivering a positive outcome: profitability and a realization of the client's vision.

In most cases, I would hire a working chef who is like-minded to the mission. (In most cases showing a dedication to local, sustainable cooking.) I usually create the first menu and work closely with the chef on the opening, which includes staffing the back of the house and purchasing small wares.

If the restaurant is a start-up, I am usually involved with the architect and designer on kitchen design as well as choosing the tabletop design: plates, glasses, flatware to make sure they are in sync with the vision of the food and overall feel of the establishment. I am often asked to train the front-of-the-house staff on menu knowledge as the chef is usually very busy keeping the kitchen humming along.

And like all consultants, a large part of my role is in keeping everyone involved on track and to help with communication between the owners and chef if it gets a little contentious.

Why did you decide to go that route instead of continuing to work as an executive chef?

Mainly due to restlessness -- as much as I loved cooking in one place for a long time [Quilty's], when the restaurant closed, I was a new mom with a one-year-old. I saw an opportunity to take the skills I had and spread them out a bit. I also needed the challenge of a new learning curve to keep my skills sharp. I loved my first "corporate" job at Balducci's and felt for the first time in my life I was an office worker in the classic 9-to-5 sense. As a lifelong cook, this was terra incognita and quite exotic to me!

How has the food in New York restaurants changed since you were the chef at Quilty's in the '90s?

Yes, I think the food has changed for the better -- I think the younger guard is more fearless and experimental than ever before. Sometimes this does result in misfires and a lack of consistency, but I prefer the energy and enthusiasm for the craft of cooking that engenders this to the more button-down style of cooking. But sometimes nostalgia creeps in and I find myself remembering flawless meals at Montrachet under Debra Ponzek and crisp and elegant dishes at JoJo. And can we have it all? I think so, if this new guard keeps an eye on continuing to refine their skills and learn from each other.

You've also worked for the catering company Great Performances. Was there a particular client (a difficult bride, for instance) or job that you remember being especially challenging, and how did you pull it off?

I was actually not in direct contact with clients -- GP has what I would describe as an entrepreneurial sales team: Each one of them is in full command of the event that they sell/design/manage, and my job was to supply them with unique menus to entice their clients with.

What was it like to work with the legendary cookbook editor Judith Jones when you published your cookbook, *Sparks in the Kitchen*?

Working with Judith was a dream come true. When I would describe how I worked with her to other chef/authors they would wail, "Oh I wish my experience had been like that!" Judith is a one-of-a-kind talent -- not only a great editor, but a wonderful cook and gifted writer. I was able to visit her at her farm in Vermont a couple of times and saw where her incredible energy and convictions stem from and are nourished. I still have my manuscripts with her green pencil marks in the margins, and I have to say that for the year I spent writing the book, I lived for the occasional "good" or "great" that she would write next to a passage that she particularly liked.