

SEPTEMBER 2011

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT



SHAPES OF
THINGS TO
COME

Susan Feniger & Mary Sue Milliken

Silver Spoon *Food Arts* presents the September 2011 SILVER SPOON AWARD for sterling performance to **Susan Feniger** and **Mary Sue Milliken**, the dynamic duo of chefs, restaurateurs, cookbook authors, and multimedia personalities known as the Too Hot Tamales. Together they've elevated Latino cooking, first in Los Angeles, and then across America, with a shared attitude that makes their food adventurous, authentic, tasty, and, above all, fun.

Ironically, for a pair of chefs who built their mini empire on the bedrock of chips, guac, and tamales, these casual cohorts began their culinary lives in the old-school classical fashion: the salt-and-pepper haired, bohemian Feniger (at left in photo) is a graduate of The Culinary Institute of America, while the blond preppy Milliken attended Washburne Culinary Institute. They met in 1978, in the kitchen at Le Perroquet in Chicago, a bastion of formal French cuisine, where they were the first women to work in the restaurant's all-male kitchen (they were among the founders of Women Chefs & Restaurateurs). Their bond was immediate. And so was their desire to learn about Gallic cooking at the source: Feniger left to cook on the Riviera, while Milliken put in her time in Paris.

In 1981, they reunited in Los Angeles, where they became an essential element of the city's birth as a culinary destination. And they did it in a miniscule space on funky Melrose Avenue in a 39-seater called City Café. Four years later, City Café begat the far larger, and even more multiethnic, CITY Restaurant. And what had been City Café was turned into a street food taco stand called **Border Grill**, which became their flagship, moving in 1990 to a far larger space in Santa Monica, which in turn begat Border Grill restaurants in downtown Los Angeles and Las Vegas, along with the Border Grill Truck that roams the streets of Los Angeles.

It also became the template for *Too Hot Tamales*, a television show that began when Feniger and Milliken were invited to cook with Julia Child on the PBS series *Cooking with Master Chefs*. Out of that grew 396 episodes of the Food Network shows *Too Hot Tamales* and *Tamales' World Tour*, along with five cookbooks and a line of Border Girls (yet another alias for the Tamales) ready-to-go dishes at Whole Foods Markets.

These days, Feniger has a new restaurant of her own, called **Susan Feniger's Street**, just down the block from her original location, serving (what else?) street food from around the world. "There's a cultural connection found on the street, the small neighborhood place, the lady making the dumplings at the stand in the alley. I connect that way to food and to the people making it. Our restaurants are all about a culture of living. For us, food is alive."

—MERRILL SHINDLER

