

October - December 2012

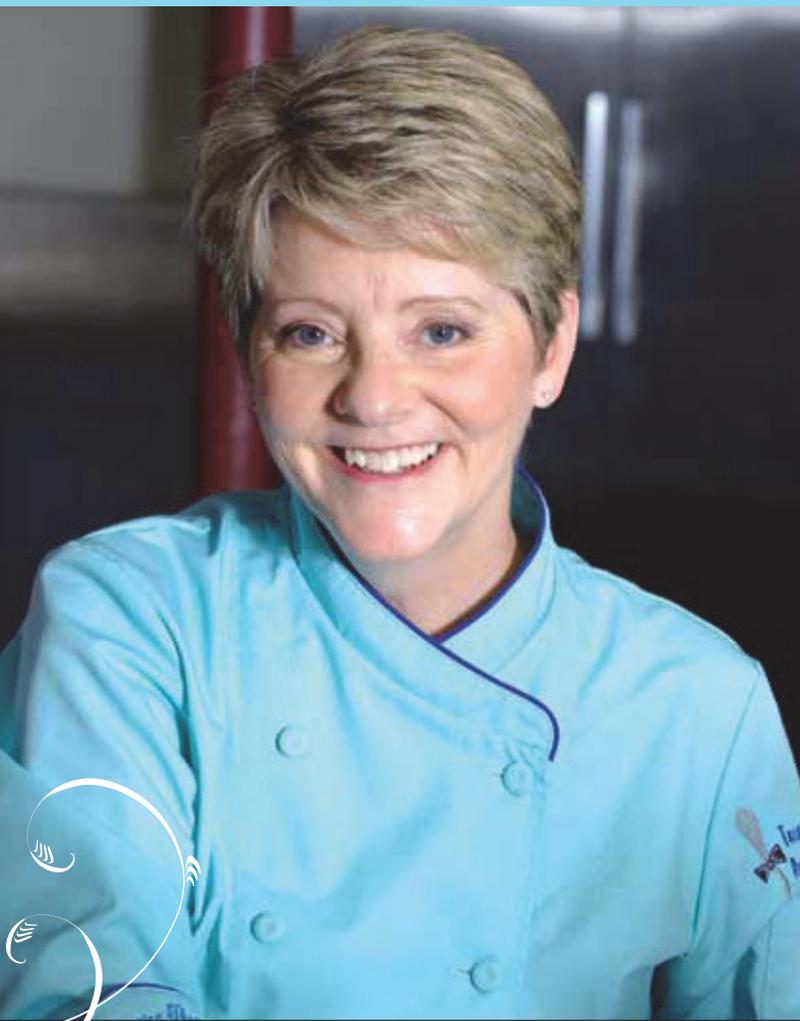
Personal Chef

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Chef Monica Thomas
Tailored Taste
Personal Chef Service

2012 Personal Chef of the Year: Chef Monica Thomas



"I believe I am successful because I work very, very hard to make my business a beneficial part of my clients' lives. I aim to provide more value than the client anticipates and to do so with a pleasant attitude."

sauce and a ricotta cake – and both of those recipes are shared at the end of the article.

The bottom line for Chef Monica is that she thinks food is one of those areas where learning never ends, and, as she says, "especially when stepping outside our own culture to experience ingredients and processes that aren't typical for us."

But the lack of formal culinary education doesn't mean Chef Monica hasn't brought a wealth of experience to her business. Just the opposite. After four majors in college, she graduated with a degree in Elementary Education. She worked as a teacher, secretary, graphic artist, office manager, Vice President of Administration for a British company that sold airplanes and missiles, independent event planner, and sales and catering manager, before achieving her biggest goal: personal chef.

And looking at that busy background, as you learn more about Chef Monica it becomes abundantly clear why she has accomplished so much. Her family life is the backbone of all she does.

Family is a big deal for Monica. She and Mike, her husband of nearly 20 years, and two dogs: Anya (4-year-old Siberian Husky with slipped kneecaps, rescued from an evil breeder) and Mac (8-year-old Rottweiler/Shepherd mix, former pound puppy), live in the midst of family with her sister and her husband six houses away in one direction and her nephew, his wife and three kids six houses away in the other direction. Her niece and her family live in the greater metro area as well.

With family so close they hear all about the food and the menus and the challenges of being a personal chef. As Chef Monica explains: "It's part of who I am and so they accept it. They also are wonderful on family vacations taking over the cooking and letting me step away from the stove. On those vacations I focus on cocktails – making and drinking them."

