

Ashley Merriman '98 (right) competed on Bravo's *Top Chef Las Vegas* this season and until recently worked as executive chef at Branzino in Seattle.



Christopher Kostow '99 of the Restaurant at Meadowood in Napa Valley, Calif., has gone from short-order cook to one of *Food & Wine's* Best New Chefs of 2009.





“It went over like a lead balloon,” recalls Richard Vellante ’86, of his announcement at his parents’ dinner table a year after graduating from Hamilton. “I said, ‘Thanks for spending your hard-earned dollars on my tuition, but I’m going to culinary school to be a chef.’” Vellante now oversees 30 restaurants and more than 4,000 employees as executive chef and executive vice president of Boston-based Legal Sea Foods.

The path from a liberal arts degree to a career in academia, law or business raises few eyebrows. Not so for a career in food. For five alumni, however, early exposure to restaurant life, seminal food-related experiences during college and beyond, and influential mentors inspired them to climb the industry’s steep ladder while garnering widespread acclaim and recognition.

Here’s how it happened.

EARLY EXPOSURE

THINK BACK TO YOUR FIRST SUMMER JOB. Whether it involved scooping ice cream, delivering papers or babysitting neighborhood kids, it probably didn’t seed your current career. And yet, for Ashley Merriman ’98, Stephen Durfee ’85, Daniel Garcia ’84 and Christopher Kostow ’99, early exposure to the food industry may have done just that.

Merriman, until recently executive chef of Branzino Restaurant in Seattle and a contestant on the current season of *Top Chef Las Vegas*, spent summers washing dishes from the tender age of 11. While her mother worked as a waitress at a natural foods restaurant in Center Sandwich, N.H., Merriman got her hands wet at the sink. “From the second I started washing dishes,” she says, “I caught the restaurant bug.” She soon transitioned from the sink to the stove and spent vacations throughout high school and college cooking professionally. Unlike many chefs, who may pick up culinary skills from their mothers or grandmothers, Merriman learned to cook on the job. Her mother did not, and still does not, like to cook. “She’s always excited when I come home,” Merriman says.

Durfee also got his start washing dishes. As a high school student in upstate New York, he and some classmates joined the staff at Shuji’s, an upscale Japanese restaurant in New Lebanon. The proprietor had a system: Boys would come on board as dishwashers, and if they made it through the year they’d be promoted up the ladder. And Durfee was indeed promoted. “I worked there for five summers,” says Durfee, now a certified executive pastry chef and pastry chef instructor at the

Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena, Calif.

Back in the early days, Durfee never assumed cooking would become his career. Still, the three-story mansion in which Shuji’s was housed, with its *tatami* mats and four large dining rooms, made quite an impression on the young student, as did the sheer foreignness of Japanese cuisine. “If I’d been making hamburgers it would have been different,” he says. At Hamilton, he even tried to woo girls by fixing them dinner in their dorm rooms. “I’d cook a four- or five-course Japanese meal, all by shopping at our local grocery store.” He laughs now, thinking back on how he pulled it off, especially since his access to authentic Japanese ingredients was surely limited in mid-1980s Clinton.

Around the same time that Durfee was learning the ins and outs of Japanese cookery, Daniel Garcia ’84 was doing odd jobs at his father’s nightclub, Royals Two, in the South Bronx.

Though not a chef (“I don’t cook,” Garcia readily admits), he grew up on rice and beans, roasted pork, chicken empanadas and pasteles, all hallmarks of his family’s Puerto Rican heritage and all of which made a big impression on him. “My passion for the food industry came from my father’s nightclub,” he says, but it also came from frequent family gatherings where food played a large role. It seemed natural that while at Hamilton, Garcia, now president and CEO of Salsa Caterers & Special Events in New York, would bartend occasionally to earn extra income. His early exposure to social events involving food and drink gave him a sense of comfort and energy in those familiar surroundings.

TOP
OF THE
FOOD CHAIN

By Cheryl Sternman Rule



Richard Vellante '86, executive chef and executive vice president of Boston's Legal Sea Foods, found himself gravitating toward the kitchen and a future in food during his junior year in Rome — and long hours at a local *trattoria*.

