



Nguyen on location at the Holly Hill Inn in Midway, Ky.

RAISING THE STEAKS

MIXING A PASSION FOR COOKING WITH NUANCED RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN THE CULINARY WORLD—PLUS A DASH OF VIETNAMESE HERITAGE—CHEF BRIGITTE NGUYEN '03 GIVES BURGERS A BITE.

BY LAUREL DELP

Never mind the \$6 burger. Try \$50,000, Brigitte Nguyen '03's prize for winning the National Chicken Cooking Contest this May. She served up a chicken burger capped with sriracha-lime mayo and rainbow sesame slaw, an Asian-inspired dish of her own invention that was, apparently, heavenly enough to convince judges at the San Antonio, Texas, event that she knows her way around a kitchen. Not bad for someone who double-majored in accounting and Spanish and spent the first years out of college auditing real estate clients for Deloitte & Touche.





PABLO ALARCIA

Nguyen's \$50,000 prize-winning Chinese Chicken Burgers with Rainbow Sesame Slaw

Nguyen, the American-born child of Vietnamese parents who fled just before the fall of Saigon, thought being a professional accountant was something she was expected to do. Yet throughout her young life, her warmest and most memorable experiences were built around meals, in a kitchen lined with cookbooks picked up at garage sales. Making and sharing food was a way to connect, not to mention the simple truth that “my mom is a phenomenal cook,” says Nguyen. The kind, she says, who challenged herself to recreate favorite dishes from local restaurants and experimented with new finds from the supermarket produce bins.

“We just got so excited by food,” Nguyen recalls. “For my mother, cooking is an expression of who she is.”

Strangely enough, the ingredients for Nguyen's professional calling, as well as her

own self-expression, can be traced to her experience at CMC. Working part-time at the Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum preparing sweets for afternoon teas, she satisfied her artistic urge to create something that ultimately would bring others together. But as far as carving a career in the cooking world, “the light didn't go off,” she says. “It was just a hobby.”

A double major, she balanced accounting and Spanish. Then, in her last year on campus, her latent appetite for all things culinary inspired a paper that would alter her course. When it came time to write her senior thesis, a perplexed Nguyen struggled with how to link her two majors in an honors thesis. The idea felt stale and uninspiring. Instead, she turned to her underfed interest in cooking and made the choice to examine the depiction of female chefs in film and literature—and to interview a few in real life.

“Her work during the first semester ended up being so rich and nuanced that we decided to make it a two-semester thesis,” recalls her adviser, Associate Professor of Literature Audrey Bilger. “Not only did she write beautifully about how women were depicted as chefs, but she ended up interviewing actual female chefs and incorporating their experiences into her analysis of the material.”

Julia. Rachael. Ina. Even in a league of extraordinary female chefs recognizable by their first names, the real muscle in the cooking world belongs to the men, learned Nguyen. “It seems like an industry that would be female-friendly, but typically the men make more money,” she says. “The theory is that a woman can’t lift 50 to 80 pounds, or spend 16 hours on her feet, or withstand the extreme heat in kitchens.”

The Food Network was just starting when Nguyen was writing her thesis. Through her research, she saw disparities emerge. “The women were pigeonholed, doing shortcut cooking,” Nguyen recalls. “The men were the rock stars.”

The process left Nguyen indignant over the male domination of the culinary world. Her findings came at a time when interests in cooking were fanned exponentially by 24/7 culinary coverage and access to celebrated cooks around the world. What may not have been suitable for TV could be read about in books like executive chef Anthony Bourdain’s unabashed memoir, *Kitchen Confidential*, then fresh in bookstores.

If slightly discouraged by the realities of professional cooking, Nguyen’s heart still was in it. She paid attention. She read the books and watched the shows. She rented movies about cooking (*Babette’s Feast* and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*) because they made her happy. “Yet I still chose to ignore that burning passion,” she says.

After graduating from CMC, Nguyen worked for three years as a financial statement auditor. But the job didn’t come without anxiety. “I was carrying a lot of weight for something I didn’t care about,” she says.

Then she met a man whom, she says, is “very much a believer in doing what you love.”