Finding the right balance is something Chef Monica admits is a struggle. She spends a lot of time working. So, from time to time, she blocks days for personal fun and then works hard to stick with it. Once a quarter her great nieces and great nephew come spend the night. She blocks 24 hours to be with and focus fully on them. There's always cooking involved (Stromboli for dinner and things such as Peanut Butter and Banana French Toast for breakfast) and general silliness before bedtime.

She relishes long weekends two or three times a year to travel with her husband. This year they've spent time in Charlottesville, VA (hitting a great little wine festival there) and San Diego, CA. These trips are usually planned short-term when she sees she has a Friday the following month that's not filled. She draws a huge X on the calendar and keeps it blocked for a trip.

Failing all of that, there's reading, crossword puzzles (she starts every day with one!), travel, and, most important, tinkering with cocktails.

You may wonder what it takes to become Chef of the Year. Chef Monica Thomas would tell you that she achieved that honor not by a specific effort to earn that right, but by a culmination of activities and hard work since starting as a personal chef in 2004.

And it didn't take her long to know that knowledge was important. She became a Certified Personal Chef with USPCA in 2006 and was re-certified in 2011.

And the benefits of attaining that credential? According to Chef Monica: "I believe certification holds one to higher standards. This is my full-time job/career and I take pride in what I do and how well I do it. I personally think it's crazy that any one is working in our field without a sanitation certificate and I am grateful that certification forces that minimal standard upon us.

Despite that, Chef Monica will be the first to tell you she didn't become a personal chef as a result of a classic culinary training model. While she is a graduate of the Culinary Business Academy, she admits that she had no formal training in the culinary arts before starting her business. But culinary education has become a large part of Chef Monica's life.

Nearly 10 years into her business, she still takes cooking classes whenever she can, even on vacation! Last year when in Rome, she took a private cooking class with a chef. After shopping the local market for fresh meats and produce, they went to the chef's villa and cooked for several hours before enjoying the fruits of their work. In fact, there are two recipes they made that day that she has incorporated into her business – a quick basil and garlic-infused tomato

In case you can't tell, she credits her husband Mike as her biggest supporter, agreeing immediately that she should quit a good-paying, steady job to jump into the abyss of personal cheffing. She describes Mike as patient with her hours at the computer and her hours away from home on weekends cooking parties. He is very understanding about her rather "tightly-wound personality" (Monica's words, not ours) and without his support and cheerleading, she knows she would not be as successful as she is.

And it's not just her personal chef business that keeps her busy. Chef Monica finds time for both her profession and her community, sometimes blending both.

She has been heavily involved at the chapter level of the Capital Chefs where she served as secretary for two years and president for four. She was also a member of the Chesapeake Chefs until it was recently merged into Capital Chefs chapter. As Monica shares, "the chapter as well as the Association as a whole, helps build that critical network of support that chefs need as entrepreneurs."

What made her work with the Capital Chefs special is the role it has played to enhance and deepen the knowledge of the members as well as to offer support. Members discuss business but generally focus on food. We share leads and offer advice based on experience to newer members. Oh, and they have fun too!

But it doesn't stop at USPCA. Chef Monica also belongs to Women Chefs and Restaurateurs (WCR) which she joined seven years ago. For six years she was a Local Exchange coordinator for the DC area. WCR's membership includes restaurant and catering chefs, personal chefs, food writers, publicists, and vendors. It's a much broader swath of the culinary world and has opened up a larger network of professionals who can support and expand her business. Through WCR she became aware of the Ovarian Cancer National Alliance annual fundraiser and has been heavily involved in the planning of that event for the last 5-1/2 years.

She also volunteered for Operational Frontline, now called Cooking Matters, which is Share Our Strength's nutritional education program. She has taught several series of six-week classes to populations of at-risk middle school girls and blind teenagers. Both of those sessions were eye-opening and made her realize she wanted to continue to teach children about the wonders of food.



created for the first six clubs and started over to accommodate the various needs.

In 2011 they had a whopping 30% increase in enrollment with 49 children registered. Although the vegan had left the school, eliminating one challenge, sheer numbers presented a new challenge. By then she had four volunteers

routinely come to the club which allowed her to break the club into groups. They appointed team leaders – older students and/or those who'd been in Chef's Club the previous year – which helped minimize the typical chaos while also allowing these students to begin to develop leadership skills.

Along with the four regular volunteers and a school moderator, the Chef's Club meets on average two times per month for a 90-minute cooking class.

They discuss nutrition (without lecturing!), food and where it comes from, setting a proper table, how to serve and clear a meal, and how to politely express preferences. Of course, they cook too! At the beginning of the school year, they will tackle only one dish per club but as they move to the second half of the year they generally make two or three dishes.

