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Chef Janine Doran At Home At Cafe Flora

By Tiffany Ran Tue., Apr. 3 2012 at 7:04 AM

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If even a frame is out of place at [Café Flora](#), chef Janine Doran will walk over to fix it. That is the kind of ownership she feels over the place where she has been cooking for 20 years. In 1999, during Café Flora's renovation, Doran was right down on the floor with the rest of them ripping out carpet and working on the space. Doran did not enter Flora as a vegetarian, but taking the dive twenty years ago has been a learning experience that continues even today.



Cafe Flora

How did you start at Cafe Flora?

Doran: I was at the [Westin \[Hotel\]](#) when Cafe Flora was starting to become big. By chance, a friend told me about Cafe Flora, and I was very intrigued because it was vegetarian. I hadn't really exposed myself to that kind of cooking. Quite honestly, I was kind of intimidated, but I was ready for a change and wanted to come aboard so I pursued coming in. I got a position in 1992 and worked my way up eventually [from a line cook position] into the chef position.

This place has morphed throughout the time that I've been here. We have changed and grown, and I'm really happy with the direction that we're in now. Nat [Stratton-Clarke], our new owner, has similar values that I could easily be on board with. So that's been a really great transition. I can't say enough about that. I think that's one of the reasons why I stayed so long.

So you're not a vegetarian still?

I have played around with being a vegetarian. One of the things about Cafe Flora is we feel like vegetarian cuisine is very tasty, very wonderful. It's good to break the stereotype of vegetarian cuisine, that it's just rice and tofu or sprouts and cucumbers. You can actually be creative and pursue it even if you're not vegetarian. I love it. I love that there is a variety of products that we get to play around with, and I find it very challenging and very creative. I do appreciate the fact that it is vegetarian and that it breaks stereotypes. It says, "Hey, if you want to go out and have a great meal, you can go to a vegetarian restaurant and you're going to be just as satisfied and surprised."

As a vegetarian, did you struggle with it?

Not really. I was a vegetarian for some time and also tried to be vegan. It forced me to take a look at ingredients a lot more and to be aware of how diff products are put together. It made me learn a lot more because when you're just grabbing things, you're not thinking about what you're eating. I think it kind of forces us to learn more about where our food comes from, where was this made, where did they get their product, how was it grown? Here, we're trying to do more local, trying to support our local farmers, and we actually get to meet people who grow our food.

How was that for you as far as working in a small restaurant after working at hotels?

Well, I don't want to say just one thing and that's the facts across the board because I can't make those kind of statements. But in my opinion, through my experience, I just feel like Cafe Flora has more heart. I think it's harder for really huge companies to have that kind of heart, focus, commitment, and involvement that a smaller restaurant can have. The owner is actually involved in trying to give back to the community. It really sets the tone for the rest of the crew and staff that are working for this particular restaurant. Although I've worked with great crews, I've learned so much everywhere I go, I just felt that this felt so much like home to me.

What did you experience jumping into new cuisine?

I was excited because I got exposed to many more different kinds of ingredients that I didn't get an opportunity to play around with in the positions and jobs that I was in, and it's continuing to grow as far as those products go. We're always trying to look for something new. The one that comes to mind right now is the farro from Bluebird Grainery. That opened up my eyes to some different products. As far as gluten free, we've come across some real artisans in the movement to create wonderful gluten free products. Your eyes open up a lot about food when you look at it in vegetarian terms. We also have the issues of gluten free and vegan. We try to have all of those things on the menu so we can take care of people who have issues with what they can or can't eat.

Our crew, I can't say enough about the crew that we work with. Here at Cafe Flora, we collaborate a lot. We get inspired by each other. I believe we always work from everybody and I've learned a lot from the ppl that I work with and I also get inspired by the people that I work with

Sometimes techniques, seeing people's flavor combinations that they put together. You know when you're used to doing something you get caught in a rut because you're producing something a certain way. It doesn't mean you're not growing or pursuing learning but sometimes it takes a fresh idea from another person to propel you more towards a different direction. That's why the creative contributions of the people that work here really help contribute to the uniqueness of what we have at Cafe Flora.

What do you eat at home when you're not working?

I've been really moving on increasing the amount of food that I eat. I'll stop by a market on my way home and just see what looks good and fresh, and I'll do something simple. I'm not vegetarian but I have a tendency to lean more towards certain vegetables. I love quinoa, I love bok choy and certain vegetables. Simple stuff like roasted vegetables.

Is it safe to say that working here changed the way you eat at home?

Absolutely. I definitely have my guilty pleasures, but I've made more moment to eating better quality produce.

And what are those guilty pleasures?

Oh well, come on now, everybody loves their pizza or uhm, I love desserts. Those rich sauces with the cream, love that. I've always loved, when I was saucier, to finish sauces with butter. Some of those kinds of things can be translated here. We have done butter sauces, we have done cream sauces but what's opened my mind is doing some sauces in different ways. For instance the special for Spring, I'm going to be making pasta with the nettles and the sauce, which is a creamy sauce, will be made with cashews.

What other techniques are there for non-butter sauces?

Nuts are great. You can use a vegetable, and make a vegetable sauce. The thickness and consistency is made up of that particular vegetable. If you wanted to make a curry, you can put some coconut into it. We use coconut oil sometimes in the cooking. We sometimes use Silken tofu. I think it's just a matter of finding that particular product that you want to use and saying like, "I want to do something really creamy with this," and you make it happen. You move in the direction of making that happen, and you play until you get it where you want it.

So speaking of guilty indulgences, the bar program and happy hour was something that was expanded later on in your time here, has that been a challenge to cook for and adapt to?

When the restaurant opened up, they initially didn't have alcohol. Then they decided to put beer and wine on the menu because guests really wanted that nice glass of beer or wine with their meal. This kind of opens up a whole other door of mixed drinks that kind of go with food.

We're still learning, we're constantly learning. Even at home, I try to think, okay I'm making this, what do I serve to drink with that? I'm trying to expand my knowledge of that as well, even away from the restaurant. We pickle vegetables for the bar, for their Bloody Marys. The bar staff have tried to come up with different kinds of special drinks on the weekend and a different weekly Bloody Mary.

The restaurant industry seems quite fluid, with chefs coming in and out of restaurants all the time. What has been the benefit for you that you stuck around?

I see the value in jumping around, but I also see a value in staying the course. Café Flora has gone through so many transitions and morphs that I've gone through with them. I feel like I've benefitted from that. Yes, there is something to be said for going to different places and learning from those places, but I feel like in my position, I've really had an opportunity to be a part of the crew, be a part of making a difference.

More information on Cafe Flora's Happy Hour can be found at Gwendolyn Elliott's Happy Hour feature [here](#).

http://blogs.seattleweekly.com/voracious/2012/04/chef_janine_doran_at_home_at_c.php