

## Learning by Example

2011 Be Like “Mike” contest winner Kristin Swaggart on her unconventional path to the kitchen, her No. 1 accomplishment and the highlight of the 2011 ACF National Convention.



### Kristin Swaggart

**age**  
40

**hometown**  
Pendleton, Ore.

**resides**  
Kennewick, Wash.

**best place traveled to**  
Ireland

**favorite local restaurant**  
Taverna Tagaris, Richland, Wash.

**education**  
Graduated with associate degree in culinary arts from Walla Walla Community College, Walla Walla, Wash., in June

**chef you most admire**  
The “old school” chefs who paved the way for culinarians like me

**favorite culinary book**  
*The Professional Chef* (Wiley: 8th edition, 2006)

**M**y family moved often when I was young. I went to five or six elementary schools, two junior high and two high schools. With working parents, our family was always busy, and like most mainstream American households, there wasn't a big focus on preparing meals. Growing up, I was interested in becoming a teacher, but I changed my mind often and ended up with a first career in finance. I didn't consider the culinary field an option, and it's fair to say that I was a pretty awful cook when I got married in 1996. I was focused on my career, and put very little, if any, time into preparing meals.

### trial and error

I quit my job to be at home when I had my first son. When my second son was born, my life changed forever. He was very sick, and it took more than a year to figure out the cause was food allergies. I immediately changed my approach

to cooking. I submerged myself in books to learn as much as I could about preparing foods in an allergy-friendly way. I taught myself how to bake without dairy or eggs. My son grew healthier, and through the years, I discovered a passion for cooking. In 2009, with the support of my family, I enrolled in culinary school. That was the best decision I ever made. Graduating with a 4.0 in June is my greatest accomplishment to date.

While at Walla Walla Community College, I was a member of the school's Culinary Club, participated in leadership workshops and competed in the 2011 ACF Western Region Baron H. Galand Culinary Knowledge Bowl. My favorite classes covered international cuisine. I loved learning about Indonesian, Greek and other foods I had never been exposed to.

### and the winner is...

Although I was a member of ACF Northwest Wine Country Chapter, I didn't know much about how the organization as a whole worked. I attended meetings when possible, but underestimated the opportunities because I was so focused on school. I first read about the Be Like “Mike” contest in the winter 2010 issue of *Sizzle*, when Trisha LeBlanc shared her experience at the 2010 convention. I entered the contest because I wanted the chance to be surrounded by so many

successful chefs. I knew that spending time with the president at such a critical event would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn and network.

The interview process made me a nervous wreck. ACF National President Michael Ty, CEC, AAC, asked tough questions about my goals, and pressed me for solid reasons why I deserved the opportunity. I was shocked to be a semifinalist, let alone the winner.

## chance of a lifetime

I was intimidated at the thought of attending the 2011 ACF National Convention in Dallas, but everyone was warm and welcoming. The convention schedule was jampacked, from early morning breakfasts to competitions and educational opportunities. For me, it was all of that and more. I attended behind-the-scenes meetings with board members and sponsors. I was thrilled to interact with amazing chefs who took the time to talk with me and offer sound advice and encouragement. I observed important leadership characteristics in action. Chef Ty spent a great deal of time listening to people, whether a member he had never met or a board member he had known for years. But more than anything, I appreciated his commitment to embracing students within ACF.

The highlight of the convention for me was the Chefs Outreach to the



Community Day in a low-income neighborhood in Dallas. Seeing children and their parents have “aha” moments as they stopped by each station and learned about healthy eating was rewarding. Children look up to chefs, and we have a responsibility to use that stage for their benefit, not ours.

## confidence boost

Since the convention, I have an even stronger sense of urgency to pursue my goals. Attending the convention was like getting an IV of motivation and confidence. In the future, I'd like to work with younger generations to help them develop skills and confidence in the kitchen. And I'm always on a mission to create delicious recipes that are not only allergy-friendly and healthy, but support local growers and producers. My top priority, however, is certification. ■



## apply for the 2012 contest

Don't miss your chance to walk in Kristin Swaggart's shoes by applying for the 2012 Be Like “Mike” contest. Details will be posted on [www.acfchefs.org/belikemike](http://www.acfchefs.org/belikemike) in the coming months. One lucky winner will win a trip to the 2012 ACF National Convention in Orlando, Fla., July 14-17, 2012, to shadow Michael Ty, CEC, AAC.

**opposite:** Kristin Swaggart at the 2011 Chefs Outreach to the Community Day in Dallas, July 22.

**above left:** Kristin Swaggart at the 2011 Chefs Outreach to the Community Day with ACF National President Michael Ty, right.

**above right:** Kristin Swaggart and Michael Ty at the 2011 President's Grand Ball, July 26.