

# SUSAN FENIGER



Photo: Rick Rose

**CHEF, AUTHOR,  
ENTREPRENEUR**

by **Jimmy Im**

**C**elebrated chef, author, and entrepreneur, Susan Feniger has become legendary in Los Angeles for her award-winning restaurants CITY, Mud Hen Tavern, Blue Window, and Border Grill, her most well-known restaurant that she has operated for 35 years with business partner Mary Sue Milliken in four locations: Downtown LA, LAX International Airport, and two in Las Vegas. While she's proven to serve up innovative and unforgettable Mexican fare, her career wasn't planned this way considering her background in French cuisine.

Classically trained at the Culinary Institute of America, Feniger landed a job at Chicago's famed Le Perroquet in 1977 as one of the first females in the all-male kitchen. "I worked really hard, and women in French restaurants back in the 1970s had to be strong," she says. "There were definitely walls up that were hard to climb over, but there were so many people 'out' in our industry that when you were in it, you didn't feel pressure because of that."

In 1978, Susan packed her bags for Los Angeles. At the time, there were four fabulous French restaurants she wanted to work at: Ma Maison, La Toque, L'Orangerie, and L'Ermitage. The stars aligned for Ma Maison, an infamous, celebrity-packed restaurant helmed by a young Wolfgang Puck. "Ma Maison was really the only hip place at the time. There was no published phone number. It was old-school, and Wolfgang was just becoming well known in the industry. It was so star-studded; all the tickets were like Paul Newman, Orson Wells, Jane Fonda...the valet guys used to come in and tell me whose car they were parking, it was that star studded."



Truly filled with a passion for French cooking, Susan took a short stint in the French Riviera at then three-starred L'Oasis before moving back to Los Angeles to work again at Ma Maison. While French cuisine was her forte, the universe had other plans for her. Still working at Ma Maison, a friend was running a small coffee shop where Susan helped design a menu.

"City Cafe was a tiny coffee shop, and I went in every day to help them put a special on the menu. This was in 1981. They were doing great espressos but they were buying food from the outside, like sardine sandwiches, so I put a hot plate in there and did soup of the day. I had two hibachis in the back parking lot and made food for them. I worked both jobs for six months before I

decided I would go there full-time. We got our first gourmet write up for a tiny café. I called Mary Sue and about a year later she came out and worked at City Cafe with me. We eventually put our first stove in. With this success, we thought we should open a bigger restaurant, which we did, now City restaurant, which has Indian, Thai, French, and more. Then we turned the little City Cafe on Melrose into our first Border Grill."

Considering Susan's entire training and experience in French culinary arts, her faithful foodie fan base was surprised when she started serving Mexican. It wasn't necessarily in her life plan, and it was truly an unsystematic decision. In fact, Mary Sue and Susan literally flipped a coin. "Mary Sue and I were deciding what to do with City

Cafe, so we tossed a coin between 'Mexico taco stand' and 'Japanese noodle shop.' Mexico won, so we took a ten-day trip to Mexico, stayed at the home of a kid who worked with us in Mexico City. We wrote the menu and opened Border Grill from our first road trip."

Border Grill was wildly successful and prompted the opening of a larger location in Santa Monica. "We had this tiny little Border Grill that was nine/ten tables with a tiny, little kitchen. Back then, we had done consulting for Angel City Brewery in a location that was going out of business, and it became available. So Mary Sue and I thought, 'Cool, let's do a Border Grill there.'"

In the 1980s in Los Angeles, there was little gourmet Mexican outside of small taque-

rias in East Los Angeles, and Border Grill introduced a new type of Mexican cuisine to discerning diners. “Our first Border Grill on Melrose was 31 years ago, so back then there wasn’t a lot happening in terms of restaurants that were doing Mexican, other than taquerias of course. We were doing food and Mexican beers and margaritas, and there wasn’t an upscale Mexican food scene happening on the westside, so we stood out. We were making homemade tortillas, we were going to Mexico and learning about ingredients we had never seen before. We had spent a lot of time in Oaxaca and the Yucatán, learning about traditional Mexican regional dishes that we had never seen. They weren’t enchiladas. We were serving *gorditas* and *huaraches* and *pescada Veracruzana* and Yucatán pork, things that were very traditional but you didn’t see in LA back then.”