Each year culminates in a Final Feast that the children cook and serve to their parents/significant adults. The week before, they rehearse the entire menu with the kids and have them serve each other. This way they also are able to enjoy the meal that they'll create again the following week. This meal has included a chilled soup, a composed fruit salad, an orange/cumin infused quinoa atop fresh spinach, avocado, chickpeas and hearts of palm, and a dessert of Anzac biscuits. Indeed, they pull out all the stops for this meal and the kids rise to the occasion each year, much to the parents' surprise and delight.

And there's more.

Over the years she's had her business she has volunteered locally for Share Our Strength, the Ovarian Cancer National Alliance fundraiser, as well. She describes them as personally rewarding, challenging and time-consuming.

How, then, can Chef Monica run a business?

As Chef Monica describes it, she is out the door at 8:00 to grocery shop – she finds going any earlier and the produce hasn't been unloaded from the truck yet and so she's wasting time waiting for things or travelling to another store.

She'll arrive at a client's between 9:30-10:00 a.m. depending upon shopping success and DC area traffic (the worst in the nation according to Chef!).

She finishes at the client's between 1:00-3:00 pm (depending on the size of the service and complexity of the dishes and "if I'm in a groove or not!")

Once home its time to check and respond to email, walk the dogs, and prep for the next day and beyond.



As Chef Monica describes her business: “I have been cooking five days per week for over two years and generally have one or two parties per month on weekends. Every other Wednesday (during the school year) is Chef’s Club at my adopted school. Since January 2012 (my New Year’s resolution) I no longer cook for clients in the morning before the afternoon chef’s club. I found it very stressful to do a full service and then race to the school for a 3 pm chef’s club.”

As you can tell, it’s not just basic home cooking for Chef Monica. She cooks dinner parties (she just did a James Bond-themed party with dishes named for the movies – You Only Live Twice-baked potato, For Your Pies Only, etc!); private cooking lessons (one popular lesson is teaching a basic dish such as Fish en Papillote and then demonstrating variations on that dish); and bachelorette parties with cooking demo (NOT hands-on!). To increase business she notes that gift certificates are a great source of income up front. She shares that she has sold many as gifts for weddings and new babies.

Even style differs. Not sure what this means?

She never intended to specialize but found that she has many clients with allergies/aversions/health issues such as dairy-free, gluten-free, and FODMAPS diet, as well as cooking for those with Fibromyalgia and cancer. She finds it’s a personal challenge to nourish these folks who face radical changes in their diets and are unsure how to proceed. Many think they will be deprived because they must avoid certain foods. It’s such a joy to hear that they are enjoying the meals even without the food items they previously enjoyed.

As you can imagine, her client base contains very few two adults + two kids models! Most are couples that she cooks for every three weeks. After that demographic, her next most common client type is the monthly single person (about three of those), and happily she has a wonderful every-Monday client. She also has a few “quarterlies” or once in a blue moon clients as well who fill in the occasional gaps.

Chef Monica notes that it wasn’t always so “easy”.

In the beginning the challenges were (and sometimes still are) many: building a business, finding clients, creating balanced and manageable menus, securing professional serving help for parties, staying profitable, juggling multiple clients and demands on time, and continuing to market even with a full load of clients. As every chef knows in this business, client’s needs and situations change frequently. A fabulous client may elope and move to Erie, PA (which did happen to Monica) or a spouse may lose a job and the couple has to tighten their belts for a while. This summer one long-term client of Monica’s retired and moved to the west coast and another decided to relocate to Texas to be closer to her daughter. Those two monthly slots had to be filled and thanks to Monica’s talents, they were!

She describes the ongoing challenge as avoiding complacency with what she has, but to continue to hone her craft, provide great service and keep marketing.

Speaking of marketing, Chef Monica describes how she started and more important, as her business matures, how she keeps it going.

Chef Monica explains that her first two clients came on the same day via a conversation her husband had with a co-worker. He mentioned that she had just returned from CBA and was starting a business. His co-worker was a single dad with four kids and he asked for her card. Another colleague in the government ‘cube farm’ overheard this conversation and also asked for her card. Those back-to-back appointments the following Saturday landed her the first two checks and two cooking days.

But remember Chef Monica’s warning about complacency.

She describes a key marketing technique (in case you didn’t pick it up earlier)

as networking, community involvement and culinary organization activities. As Chef Monica describes: “It’s imperative to put yourself ‘out there’ so that you become the ‘expert’ that people in your area turn to for all things culinary. I have volunteered to speak at associations as varied as NAARFE (National Association of Active and Retired Federal Employees) discussing nutrition for seniors and for a local historical preservation society about ‘preserving recipes from the past.’”

She volunteers annually for the Ovarian Cancer National Alliance fundraiser “Turn Up the Heat with Women Chefs” in a logistic (vs cooking) role, organizing the load-in of 35 chefs’ food for the 300+ guests. Through this event and her membership in WCR she has met most of the top female chefs in the DC area. This networking has directly led to work for Monica.