When Nguyen’s boyfriend—now fiancé—moved to Lexington, Ky., he encouraged her to join him there. She did, also finding an affordable culinary school where she could earn a degree in 18 months instead of the usual three years. The time flew. While working on an externship at the Holly Hill Inn in nearby Midway, she jumped on the opportunity to cook for and serve the U.S. team at the Beijing Olympics. (She also will join the team in Vancouver, B.C., in 2010.)

Meeting the athletes, dignitaries, and celebrities who came through the U.S. pavilion

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was the experience of a lifetime. But Nguyen was most struck by the number of Claremont McKenna alumni in Beijing that year.

“Claremont McKenna is such an amazing college,” she says. “I ran into people I knew from there on the other side of the world, people I hadn’t seen in years, people I’d recruited for Deloitte.” There was even a dinner hosted by Tao Li ’02, Trustee Susan Matteson King ’85, and Bick McSwiney ’04, in Beihai Park.

These days the CMCer is a pastry chef at Lexington’s Wine + Market, and still works at Holly Hill Inn, where the chef, Ouita Michel, is a woman. Much has changed in the eight years since she wrote her thesis. Michel and her husband own the restaurant—he’s the sommelier and runs the business, and Michel cooks. Their daughter sometimes plays in the kitchen.

“When I did my thesis,” Nguyen says, “I heard things like, ‘If you cry, your career is



Nguyen’s Vietnamese bistro burger, developed while she was a student in the culinary arts program at Sullivan University, qualified for competition on the Food Network’s Ultimate Recipe Showdown.

over,’ and, ‘You can’t use your femininity to your advantage.’ But I’ve found that I don’t have to change anything about myself. And I have found myself at Holly Hill, where the women outnumber the men.”

Nguyen is thriving, and Michel couldn’t be more pleased. “Brigitte is an absolute delight,” she says. “She has a discerning eye for quality and detail, but she also can flat-out produce when she needs to. It was a gift to have her in my kitchen as a student, and now as a coworker. She has a ready smile, is kind and thoughtful to everyone around her, and loves to eat good food! We love her.”

Nguyen also caters small jobs, and helps various chef friends with accounting. Her

first round handily. In the second round, she finished her Bluegrass bourbon beer cheese melt with time to spare. But when she sliced through the fragile brioche the Manhattan staff substituted for Texas toast, the bottom slice was soggy and the burger crumbled. One by one her competitors scored too low to beat Nguyen’s first-round score of 95, and for a few cliffhanging moments, it was down to Nguyen and competitor Harold Cohen, a legally blind retired plastic surgeon...then Cohen’s South Carolina pimento cheeseburger received a 96.

Buoyed by the near win, Nguyen entered the National Chicken Cooking Contest: the one with the big prize.

Then, in May, Nguyen found herself in

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experience has convinced her that she doesn’t want her own restaurant.

“Owning a restaurant isn’t necessarily about the food: it’s a balance of multiple skill sets, including managing people and operations,” she says. “Ultimately I’d like to be involved in food media—writing and developing recipes, hosting a show.”

Nguyen had the opportunity to test her on-camera skills at the Food Network, the very channel whose depictions of female chefs grabbed her attention as an undergraduate, when she was selected as a finalist for the Ultimate Recipe Showdown’s burger competition. Her Vietnamese bistro burger (a runner-up in Sutter Home’s national Build a Better Burger contest the year prior) was up against an Iberian burger, a black bean quesadilla burger, and a croque monsieur burger, competing for \$25,000 and a spot on the menu at T.G.I. Friday’s.

Nguyen impressed the judges immediately by julienning and pickling vegetables, constructed her burgers on time, and won the

Texas preparing her Chinese Chicken Burger. One of nine finalists, she already had received \$1,000 for winning her region. At the end of a long day of cooking and judging, the weary contestants lined up. Nguyen clapped for another contestant, a travel agent from the state of Washington, who won \$10,000 for her butterflied chicken with caramelized lemons in a sweet-sour sauce.

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“Brigitte’s level of passion and enthusiasm for her senior thesis was so evident in every one of our meetings,” adds Bilger, “that I’m not surprised she has found her way to this vocation. I am extremely proud of her.”



Nguyen traveled to San Antonio, Texas, for the National Chicken Cooking Contest.

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