Being a chef for several restaurants was not only a passion but it seemed to be her destiny. In June 2013, Susan and Mary Sue were awarded the California Restaurant Association’s Elizabeth Burns Lifetime Achievement Award, joining the ranks of a handful of other women who have made history in the restaurant industry. In 2014, they were inducted into the Menu Masters Hall of Fame, and they continue to rack up awards for their cooking, which is quite literally in Susan’s blood.

“My mom was an amazing, wonderful cook. Every Sunday, by dinner time, there’d be about 15 people eating. My mom pulled food she made from the freezer: Velveeta cheese dreams, fudge, lady finger ice-box cakes. She rocked and inspired me.” Susan’s mother isn’t her only inspiration. In the 1980s, Susan took a far-flung trip to India, which had a major impact not only on her cooking technique, but her life. “I love the food, the spiritual energy, the colors, the flavors, the appreciation of life, my memories. My time there in the early 80s moved the direction of my career. It taught me about flavors and spices and an earthiness that is a part of my being. When I go to India today, I continue to be blown anew and think it’s other-worldly. It humbles me to be there. It’s grand and it’s simple all in one.”



In her decades-long, flourishing career, Susan has written cookbooks, had a radio show, and starred in her own TV show, way before food shows became a priority with major networks. Along with Mary Sue, they formed *Too Hot Tamales* as a pair of chefs cooking on the Food Network, which first aired in 1995. “Food Network approached us and we ended up filming 450 shows of *Too Hot Tamales* and *Tamales World Tour*. We literally did six shows a day, five days a week of filming, and it was on five or six times a day. Food Network was just starting, and they didn’t have much content back then.”

Susan has made several TV appearances since, and she also competed on Bravo’s *Top Chef Masters*.

Considering her accolades, success, and fame, nothing was ever handed to her, and she held her own in such a competitive industry. “The restaurant business is very up and down, like a roller coaster. It’s all about people, customers, staff, emotions, creativity, experience...but it’s a (people) business for sure. Something like 95 percent of restaurants fail in year one. You have to be creative, a good business person, and be able to han-

dle all the things that get thrown at you, which is a lot.”

While it helped that her father was a businessman, Susan proved that she had a strong work ethic, and her success was never predicted. “I never really thought I’d get this far. I thought at some point I wanted to be a restaurant owner, but [at first] all I wanted to do was learn. I didn’t think I would be writing cookbooks or opening restaurants. I think my career just unfolded with everything I was passionate about. The idea of a cookbook and another book, and a radio show, and teaching classes, and Food Network, just happened. I think many people plan their career specifically. That’s not what Mary Sue and I did. We were just passionate people doing the things we loved.”

While not in the kitchen, Susan, as a member of the Los Angeles LGBT Center for almost a decade, makes sure she gives back to the community as much as she can, especially in Los Angeles. “I’m on the board of the Center, which is the most amazing, inspirational board I have ever been on. It’s educational, it’s fun, and its leader Lori Jean and her team are

absolutely fantastic. The board is a mix of smart, hardworking, funny, loyal, sweet, and amazing people. The work that gets done continues to blow me away. It changes the world for so many. Each and every day the team at the center does the important work that so many rely on but so few do. As a board member, I can contribute to that work, and for that I’m honored.”

Juggling multiple restaurants is not an easy life, but it’s a rewarding one, and all it takes is passion. Susan is always trying to find balance, to continue to grow in the business while spending quality time with her wife of 21 years, and she is forever helping Los Angeles’ flourishing restaurant scene become one of the best food cities in the world.

“I believe Mary Sue and I are very hard working, hands-on, involved, respectful people. We try to communicate openly and listen and lead by example. We love what we are doing, we love cooking and we love working with our employees, teaching and learning from them. We love to grow and learn and our industry is always changing. It’s an incredible field to be in and no question it’s in my heart and in my soul.” ■