She also writes a quarterly newsletter sent (purposely) via snail mail. This puts her in front of clients, former clients, and potential clients at least four times per year. She writes about food, travel, cocktails, books, and seasonal happenings. Generally after the newsletter goes out she will hear from at least a dozen of the 150 recipients. Sometimes it’s just a ‘thanks for keeping me on your newsletter list’ but frequently it’s a ‘I’ve been meaning to throw a party/or get back on your schedule’ which makes it a worthwhile activity. She has chosen the old-fashioned method to differentiate herself from the daily bombardment of electronic newsletters that can easily be deleted without reading and to create a little excitement at the recipient’s mailbox.

Speaking of traditional marketing, she admits that she never tried print ads as she listened to so many other chefs who tried and found that to be expensive and un-fruitful.

Chef Monica reminds readers, too, of the value of USCPA noting, in particular, the importance of attending the annual conference.

Conference for Monica is a re-charging of the batteries. As personal chefs work in isolation, this is the time to spend with others in a personal chef’s exact field. Personal chefs’ needs are different from restaurant and catering chefs and so it is really worth her time to spend 2-1/2 days with others who experience the same issues she does. The camaraderie of the extended group of personal chefs invigorates and inspires her for another year.

While she knows that she will not make as much money in August (conference month) as she does in April, it will balance out in the end and that the time away and the expense to get there are well worth it in the long run for her mental state and to energize her for another year.



The editors posed a few questions to Chef Monica for some genuine insight into an award-winning chef and here's what we learned:

What makes your business special? "I am willing to work with unusual food requests and to do the research that comes with that. I work to under-promise and over-deliver so that my clients are happy."

What makes YOU a special person!? "I'm fiercely loyal, hardworking and curious. I enjoy learning new things, like a challenge and try to push myself beyond my comfort zone. Once I have some success within these new parameters, I have a larger comfort zone to work within, slowly expanding my areas of proficiency."

Your favorite cookbook? "I tend to go back to what are now classic cookbooks such as The Silver Palate cookbooks. Those were ones that inspired me to experiment in the kitchen and to grow in confidence over the years. I am also addicted to magazines (of all sorts) and routinely rip out piles of recipes every month from Bon Appetit, Food & Wine, etc. I'm still lamenting the death of Gourmet."

Your favorite gadget, equipment? "My 8" chef's knife is my life-line. Gadget wise, I love using a potato ricer to squeeze spinach."

What do you drive and how does that fit into your business? "A 2002 Mercedes C240. It is much better-sized for this job than my previous car which was a 10-year old VW Cabrio."

If you could hang out for a day with a famous chef (or anyone famous) who would you choose and why? "Bruce Springsteen, though I'm sure I'd be tongue-tied and just stare. The why is obvious, no? Been a fan since July 1973."

Noting that achieving "Chef of the Year" was one of the highlights of her career, Chef Monica reminds personal chefs to work hard, continue to learn, ask questions, and offer clients a worthwhile, valuable service that makes a difference in their lives.

Chilled Cucumber-Avocado Soup
serves 5 (bowls) or 10 'cups'

1 lb. cucumber
2 medium Haas avocados
3 cups vegetable broth
1/3 cup red onion*, chopped
1 ½ tablespoons fresh dill weed, plucked from stems
¼ cup fresh lemon juice
1 teaspoon sea salt
¾ teaspoon white pepper
additional dill weed for garnish

Peel the cucumber and then cut in half across the cucumber (NOT the long way). If cucumber is extra long, cut the halves in half. Then cut all the pieces in half the long way. With a spoon, gently scoop out the seeds and discard them. Chop the cucumber coarsely trying to keep the pieces roughly the same size. Place the cucumber in the blender.

Cut the avocados in half the long way – there is a large pit in the middle so you cannot cut all the way through. The adult with your group will show you this. Roughly chop up the avocado. Add avocado to the blender. Add about half of the vegetable broth to the blender. Add the red onion, dill weed and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper.

Make sure the lid is on the blender tightly. Start the blender on low and then gradually turn up the speed until you are at the highest level. Puree the mixture until smooth. Pour into a large bowl and whisk in the rest of the vegetable broth. Store in the refrigerator to chill before serving.

When ready to serve, ladle or pour soup into bowl or cup. Place a sprig of dill in the center of each.

*can also use other onions such as Vidalia, scallions or shallots.

Recipe adapted from a Rancho La Puerta recipe

NOTE: This makes a great starter for summer dinners. It holds its color for several days in the fridge. And, I double the white pepper for a spicier soup.

