



A Real Dish

A chef to the stars cooks like nobody's business.

BY JEFFREY SLONIM

CYNTHIA SESTITO—who has helped launch a slew of Hamptons eateries (One Ocean, Farmhouse) and cooked privately for more than a few boldface names—is the Auntie Mame of East End chefs. Currently filming a television pilot, she is so spirited and amusing in the kitchen, one might neglect to ask her history. Suffice it to say, she has lived.

Her first food memory is of turning a lamb spit in Kifissia, Greece—a kind of Hamptons north of Athens, where her father, an American military diplomat, was stationed. (He spoke fluent German and later snuck their Durham, North Carolina, neighbor, Wernher Von Braun, into the US through Mexico.) Young Sestito learned to cook Southern at their home, Tilly Plantation, where she made pies and cakes with her Southern mom who she says taught her “how to make fudge without a thermometer.”

Later, with mom's kin on ranches in Bandera County, Texas, she learned to pit-barbecue and to catch catfish with her uncles. At Sea Pines, then an exclusive boarding school in Brewster, Massachusetts, she cooked Sunday dinners for the headmaster. “That's when I discovered mussels,” she says. “We'd go out on the rocks and get these fat, amazing mussels. I don't see mussels like that anywhere anymore.”

Thanksgiving with Sestito isn't any ordinary feast. “Always fried oysters, oyster stuffing, oyster pies—at least two oyster dishes,” she says. “The first Thanksgiving I did for Jay-Z and friends, we had no tables and chairs—all of this, mind you, served on the floor: 20 crazy hors d'oeuvres, rib roast, whole bass, organic turkey, goose, pumpkin ravioli, butternut squash soup, two kinds of homemade rolls and breads and chutneys.”

Sestito's menu derives from her peripatetic youth. Beginning at 17, on

her own in Paris, she served up a yearly Southern-inspired Thanksgiving at Joe Allen's. She also created a design firm called Robcynth with gal pal Robin Carter. Touted by Andrea Putman, they were soon designing fabrics for Karl Lagerfeld and Claude Montana in Paris. “I hung out with Karl and Valentino and his boyfriend,” she explains. “We'd go to dinner with Mick Jagger when he was with Bianca. I cooked for Leonard Bernstein parties. And I'd go over to Lenny's place and serve eggs Benedict for brunch.”

Back in New York, Robcynth created yellow cab-inspired designs for Bloomingdale's. The Met has two of their dresses in its permanent collection. In the early '80s Sestito split with her design partner and, a few years later, founded her first restaurant, Webb City, in Sag Harbor, in a bunker that more recently housed J LX Bistro. Next came her eatery One Ocean. “It was all-white inside with white stuffed birds,” she says.

After a crushing business hiccup, Sestito consulted on the launch of numerous Hamptons hot spots, including The Independent and Farmhouse. But in 1999, the huge fan of Jay-Z's “Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)” was asked to assist at his East End summer rental. “I'm making pancakes,” Sestito says she told him the first morning. “I don't think you can make pancakes like I can,” he answered. And Sestito's endearing potty mouth shot back, “Honey, don't even try that. I'm going to kill you with my shit!” “Afterward,” she says, “he hugged me and said, ‘Wow, you really did!’”

“The first Thanksgiving I did for Jay-Z and friends, we had no tables and chairs”

Sestito found herself at the center of a fascinating new world. “I loved Aaliyah,” she says. “We were incredibly close. Her death hit me hard. She loved my candy salad and what they called my cereal pie: peaches and cream, almost like a cobbler, but it was warm and the cream would melt and they'd break up the peaches and the French butter crust into crunchy chunks like cereal. I was at Jay's all the time—Sunday breakfast, dinner, *The Sopranos* parties. And then Beyoncé showed up a couple of times. I found them houses every summer.”

In the meantime, Sestito also brought her luxuriant menu to Star Room for three summers. And, more recently, she cooked privately for Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin. “He loved my French toast,” she says. “And Gwyneth loved my miniburgers. I called them B-Burgers [for Beyoncé].” Last summer, she created a pink event for Sarah Jessica Parker. “Pink sorbet, pink brittle with pink roses,” she explains. “She was absolutely lovely.”

Sestito's tip for a sexy holiday meal? “Overload,” she insists. “Overkill—every dish must appear lush.”



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INDULGENCE **Where Jay-Z**



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The 40/40 drink
Makes 1 drink
1 1/2 oz. vodka
1 oz. milk
Mix vodka, milk and ice in a shaker. Strain and serve in a martini glass that has a chocolate-syrup swirl on the inside.

