

FOOD & DINING

Chef Pursues an Unusual Culinary Career



Chef Maria Zebrowski.

By Evan Ortega

Hillary Clinton once remarked that she chose to fulfill a profession rather than bake cookies, but if she had Maria Zebrowski's job, she could have done both to the extreme. Before she became a personal chef and authored several cookbooks, Zebrowski followed a career path that involved everything from styling food for advertisements to developing products like Nestle's cookie dough in test kitchens. "I've been so fortunate to have work that I love," Zebrowski said. "In all the years that I've been working, which are many, I've probably had one or two bad days. I mean who can ever say that? I've been really lucky."

Having grown up on her father's produce ranch in Delano, California, Zebrowski recalled family meals with fresh fruits and vegetables from the fields. Meals in her home were treated as events and her father loved to have guests over for dinner. "It was always good food that I guess is in my DNA," Zebrowski said. "When you were the last guy to make it into the kitchen, you had to chop the onions, so it was kind of an incentive to get there early and pitch in."

After graduating from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with a home economics degree in 1973 and then working as an assistant food editor at the *Fresno Bee* for several years, Zebrowski landed a job developing recipes at test kitchens for Carnation and later Nestle (which ended up buying Carnation) in Los Angeles. "They needed a person to start at the bottom and they hired me," Zebrowski said.

She started by doublechecking the recipes that other people at the company had already been developed. "I've done a lot of work for other companies too, but when you work in a test kitchen you do such a variety of things, so I have a broad skill set," Zebrowski said.

The recipes Zebrowski tested would then be printed in cookbooks, on product labels, promotional materials and advertisements. Zebrowski also started tagging along on photo shoots to observe food stylists prepare food for the camera. "One day somebody was sick and they said 'Okay, it's yours,' so I went on a photo shoot... the photographer was telling me what I needed to do, but you do some and you just learn."

Food Styling

As a food stylist, Zebrowski had to make food look appealing to the eye but also endure potentially long television and photo shoots. To do this, stylists will often use tools more suited for the garage than the kitchen. "When I was at Carnation, we did a lot of ice cream and that was always the terror because it

dies; ice cream just melts," Zebrowski said.

The solution was to use liquid nitrogen (think *Terminator 2*) to keep the ice cream cold for the amount of time required to photograph it. "You drop it on your feet or something like that, that ice cream would be so hard if you dropped it on the floor it would shatter," Zebrowski said. "We had to be really careful, you could really get burned. You just didn't touch it...it was really hairy."

Zebrowski's experience styling cookies was less dangerous, but equally tedious. "I wrote a gold standard for what a cookie at a photo shoot should look like," she said.

Her standards dictated that the amount of chocolate chips in the photographed cookie should be representative of the number of chips in the bag and visible on the outside of the cookie. "You could never put one just straight up and down," insists Zebrowski. "They had to be like one turned upside down, about three of them turned sideways and such."

In order to accomplish this for a shoot, Zebrowski would use a specific size ice cream scoop to get the right size and shape, cooking them until they were firm enough to have chocolate chips placed on top. After selecting the perfect cookie, she would then brush the chocolate chips with Simple Green in order to give them a shine that lasted for hours. "You might have to do 200 cookies-it's pretty arduous stuff," Zebrowski said.

On a shoot where she prepared a turkey, Zebrowski cooked the bird for about 45 minutes, put it in her trunk and drove to the set in Orange County. She created a paint of sorts, with ingredients including Kitchen Bouquet and bitters which she brushed onto the skin in layers until it was the right color. Because the coloring would not easily stick to greasy turkey skin, she also added detergent. After that, she took out a blow torch she bought from a hardware store and applied its flame to the skin to finish the job.

Although the turkey started smelling before it was finished being photographed, Zebrowski said eggs can last up to a week if they are properly styled. She would cook the whites in a half inch of oil at a low temperature, ladling oil on top with a spoon and carefully forming the shape. "And then when it's almost firm, you take the yolk and drop it on and you kind of hold it until it gets solidified in the right spot and then you pour a little oil on that," Zebrowski said. "It's really tedious making those things."

Chemistry of Cooking

Baking is more difficult than cooking over a stove, Zebrowski said, because of the chemistry involved. Changing one ingredient can cause other ingredients to react with each other in unintended ways. "If you make a muffin and then you decide you want it to be a lemon muffin, if you put acid in there, then that completely changes the pH level," Zebrowski said. "So then baking powder usually isn't enough because there's only a little bit of soda in it to counteract the acidity, so you have to use either all baking soda, or baking powder plus baking soda and you have to get that proportion just right."

Nestle wanted its recipes to include Nestle products, using as much of each package as possible. Zebrowski remembered when she was asked to develop a cheesecake recipe using an entire can of evaporated milk and canned pumpkin. "I said you can't do that...I said cheesecakes don't have moisture; they



TORTILLA SOUP

Here's a version of chicken tortilla soup that's both super-easy and delicious. To make it even quicker, use crumbled baked tortilla chips in place of the homemade tortilla strips and skip Steps 1-2. Serve with vinegary coleslaw, lime wedges and hot sauce.

Servings: 6 servings, about 1 1/3 cups each

Total Time: 45 minutes

Ease of Preparation: Easy

Health: Low Calorie, High Fiber, Low Cholesterol, Healthy Weight

Ingredients:

Tortilla Soup
8 corn tortillas, halved and thinly sliced
Canola or olive oil cooking spray
1-tablespoon canola oil
3 Anaheim or poblano peppers, diced
1 medium onion, diced
1-teaspoon ground cumin
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces (see Tip)
4 cups reduced-sodium chicken broth
1 14-ounce can diced tomatoes with green chiles
2 tablespoons lime juice
1/2 cup shredded sharp Cheddar cheese
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro

Steps:

1: Preheat oven to 400°F.
2: Spread tortilla strips in an even layer

on a baking sheet and coat with cooking spray. Bake until browned and crispy, 12 to 15 minutes.

3: Meanwhile, heat oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add peppers and onion and cook, stirring, until the onion begins to soften, 3 to 5 minutes. Add cumin and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Add chicken, broth, tomatoes and their juice. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer until the chicken is cooked through, 12 to 15 minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in limejuice. Serve each portion topped with some of the baked tortilla strips, Cheddar and cilantro.

Nutrition: (Per serving)

Calories - 288
Carbohydrates - 25
Fat - 12
Saturated Fat - 4
Monounsaturated Fat - 4
Protein - 20
Cholesterol - 56
Dietary Fiber - 5
Potassium - 404
Sodium - 483
Nutrition Bonus - Vitamin A (40 daily value), Iron (15 dv).

Tip: To trim boneless, skinless chicken thighs, we like to use kitchen shears to snip the fat away from the meat.

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