

Calculating a Recipe for **SUCCESS:**

Long Beach Chef Eighty-Sixes a Career in Accounting

by jennifer kincaid

SHELLY BOJORQUEZ USED to think that crunching numbers was her career destiny. But all of that changed in a 180-degree career move when she traded her cubicle for a kitchen.

The Honolulu-born chef of Long Beach's 555 East American Steakhouse started her career as an accountant after attending Goldenwest College in Huntington Beach and California State University, Fullerton.

Bojorquez, who moved to Orange County in California when she was five years old, grew up as an avid athlete, playing both high school and college sports, including basketball, softball, and volleyball.

It was this love of action that played a huge role in her decision,

when she was 22 years old and working for an aviation company, to move out from behind a desk to behind a kitchen line. "I was antsy. I think that with sports, I wanted to move, keep going," she says. "Working in a kitchen afforded the same teamwork aspect and adrenaline that reminds me of team sports. [Accounting] just wasn't for me."

Bojorquez's grandmother was a major inspiration for her career change. "I grew up with my grandmother, who was from Oaxaca, Mexico," Bojorquez says. "She was a great cook, and those were some of the best times, cooking with her. It was just always [exciting to] me, to cook."

A chef suggested Bojorquez check out culinary school. "She said, 'You like to cook, you're always cooking for friends.' This was before Food Network, so it wasn't a very popular idea with my family because it wasn't a business degree; it wasn't something you could flourish in back then."

Bojorquez decided to give culinary school a shot, attending Los Angeles Technical College.



Shelly Bojorquez outside 555 East restaurant in Long Beach, California.

There, a fellow chef advised her to stay in the area, make contacts, and forget about going to culinary centers like San Francisco or New York. "It was the best piece of advice," Bojorquez says. "I got to know the chefs in L.A., [and] got to work in different kitchens. It's all about who you know. The networking was the biggest part of the education."

Because of her accounting background, though, Bojorquez initially found it difficult to find a job. She began as a prep cook at a small chain barbecue restaurant in Long Beach called Johnny Red's. "When you are in school

they don't teach you will be making very little money to start out with – 25 cents above minimum wage," Bojorquez says. "I had to keep an accounting job to pay the bills, and as I was going along, I kept questioning, 'Did I choose the right path?'"

But it was during this first job that she learned all the stations in a kitchen and how to smoke meats, and from there, she admits, she was hooked.

She eventually moved onto positions within the Hilton, at Ocean Avenue Seafood, and then at i. Cugini in Santa Monica. In 1998, Bojorquez landed her position as



Bojorquez admits that she faced a **number of challenges** with being the only woman in an **all-male kitchen**, as well as being a lesbian in a predominately Hispanic workforce.

photos: courtesy of shelly bojorquez



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chef at 555 East, where she now also carries the responsibilities of training new chefs and implementing new systems and recipes at the company's various other restaurants around the Southern California region. "It keeps me going," she says. "I like the challenge."

Her love of challenges is a good thing, since her road to success hasn't always been a smooth one. Bojorquez admits that she faced a number of challenges, including being the only woman in an all-male kitchen, but she never let it get to her. "There's nothing really that has held me back," she says.

She also finds support in her partner of five years, Melissa Costello, whom Bojorquez met through banking at Washington Mutual, where Costello is a manager. "She's the first woman who works the kind of hours I do, 10 to 11 hours per day. Not a lot of people

I've been with understand that."

The two live in a house in Long Beach, with their four "children": two Chihuahuas, one Chihuahua/Jack Russell mix, and one Jack Russell. Bojorquez says they give her the support she needs to do her job as best as she can, and inspire her cooking.

While Bojorquez's background is in seafood, her position with a steakhouse at 555 East has made her appreciate how to make the single-ingredient dish of steak the best she possibly can.

"People will say that they've eaten all over the United States, and they look forward to coming to our restaurant, which is exciting to me," she says. "L.A. doesn't quite have that grasp on food. We wish we did, but people here don't live for the experience like people in San Francisco or New York. So we try to bring a little bit of what that experience is like to L.A." ❧

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