Big Jewish flavors like smoked and cured fish loomed large in the family of Christopher Kostow '99, who spent early teenage summers working at the Ravinia Music Festival in Chicago. Kostow started as a cashier, but he soon realized the guys in the kitchen were having all the fun. "I wanted to get back where they were," he says, "so I started flipping burgers." As a short-order cook, he hardly harbored visions of culinary grandeur. But that's all changed now. Kostow, who runs the kitchen at the Restaurant at Meadowood in Napa Valley, California, was recently named one of *Food & Wine* magazine's Best New Chefs of 2009.

LESSONS FROM ABROAD

RICHARD VELLANTE OF LEGAL SEA FOODS KNEW HIS WAY AROUND GOOD food, especially good Italian food, from childhood. His Italian-American family lived to eat, gathering on Sunday afternoons for big, traditional dinners. "Food was always a part of my life," he says, "and whenever we had a gathering, it was all about welcoming people with food." But Vellante, who loved studying history and playing football at Hamilton, didn't find the seeds of his current career really taking root until his junior year in Rome, with Temple University's study abroad program.

In Rome, he befriended the owner of a small *trattoria* and spent his time fully absorbing the country's food culture. "I was blown away by the way of life there," he says. "To get your groceries, you'd go to

the fruit stand, to the butcher, to the fishmonger. Here in the U.S. we think about how fast we can eat, how fast we can grow something. But in Italy, people take the time to eat, and eat with friends. The quality of the fruits and vegetables, and even the street food there, influenced me drastically." The time abroad also sparked Vellante's interest in gardening and his growing appreciation for restaurant culture. He wasn't starting to cook yet himself, but sitting in that *trattoria*, eating and drinking, made an indelible mark on the Millis, Mass.-raised alumnus. Even now, he trails off in reverie as he recalls the flavors from that year. "The pasta, the roast pork, the vegetables ..."

After returning from Rome, Vellante knew he wanted to enter the restaurant business, but he couldn't yet take the plunge. "I kind of glazed over," he admits of that year, and after graduation, he took a marketing job with PepsiCo. "I did it for one year," he says, "almost to the day. Then I left." His announcement at his parents' dinner table soon followed.

Rome figured prominently in the culinary awakening of Christopher Kostow as well, and he recalls eating and drinking his way through the city during his own semester abroad. But in the late '90s, when Kostow graduated, up-and-coming young chefs were more visible on the national stage, so Kostow didn't hesitate to take a cooking job after leaving college. He ended up in San Diego, where he spent several years cooking at a restaurant called George's on the Cove, and then returned to Europe to work as an apprentice, traveling and cooking for months at a time in Provence, Paris and Montpelier.

INFLUENTIAL MENTORS

"YOU ARE YOUR ROLODEX." WITH THESE WORDS FROM HIS MENTOR, A young Daniel Garcia absorbed a lesson that would serve him well in his future career as a caterer. But at first, Garcia considered law school. A man named Raymond Narral hired Garcia to work at his law firm, and by exposing him to a network of colleagues and legal experiences he hoped to help Garcia decide if that direction was right for him.

"He took people under his tutelage," Garcia remembers, "and I think he saw an energy in me and a desire to learn. He also wanted to help Latino youth have opportunities to grow and to have an impact."

Garcia did eventually apply to law school, to Northeastern University, but when he got waitlisted Narral asked him point-blank: "What are you going to do, wait another year? It's time to move on." So Garcia instead began working for a local caterer, which in a sense fused the pleasure he felt as a kid in his father's nightclub with the joy he took in exposing others to his Latin heritage.



Daniel Garcia '84 meets with his staff at Salsa Caterers & Special Events in New York, where he is president and CEO. The winner of a Crain's Small Business of the Year Award traces his "passion for the food industry" to his father's nightclub and his family's Puerto Rican cuisine.