Fried Snickers bars
Makes 3 servings
1 cup flour
1/2 cup powdered sugar
1 egg
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1 bag, dark chocolate
10 mini Snickers candy bars
Mix together flour, sugar, egg, vanilla extract and salt. Coat Snickers bars in the mixture. Deep fry in oil for about 3 minutes. Drain and then serve with powdered sugar and whipped cream or vanilla ice cream. For an extra kick, drizzle chocolate syrup over the top. Cook time: 5 min. Prep time: 10 min.

From PEOPLE Magazine
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"I have butterflies in my stomach—I'm shaking!" Beyoncé Knowles confessed as she made her way down the red carpet on Dec. 4, in New York City. So was it those rumors of an upcoming wedding to her boyfriend of four years, Jay-Z, that had the star feeling wobbly? If so, Beyoncé wasn't saying. What she would cop to was the emotional connection she feels to her latest big screen project, a film adaptation of the musical *Dreamgirls*, opening nationwide Dec. 25. "I'm so excited to share it with everyone," she said. "I want everyone to love it like I love it."

By the end of the night, it seemed as if Knowles—who plays Deena, the lead singer of a Supremes-type girl group hungry for fame, opposite ex-*American Idol* Jennifer Hudson as the heroic Effie White—just might get her wish. "It's the best musical film since *Chicago*," said *Queen Latifah*. "It was definitely something special." Added Terrence Howard: "What Jennifer and Beyoncé did in that movie was powerful."

The good vibes continued throughout the official afterparty at Gotham Hall, straight on into an after-afterparty cohosted by another one of the film's stars, Jamie Foxx—who entertained revelers by serving as MC, shining a flashlight on those revelers

surprise" for Jay-Z after the premiere, which fell on his 37th birthday. **Lucky guy.** The couple flew on a balloon-filled private jet, with in-flight cuisine prepared by Top Chef's Cynthia Sestito, to St. Barth's, where they are expected to spend several days celebrating.

"Party! We're going to be here all night!"

All except for no-shows Eddie Murphy, who plays the dissolute soul singer Jimmy "Thunder" Early in the film, and Knowles, who told reporters that she "had a surprise" for Jay-Z after the premiere, which fell on his 37th birthday. **Lucky guy.** The couple flew on a balloon-filled private jet, with in-flight cuisine prepared by Top Chef's Cynthia Sestito, to St. Barth's, where they are expected to spend several days celebrating. The rest of the cast was soaring too. Hudson, Murphy and *Dreamgirls* itself are already considered front-runners in this year's Oscar race.

THAT Ciroc Vodka will throw **Diddy** a July Fourth bash tonight at East Hampton hot spot Lily Pond ... THAT **Charlie Walk, Ryan Seacrest, Eugene Remm** and **Mark Birnbaum** will host a Don Julio Fourth of July barbecue at The Estate in East Hampton ... THAT Bravo "Top Chef" finalist **Cynthia Sestito** will be the personal brunch chef at the Grey Goose Manor in East Hampton on Sunday afternoon ... THAT Vegas showman **Jeff Beacher** will re-open Beacher's Madhouse at Harry Morton's Viper Room in LA next month.

hotdish

Hollywood goes to the Hamptons

SUMMER'S HOTTEST PARTY

Russian socialite Anna Anisimova (right) threw a barbecue bash, followed by a private fireworks display, on the grounds of the magnificent Southampton estate she rents for \$350,000 a month.



STAR WAS THE STAR OF THE NIGHT

After Star Jones Reynolds left *The View*, she and her husband, Al, headed for their East Hampton home for a little rest and relaxation. Star wowed the hip crowd at the party with her slim figure as she and Al indulged in the decadent desserts. "I'm normally not so covered up," Star said of her attire.



THE COCKTAILS KEPT FLOWING

Thanks to Cynthia Sestito (left) from TV's *Top Chef*, 75 guests dined on five-star cuisine and enjoyed drinks like Voss water, Stoli Elite and p.i.n.k. vodka.

Grilled veggies (Serves 8)

- ¾ cup balsamic vinegar
- ¾ cup olive oil
- 1 tsp. Herbs de Provence
- 1 lemon, sliced
- 1 lb. sweet potato wedges
- 2 red peppers, seeded and sliced
- 2 lb. portobello mushroom caps

Heat grill. In a bowl, combine first three ingredients. Add lemon and veggies; toss to coat. Season with salt and pepper. Place in grill pan. Grill 8 minutes, turning frequently. Garnish with basil for a perfect side dish.



NEW YORK POST

The Real Deal

INSIDE SCOOP ON TV'S HOTTEST REALITY SHOWS

One less 'Chef'

Bravo reality show loses one contestant

By DEBORAH STARR SEIBEL

She isn't the first contestant to leave a reality show because of a loved one's serious illness. But on Bravo's "Top Chef," it was the first time viewers were able to witness the painful process as New York chef Cynthia Sestito chose personal responsibility over potential fame and fortune.

