

Tracy GRIFFITH

BY LISA SHAMES

Born and raised: New York and St. John, Virgin Islands

Background: It was teen modeling and TV commercials that led her into an acting career. After roles in movies such as *The Good Mother*, *Fear City* and *The Finest Hour*, and TV shows “21 Jump Street,” “The Monroes” and “Guiding Light,” she left the entertainment business for a career in foodservice.

Greatest accomplishments: Griffith was the first female graduate of the California Sushi Academy, Los Angeles; inducted as an honorary member in July into ACF’s honor society, the American Academy of Chefs; creator of American-style sushi; certified dive master; released her first country music CD “Red” in August 2006.

Published work:

Sushi American Style: Easy Techniques, Everyday Ingredients (Clarkson Potter, 2004)



It pays to listen to your customers. Just ask Tracy Griffith, who did just that. She got rid of an ingredient her diners didn’t like, replacing it with ones they did. In the process, she created a new style of cuisine that she can now claim as her trademark.

No stranger to shaking things up, this actor left that glitzy world behind and followed her passion for sushi, enrolling in the Los Angeles-based California Sushi Academy, the first vocational school specializing in the training and certification of sushi chefs. It wasn’t easy, admits Griffith, who compares it to boot camp. Neither was finding a job in the male-dominated industry once she graduated in 2000. But when she did, Griffith combined her training in traditional Japanese cuisine with the request of her

clientele for sushi—minus the raw fish. “It was funny that customers would come to the sushi bar and not want to eat sushi,” she says. Her American-style sushi was born.

She’s since written a book about it, and recently presented her BLT Roll—applewood-smoked bacon, red and yellow heirloom tomatoes, avocado, Irish cheddar and Black Japonica rice in a handroll with wasabi mayonnaise—at ACF’s national convention in July.

Q&A

Why sushi?

It's the most fascinating and beautiful cuisine of all. I first had sushi in California when I was 10, visiting my half-sister Melanie [Griffith, the actress]. She was raised in Hollywood and I was raised in New York. I was just blown away by the colors and the fact that it was raw fish. I didn't have any idea how to make sushi, so when they opened the California Sushi Academy, I knew I had to go.

Describe your American-style sushi.

When I started working in Beverly Hills [Tsunami's; Rika's on Sunset] so many people would confide in me—being a sushi chef is a lot like being a bartender—that they didn't like raw fish. So I started making them these different rolls, like the Cowboy, which is grilled steak with blue cheese, red onion and rice with a jalapeño soy sauce. They started to come back and ask for it, and that became my signature. I was trained in the traditional Japanese manner, but this fusion of Japanese technique and rice with American ingredients really works, or I wouldn't keep doing it.

What might surprise culinary students about Japanese cuisine?

Everything matters. It matters how you put the food on the plate and how you put the plate down on the table. Students might be surprised about how important the details are, almost in a spiritual way.

Describe the program at the California Sushi Academy.

It was very tough. They started off with the philosophy of Japanese cooking, then making miso soup, which is very important because you always have that with sushi, and then there were weeks on making rice. Then the second half was just sushi, of which a lot was filleting fish properly.

What was it like to be the first female graduate?

It was challenging. My instructor, who was a great teacher and chef, was perplexed that a girl was in his class because it's just not done, which he told me almost every day. But we got through it. I learned a lot from him. He made sure that I actually wanted to do this, which I did. It was hard anyway, but him being so negative about my being there was strange. But it made me like, 'I'm going to show you.' So it backfired on him.

What is it like working in a position that is dominated by men?

When I graduated from school I went out into the L.A. sushi world, which I knew well because I was a patron. So many places told me they wouldn't hire me because there was no such thing as a female sushi chef. I reminded them that was illegal, and told them, 'Here I am with my knives and ready to go. If you don't think I can do it, let me show you that I can.' It almost wasn't even an insult, because it was beyond their concept. It took a while to get a job, but when I finally did I really loved doing it and people responded well.

You were an actor prior to your involvement in the foodservice world. What led to this career change?

I enjoyed acting, but it wasn't a passion, and I was getting tired of the business end of it. I started thinking what else do I really love, and cooking was the answer, but I wasn't sure how to go at it. Then I saw the California Sushi Academy was opening, and I knew that was it. It was an epiphany.

I read that you played Johnny Depp's girlfriend on "21 Jump Street." What was that like?

It was my first screen kiss, and it was a good one. He's a sweetheart. He's just a down-to-earth guy, and I hear he's still like that.

Where does the inspiration for your rolls come from?

I think about my favorite sandwiches and pastas. The Primavera Roll—roasted asparagus, pine nuts, goat cheese, rice and sun-dried tomatoes in a tomato/basil wrap with a fig/balsamic dipping sauce—was inspired by one of my favorite pastas to make.

What are you doing now?

I'm working on my idea of American sushi with a partner in San Francisco, consulting and developing concepts. This year there are bunches of irons in the fire, from a hotel restaurant to a fast-food one. I'm also working with a food scientist who's developing vegetable-based wrappers, sort of like fruit leathers, for me. That's my next frontier.

What advice do you have for culinary students?

First of all, being a chef is really hard and physically demanding. You have to love it. Even the celebrity chefs work their butts off. But it's very rewarding, and there are such great people in this business.

Lisa Shames is based in Chicago.