He has never looked back. He worked his first event in 1985 and soon discovered his community's thirst for catered Latin cuisine. A bell went off; there was money to be made in this niche. After five years working for someone else, Garcia decided to branch out on his own. "I knew I needed a cook, a kitchen, a truck. I just went for it." Salsa Caterers & Event Planners now has 50 employees and last year received Crain's 2008 Small Business of the Year Award. "Raymond Narral was a very special man," Garcia says of his early mentor. "He had a tough, hard-core style of teaching, but it resonated with me, and I learned fast and hard."

Mentors in any field often play a critical role in exposing young workers to a new profession, but in the food industry, with its intense stress, breakneck pace and physical demands, early mentors can prove especially crucial. Ashley Merriman found hers on her very first day of culinary school, at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City. When she walked into class, she met her instructor, Alexandra Guarnaschelli, executive chef at New York's Butter. Guarnaschelli soon took the driven Merriman under her wing. "I felt an immediate connection with her," Merriman says of Guarnaschelli, who now hosts her own Food Network show. "I worked for her for several years at Butter, and she gave me the best foundation I could ever have asked for. She encouraged me to move onward and upward."

She also influenced Merriman's ability to communicate effectively in the kitchen. "I respect Alex's teaching style," she says. "I respect that if you're going to be a chef, so much of your job is about teaching younger cooks how to execute food to your specifications. There's the screaming and yelling approach, but for me there's something about teaching in a positive way that's my particular strength." And when Merriman was invited to apply for a spot on *Top Chef*, she turned to her extended professional network, and to Guarnaschelli, for advice about whether to take on the high-profile opportunity. "All of them really encouraged me to apply and to get my name out there," she says. "So I did."

Sometimes, mentors are there from the very beginning, but their lasting influence only becomes apparent in hindsight, after hard-won achievements and accolades. The proprietor of Shuji's, the Japanese restaurant where Stephen Durfee started as a dishwasher, was a man named Shuji Uchiyama. A talented, technique-driven chef, Uchiyama figured in with other influential adults in Durfee's life: his parents, his coaches, his teachers. "He's right up there," Durfee concedes. "I look back and think a lot of the way I behave in the kitchen, he inspired." Over the years, Durfee has thanked Uchiyama in speeches and at

awards ceremonies, and when his mentor finally sold his restaurant a few years ago, he asked Durfee to buy it. Already settled in California, Durfee declined. (Sadly, the person who ended up buying the restaurant accidentally set it on fire.)

Another highly influential chef in Durfee's career, though only a few years his senior, was Thomas Keller, chef and owner of the pre-eminent restaurant The French Laundry in California and, now, seven other restaurants. Durfee debuted with Keller at the James Beard Awards dinner in New York, and when Keller opened The French Laundry in 1994 he brought Durfee on board. Durfee stayed until 2000, working his way around the kitchen, eventually taking up the helm at the pastry station. By the time he left, Durfee was the executive pastry chef of one of the nation's most celebrated restaurants. Of Keller, Durfee says, "He was a tremendous influence on teaching me not just how to cook, but how you behave: 'This is what service is, and this is what you do to impress somebody.' He's incredibly detailed and focused," Durfee adds, "and that detailed focus is really what it takes to be successful in this career."

More courses online

"It's really great to be able to entertain people through food, introduce new ways of doing things that someone may have been doing for years, or share with them entirely new foods," says Maryline Damour '90. A chef, partner and instructor at Bomba Cucina, a caterer with an Italian bent, Maryline is one of many alumni and alumnae in the cooking, catering and food writing fields. Read about more of them — including Matt Meagher '76, R.B. Quinn '83, Amy Welles Hodge '86, Stephen Conley '87, Jon Hale '87 and Frank Sally '97 — on the Web, along with great recipes from the chefs featured in this article. Go to www.hamilton.edu/foodchain



Stephen Durfee '85, winner of a James Beard Award and named one of the 10 Best Pastry Chefs in America by *Pastry Arts & Design* magazine, was inspired by his boss at Shuji's, the Japanese restaurant where Durfee began as a dishwasher.

