

ETTING LIFE UNFOLD

WHEN DIANA VALENZUELA, CURRENTLY THE PASTRY CHEF AT ÉLAN, ISN'T PONDERING PUMPKIN CRÈME CARAMEL, YOU MIGHT FIND HER ON A FARM IN IRELAND READING JAMES JOYCE OR TUCKING INTO THE RICOTTA TOAST AT RAZZA RIGHT HERE IN JERSEY CITY. WE SAT DOWN WITH THE SELF-TAUGHT PASTRY CHEF TO TRACK HER TRAJECTORY TO THE TOP OF THE DESSERT SCENE.

//////////

Before she was seduced by butterscotch semifreddo and pistachio panna cotta, Diana, who completed a master's in the humanities from the University of Chicago, says she never considered food as a career. "I moved to the East Coast having no idea what to do next."

The Michigan native began her Tri-State adventure with a six-month stint in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighborhood before making the move to Jersey City. She says, "The minute I got to Jersey City, I felt [as if] I could breathe easier."

After finding a place to call home, Diana turned her attention to work, but she didn't really have a plan. "I thought about a Ph.D. and teaching, but I was being drawn to a different direction."

That direction was hospitality. In September 2009, Diana started working at the Warehouse Café in Jersey City's Powerhouse Arts District. "It was such a great way to connect with other people," she says. "We had so many regular customers; we built relationships every day."

Talking about this period in her life, she looks wistful, even a little bit nostalgic. These days she's working six days a week at Élan, managing a team of pastry chefs. She bounces between executing her present menu and dreaming up creations for future menus. But before she wound up in the kitchen for good, Diana had one more unexpected stop: a farm in Ireland.

"I was obsessed with the idea of WWOOFing," Diana says. (That's World Wide Organization of Organic Farms, to the uninitiated.) In exchange for working on a farm, volunteers are offered room and board, and the door is opened to witness the type of connection with agriculture that is often missing from contemporary life.

In the summer of 2011 Diana left the Warehouse Café for Ballymaloe House, a famous cookery school and restaurant in County Cork, Ireland. "I had never lived in a place where you fished for your next meal," she recalls of her first few days in the country. "The Irish were so connected to their food: it wasn't about trends or buzz words — this was a way of life."

She worked in the garden and farm in the mornings, but her evenings were free. It was dark out in the countryside, but there was always the glow of the kitchen. "I would hang around there, mostly out of loneliness," Diana says. "I talked with the cooks, I tried to help out. I saw the camaraderie that exists in kitchens."

WORDS Jessica Colley

PHOTOGRAPHY Samantha Murasko

That summer she broke down lobsters and made raspberry jam. Without even intending to, she was getting serious restaurant experience under her belt.

After a year at Del Posto, Diana's boss encouraged her to set out on tastings. In the pastry world, these are interviews during which a pastry chef prepares a few desserts and allows the work to do the talking. And in June 2014, Diana

*Aug 13
to be one thing well, exemplify even, and
then to do it over and over again.
Korean Buns, the mystery of the dough, one-handed
we hand behind the back, talking.*

Johnny was... creative... performative.

Diana returned to Jersey City with the desire to recreate the connection she felt in Ireland and found the answer in restaurants — and specifically, pastry. Diana headed into the kitchen without a culinary degree, but armed with drive and an industrious work ethic. "Nothing substitutes for hands on experiences," she says. "Doing the same thing every day — that can be as important as anything else."

First came a job at Adara in Montclair, then at Riverpark in Manhattan. Before long, Diana landed a job at Mario Batali's Del Posto in the Meatpacking District, a restaurant with an exceptional pastry program. This is where she continued to sharpen her craft, to learn from her experienced colleagues. "When everyone else would get stressed out at work, there was this one sous chef, Kim, who would slow down," Diana describes. "She was very focused and precise, even in the middle of chaos. I always respected that."

joined David Waltuck, of Chantarelle fame, as the pastry chef of Élan in Manhattan's Flatiron District.

Life is now all about balance. Not between work and play — but between taste and textures: acid, sweet and creamy. Diana has dessert on the mind day and night, trying to create the types of treats that feel new yet familiar at the same time. At Élan, that might be a pistachio panna cotta with rhubarb jam and candied orange and pistachios. Or a seasonal pumpkin custard with espresso caramel, thinly sliced pickled squash and pumpkin seed cocoa nib crunch.

The creativity of the job, working with her hands, the ability to take an ingredient that is already good and turn it into something new and unique — these are the qualities that drew Diana to the kitchen and are keeping her there. "A lot of people think you need a plan in life, that you need to know where you're going. But I say: let life unfold."



*"I think we're bored bored. And we have no reason to be! Look up at the stars! Wiggle your toes! Do you understand how these amazing things can occur?
Do you know why the same apple tree year after year produces slightly different apples?"
Shura Irish Foghorn*