Sestito, 52, has owned three restaurants, runs her own East Hampton catering business and is the personal chef for Beyonce and Jay Z. She signed up for "Top Chef" last summer because she wanted to test the waters of becoming a television chef. At the time, it appeared that her 86-year-old father, Joseph, a former military colonel, was on the mend after three months in intensive care for intestinal problems.

"He'd been on oxygen, he'd had a tracheotomy and he was off all of that," says Sestito. "He was very happy that I was going to San Francisco to do the show."

But the day last October that Sestito boarded the plane, her father's condition worsened again. This time the diagnosis was bone cancer. Viewers watched Sestito take several devastating phone calls over the first three episodes making it clear that her father's health was failing.

"I wanted to leave sooner than I did," says Sestito, who ultimately stayed in San Francisco for less than a week. "I went to the producers and I said, 'I have to leave. I can't be here.' Because for the first time in my life, I can't

cook. I don't care about it and it's not fair to the other contestants."

Sestito says the producers were nothing but supportive. She made it home in time to give small parties for her father in his hospital room, inviting close friends and cooking his favorites, including lamp chops and chocolate treats. "Even though he was heavily sedated," says Sestito, "it was wonderful."

Joseph Sestito passed away on November 8, two weeks later. Sestito was asked to return to the series, but declined. In her place, rejected contestant Andrea Beaman, a holistic cook based in New York, returned to the show.



Cynthia Sestito took her rolling pin and left the show.

Cynthia Sestito: Cynful in the Hamptons

by Judi Sandall
CulinaryEd Columnist

March 5, 2007

Accolades abound for Chef Cynthia Sestito--'the Hampton's number one chef,' according to the New York Post, and the 'hottest chef to put on a pair of mitts in the kitchen,' according to Hal Rubenstein, fashion editor of InStyle Magazine. Chef Sestito has acted as a consultant for or has opened a number of top-notch restaurants in the Hamptons--Webb City, One Ocean Road, The Independent, The Farmhouse, and The Blue Top Restaurant. She's also helped launch a nightclub, the Club Star Room, awarded three stars in The New York Times. She was even instrumental in getting Jay-Z's 40-40 Club, an all-American NYC sports bar and lounge, up and running.

Chef Sestito has also done some culinary rockin' with the stars, catering large-scale projects like the occasional movie premiere and several high profile clothing line launches. TV-land also calls on her expertise--giving her airtime on *Access Hollywood* and *MTV Europe*. A frequent guest chef on network news shows, she also debuted in season one of Bravo's *Top Chef* reality show.

In the Beginning

Born into a family that loves to cook, Chef Sestito kept her hand in the culinary game during her fashion designer days in Paris by taking culinary classes at Le Cordon Bleu and the Sorbonne. In 1986, she closed her design business to focus on another love--food--and brought her design talent stateside to the Hamptons' culinary world, where she opened a succession of acclaimed restaurants.

As You Like It

As might be expected with her design background, Chef Sestito loves the design element of opening a restaurant--coming up with the concept, designing menus, inventing recipes, training staff--and then she loses interest.

"When you open a new restaurant," she said, "you have to work crazy hard, with killer hours and lots of unexpected headaches, but once it's up and running, I'm ready to move on to the next project." Even though she moves quickly from one project to another, she gives each project her full attention.

By far, the most favorite aspect of her busy chef life is the small private parties that she caters for some of her regular clients. She decides the theme and the menu and everyone, even the chef, gets a chance to relax and have fun.

In Reality

When I asked about her appearance on Bravo TV's *Top Chef* reality show, she told me, "Bravo's production company was extremely professional and a pleasure to work with. I felt the first season was the most 'real' of the *Top Chef* shows because it was the first. Unfortunately, the nature of 'reality TV' is that you don't see the whole picture; the action is edited and contestants often play larger than life caricatures of themselves."

Truth Be Told

According to Chef Sestito, a culinary education is a great asset for an aspiring chef. Before she hires someone, however, she wants to see how they interact with food--how they touch it and behave around it. Her philosophy is that food theory is great--in theory--but a good chef also needs to be able to get in there and just do it.

"The restaurant business is a miserable business with long grueling hours. You really have to love it or have to be seriously crazy--or both," she added. Nevertheless, she's pleased to see more women graduating from culinary school and making names for themselves in what is still primarily a male-dominated business.

According to her bio on the Bravo TV Web site, Chef Sestito "has no inhibitions and a no-nonsense attitude when it comes to her customers, not afraid to tell anyone exactly what she thinks." Definitely her own woman, Chef Sestito is also smart, creative, successful, and colorful. Brava!

About the Author

Judi Sandall is a technical writer and culinary columnist with a BA in English Literature from the State University of New York.