SUCCESS, IN MANY FORMS

BY ANY MEASURE, DURFEE AND HIS FELLOW HAMILTON CULINARY PROFESSIONALS have indeed been successful. In 1998 Durfee won the James Beard Award (widely recognized as the “Oscars of the Food World”) for Outstanding Pastry Chef, a national and industry honor few ever achieve. For nine years now he has taught at one of this country’s premier culinary schools, and he has represented the Culinary Institute of America at the National Pastry Team Championships. He was also named one of the 10 Best Pastry Chefs in America by *Pastry Arts & Design* magazine. His greatest pleasures, however, come not from these awards, but from the acts of thrilling and exciting people through his food. Even better, he says, is sharing this excitement with his students. “As a teacher I can influence more people than I ever could as a chef. That’s the reason I teach — to share that excitement, that enthusiasm and that passion.”

For his part, Christopher Kostow has earned tremendous recognition in the culinary field, especially when one considers that he graduated from Hamilton only a decade ago. He has earned a total of five Michelin stars (one in his first executive chef position at Chez TJ in Mountain View, Calif., two in his second year at Chez TJ, and now two more while at Meadowood). And in addition to the Best New Chef recognition from *Food & Wine* magazine, Kostow was also a



semifinalist for a James Beard Award for Best Chef: Pacific in 2009. Even given these accolades, however, Kostow works to keep a cool head. While he continually strives for perfection, whether in his career or on a particular dish, it’s important, he says, “to never think that you’ve arrived.”

Richard Vellante has run the last eight Boston marathons, raising money for the Dana Farber Cancer Center in the process. But it’s his work as executive chef and executive vice president of the Legal Sea

From an early age, these cookbook writers had all the ingredients

By Ronda McDowell-Wanless '81

AS A STUDENT AT HAMILTON, Lucy Saunders '81 once brought students and faculty together by producing a Monty-Pythesque Medieval Feast. The meal was her Middle English “final paper”: She cooked stewed chicken in cream with spices, honey and Genesee Cream Ale, and served it on 80 homemade bread trenchers, an edible flatbread “plate.” The feast was held in the then-shuttered Saunders Hall of Chemistry, named after great-great-uncle Arthur Percy Saunders, Hamilton’s chemistry professor in the 1930s.

Nearly three decades later, she’s the author of two remarkably creative culinary

books — *Grilling with Beer: Bastes, BBQ Sauces, Mops, Marinades, & More, Made With Craft Beer*, and *The Best of American Beer & Food: Pairing & Cooking With Craft Beer*. Along the way, she studied at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago and a Center for Brewing Studies workshop (Fred Matt of Utica’s F.X. Matt Brewing Co. was a classmate); apprenticed at restaurants in London and Brussels; and won the Weber-Stephen Fellowship for Food Writing on Outdoor Cookery. Putting her writing talents to use in service of the love of outdoor cooking that began during her Detroit childhood, she has written a column, “The Art of Drinking,” for the *Chicago Tribune*, and launched several popular Web sites: www.beercook.com, www.grillingwithbeer.com, and her book blog bestofamericanbeerandfood.com.

And, of course, she’s still whipping up feasts for friends from the Hill. In spring 2008, assisted by Mary McLean Evans '82, Saunders

produced an alumni evening of cooking and craft beer at the Evanston, Ill., home of Peter Frankel '87. As reported by attendee Gary Rejebian '81, “Lucy presented the most glorious, congenial alumni event I have ever been to — a BBQ and beer tasting based on recipes from Lucy’s new cookbook *Grilling With Beer*.”

Says Saunders: “My father, Bill Saunders '53, always enjoyed the lasting friendships formed at Hamilton, and that’s another legacy I’m happy to share.”

Mimi Brodeur Legro '82, another author of two well-received cookbooks, one savory and the other sweet — *Mushroom Cookbook: Recipes for White & Exotic Varieties*, and *Peach*



Mimi Brodeur Legro '82

CULINARY INSTITUTE REMEMBERS JACOB SHAPIRO '05 WITH SCHOLARSHIP FUND

EARLY IN SEPTEMBER, STEPHEN DURFEE '85 recalls, the parents of Jacob Shapiro '05 visited the Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena, Calif., where Durfee is a pastry chef instructor and Jacob had been a first-year student at the time of his death in April. "They came out to visit the school and spread his ashes on a tree that was planted in his honor," Durfee says. "They were wonderful people, and I was pleased to hear a little bit" about Jacob, whom Durfee had known only slightly.

