



## Susan Feniger

### Celebrity chef

BY NINA ELDER

**G**rowing up in Toledo, Ohio, Susan Feniger never imagined she'd end up as a globe-trotting chef, bringing everything from authentic Mexican dishes to Singaporean street food to L.A. diners. This Midwestern gal—chef/owner of Street in L.A. and co-chef/co-owner of Border Grill in Santa Monica—has cooked with Julia Child, been half of the Food Network duo known as the *Too Hot Tamales* (with friend, chef, and Border Grill business partner Mary Sue Milliken), and battled against fellow culinary kingpins on *Top Chef Masters*. *Westways* caught up with Feniger to find out how she convinces diners to be more adventurous, quiz her on the food trends that excite her, and live vicariously through her delicious world travels.

#### When did you get your first taste of a restaurant kitchen?

My first restaurant job was at Smith's Cafeteria in Toledo when I was in high school. I was kind of a jock, and I found a familiar team atmosphere in the kitchen. When I became a chef, I realized that a big part of my job was being both a coach and a cheerleader. It's the only job I've had where I could work for 12 or 14 hours straight and not look at the clock or be bored.

#### You and Mary Sue opened City Cafe in L.A. in 1981, then turned the space into Border Grill in 1984. Why did you decide to do that?

We were planning to expand City Cafe into City Restaurant and were trying to figure out whether to open up a noodle shop or a taco joint in that space. We traveled around Mexico in a VW bus and spent time cooking in Mexico City with the family of one of our prep cooks. We were blown away by the food.

It was such a sophisticated cuisine. So the taco joint won.

**What stood out from that trip?** I still remember my first fish taco in Mérida. It was a cold salmon-and-lobster salad with a slaw of cabbage, cucumber, and bitter orange. They piled all of that on tiny homemade corn tortillas, drizzled the seafood with olive oil, and topped it with fresh peas.

#### Your restaurant Street focuses on street food. Where did you have your first street food?

The summer after 10th grade, I did a student exchange in Holland. While I was there, I had thick-cut steak fries with mayo and lime on the streets of Amsterdam. I still eat my fries that way.

**Some of the food at Street is pretty exotic. How do you encourage diners to try something new?** I'm finding that most people are willing



to go down that path with us. We want to take people on a bit of a journey, but not too far. For example, one of the most popular menu items at Street is Kaya Toast, but it wasn't a hot seller when we first opened. We learned that we needed to explain the dish differently to customers. If you start talking about *pandan* leaves, that's intimidating. But if you talk about a sandwich made with a coconut-custard filling drizzled with dark soy sauce and topped with an egg, then people are interested.

#### Your most recent book is Susan Feniger's Street Food. Why should home cooks try to make street food at home?

Most street food is based on family recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation, so it makes sense to make this food at home. I also love to try and get people to experiment a little. If you don't have something,

just improvise. I was giving a cooking demo once and was making my spiced millet puffs. We didn't have any puffed millet, so I used Rice Krispies instead. The recipe is kind of like a savory Rice Krispies treat, so it worked out great.

#### You love ethnic food. What are your favorite ethnic neighborhoods?

There are so many options here. I love Little India in Artesia, L.A.'s Koreatown, and Little Saigon in Orange County. I think some people get intimidated in ethnic neighborhoods, but you just have to walk the streets. Give that taco truck a try. And as you walk, pay attention. If you see a line of locals at a restaurant, go there. **W**

*Sample Susan Feniger's food at Border Grill ([bordergrill.com](http://bordergrill.com)) at 1445 4th Street in Santa Monica, or Street ([eatatstreet.com](http://eatatstreet.com)) at 742 N. Highland Avenue in L.A.*