

Lora Krulak



A chat with Katy Sparks

I first had the pleasure of meeting Katy Sparks when I was looking for a stage, just out of cooking school. Katy's restaurant Quilty's in Soho was well known for seasonal American cooking - enhancing the natural flavors of the freshest ingredients available at the moment. That was a quote from our mutual friend [Steven Hall](#), and this was 1998, the year I walked in her door. So one could never refer to Katy as trendy, and it was no surprise that she was named best new chef in [Food and Wine](#) that year.

LK: Katy, what current movement in food is getting you most excited?

KS: Good question! I've always stayed away from trends, and lately it's difficult for me because artisanal and local are trending, but they've never been a trend to me - I've always cooked that way, so I can't really avoid it.

It's refreshing as people are becoming much more open to new and healthier ways of eating, such as vegan and gluten-free, and in general are just more open minded and conscious about what they eat.

LK: Do you cook gluten-free or vegan or raw?

KS: Not necessarily, but I'm very aware of the movement - sensitive to it, so ultimately it affects my cooking. I will use many of the techniques and ingredients. My biggest concern for trends like raw food, for example, is that people just don't educate themselves enough and end up eating processed ingredients by default, like agave nectar.

LK: You said you follow a lot of [Weston Price's](#) philosophy. Can you speak a bit about that?

KS: The philosophy is based on his theory that in order to maintain health we need to eat nutrient-dense whole foods. The key component is real food, which means real butter, real dairy, grass fed animals, wild fish, locally sourced produce, biodynamic farming, etc.

LK: I know you teach at the [Natural Gourmet Institute](#) now. What was the driver for that?

KS: I started to become more aware of the health benefits and healing affects of food because my dad became ill. This was hard to process as I wasn't sure what part of his illness was from lifestyle and what

was from diet. I studied and read and learned as much as I could. The health part wasn't my passion but I realized the connection - that eating real food and maintaining health were one in the same. It's a shame it took an illness to get there, but whatever it takes.



Ms Katy Sparks

LK: Has the rise in food allergies and intolerances affected your cooking at all?

KS: Marginally so. I am aware of it - most chefs are aware of it and much more accommodating. It's been a long term awareness for me, since the time of Quilty's, but it's nice to see that it is becoming more mainstream.

LK: Do you feel pressure to use local ingredients?

KS: No, only if it sourced well. If it's biodynamic or organic I'll most likely buy it but I don't believe in the tyranny! Freshness is the key factor, no hormones, only grass fed. Other factors come into play - it's not just all about local. If the soil isn't good in your location, local wouldn't be the best option. Soil is better in some areas than it is in others. It's a fact.

LK: You said your son is getting into your Green Philosophies.

KS: Yes, I'm so proud of him! He is more of a carnivore than I am but he's very much aware of the political and social issues that surround the food he eats. He's proud of my involvement with the Green Revolution. His whole generation is concerned and cares and is just as politically active as the baby boomers. They're bombarded with issues every day and they understand that our planet is in trouble.



Shitakes from the farmers market

LK: Do you insist that your clients buy organic and sustainable when you're sourcing and creating menus for them, and will you still work with them if they won't?

KS: I don't insist on particular products but I strongly encourage sustainable, local and organic. Of course I'll work with an open minded client as long as there's integrity in the ingredients we use. For example, I won't work with hormone or antibiotic laced proteins, but in most cases, once I educate my clients a little bit on the issues, they tend to move toward local and sustainable sourcing.

LK: So you end up pulling them over to your side. Nice technique. Do you feel there's a food or eating trend on the rise?

KS: Well, there are so many more minds to turn on. It's just is a tiny toehold now and it is all about turning on one light at a time. I'm doing my part but it's slow and small.

I do think there will be a tipping point. For example, people seem to be having meat less and less. I find this huge. [Meatless Mondays](#) are fantastic and having people like Mario Batali and Gwyneth Paltro involved is huge. They are both so influential. It's a small thing, but if millions of people are doing it it's HUGE.

My wish is that people were not so fearful of change. It usually takes something very close to home, like my father getting ill, to tip the scale and get people to change and embrace a new lifestyle. But this type of healthful existence is still a minority.

LK: Are you finding any differences in farmers markets lately? Would you say there's more available or less, and what about quality?

KS: The only difference I'm finding is that so many more markets to choose from, which is a really great thing.

Sweet Corn Soup with Crispy Shiitake Mushrooms

by Katy Sparks

Freshness is critically important for fully enjoying corn-its natural sugars convert to starch very soon after being picked. You can delay this inevitable progression by standing the ears upright in some water in your fridge-this fools the silly corn into thinking it's still on the stalk. But, alas, it catches on fairly quickly so this will buy you only a day or two.

For the Soup:

8 ears fresh, local corn
3 cups whole milk
3 cups chicken stock (fresh is best, or use organic, low-sodium boxed)
Sachet of cilantro stems, coriander seed, orange zest
1 onion, minced
1/2 bulb of fennel, diced fine
1 jalapeno, minced
3 tablespoons butter
Salt, freshly ground pepper and freshly grated nutmeg to taste

For the Shiitake Mushrooms:

1/2 pound of shiitakes
1 cup of pure canola or other vegetable oil
Salt
2 or 3 tablespoons cilantro leaves, chiffonade



sliced shitakes for the soup

To make the soup:

Cut the kernels off the cobs and reserve in a bowl.

Put the cobs, milk and chicken stock in a stockpot and bring to a simmer. Drop the sachet into the pot and let it all cook, simmering slowly for 30 minutes. You want to extract as much flavor from the cobs as possible but don't steep them too much longer or you will get a slightly woody aftertaste. Strain out the cobs and sachet and reserve the broth.

Melt the butter in a deep skillet. Sauté the onion, fennel and jalapeno in the butter, being careful to not brown them. Stir in the reserved kernels and sweat the vegetables, stirring often. You may need to add a few tablespoons of the broth to keep the kernels moist as they sweat. Taste a few kernels-they should still "pop" a little in your mouth but not crunch.

Pour the reserved broth into the skillet, turn off the heat and let the soup cool as the flavors develop. I puree three quarters of the soup, leaving the last quarter unblended for texture. Season the soup with salt, pepper and nutmeg.

To make the crisp shiitakes:

Remove the stems from the caps. Gently brush the caps with a damp towel to clean. Cut the caps into the thinnest strips you can. Each 2" diameter cap should yield approximately 15-18 of thin strips-a julienne cut.

Heat the canola oil in an eight-inch wide skillet until the oil shimmers on the surface. Test it for readiness by gently lowering one strip of shiitake into the oil-it should sizzle quickly and rise to the surface of the oil immediately. Fry the mushrooms in several batches. They're done when you see a golden brown color on them and almost no more sizzle from the pan-this will come to an end as the mushroom loses its moisture. Frying in batches prevents the oil temperature from dropping too steeply. (When the oil is not hot enough for deep-frying or even shallow frying, the food absorbs more of the oil than it should.)

Drain the mushrooms quickly on paper towels using a "spider"-a net screen with a handle. You can use a slotted spoon but a spider will draw off less oil. Season the mushrooms immediately with salt while they are damp enough to hold onto it.

Katy can be found at <http://katysparks.com/> and she tweets @katycooks