Jacob's mother, Catherine Shapiro, brought the award-winning pastry chef a recipe for chocolate cake. "She apologized, thinking it rather presumptuous," Durfee says, "but said it was exactly what Jacob would have done himself."

Jacob and a fellow student, Adam Rains, died in an automobile accident near the institute April 17 along with a third man. "They were two great freshmen, loved by everyone," Charles Henning, the institute's managing director, told the *Napa Valley Register*. In the wake of the tragedy, the institute created a "Follow Your Dream" culinary scholarship fund in memory of the students.

When Jacob arrived at the institute last year, he was asked to compose an essay about his values and philosophy. He wrote of the importance of "expressing joy in each task I do, and doing everything and approaching everything with a gusto for learning." And he quoted Benjamin Franklin on the value of order: "Let all things have their places; let each part of your business have its time." That spirit was honored at a memorial service for the students in May, when their classmates elected to celebrate their lives by wearing white chef's coats rather than mourning black.

The Culinary Institute of America has created a "Follow Your Dream" scholarship fund in Jacob's memory. Contributions may be made to CIA Scholarship Fund, Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, 2555 Main St., St. Helena, CA 94574. Please note: in the name of Jacob Shapiro.

Foods that allows him to meld both his creative culinary side and his business acumen. Ultimately, however, it's pleasing others that gives him the most satisfaction. "There's this underlying need to please and be hospitable and make people happy," he says. "The restaurant business is about making people feel better when they leave than they did when they arrived."

Daniel Garcia measures his success in strengthening the infrastructure of his company and continuing to grow it profitably. "For me, the fulfillment is in sharing my culture through the food with others, and having an impact on the people's lives we touch." By specializing in Latino-Caribbean, Latin-American and Spanish cuisine, his business helps to expose more and more people to the foods he most enjoys.

And for Merriman, greater exposure through a wildly popular television show has already significantly heightened her profile, both in Seattle and nationally. And though when we spoke, she was under strict orders to keep the details of the televised *Top Chef* competition confidential — she was finally eliminated in October — she was able to share openly how her experience on the show has enhanced her culinary skill. "After coming back from the show, I got back in my own kitchen at work. I felt really inspired by everyone I cooked with and competed against." ■

Cookbook: *Beverages, Breakfast Treats, Appetizers, Soups, Salads, Sides, Entrees, Desserts* — can trace her love of the culinary arts to youth as well. As a child, she began her career with an Easy-Bake Oven. At Hamilton she baked and sold cakes to the faculty for special functions, and made baked goods such as Nana's shortbread (the recipe is in the *Peach Cookbook*) to sell at the McEwen Coffee House.

Brodeur notes that she "went the untraditional route; instead of banking, I looked to baking." She took a year off between her first and second year at Hamilton to work as an apprentice, or *stagiaire*, at the famous French cooking school La Varenne in Paris in exchange for her Grand Diplôme. After graduation she worked as a pastry chef at the five-star Salishan Lodge on the Oregon coast before working at *Food & Wine Magazine* and doing entertainment seminars with Martha Stewart. She has since styled food for Near East,

Weight Watchers and Heinz, and developed recipes for Near East and Heinz. "Photo sessions for green beans with the perfect pat of Weight Watchers margarine could take hours!" she recalls.

Now living with her family in Hershey, Pa., on a 10-acre fresh-ingredient farm with a four-tiered vegetable garden, herb garden, sheep, turkeys and chickens, Brodeur writes a weekly restaurant review column for Harrisburg's newspaper (www.pennlive.com/columns/patriotnews/brodeur/?archive). She also works as a chef at the Cook's Corner in Giant Supermarkets, and she is hard at work on a third cookbook. Don't ask for previews or recipes, though: "It's a secret."

Lucy Saunders '81 (center), author of *Grilling with Beer*, won accolades for her cuisine at a 2008 Alumni Association feast at the home of Peter Frankel '87 in Evanston, Ill.

