

Susan Kelliher Ungaro, President of the James Beard Foundation, focuses on furthering the famous chef's legacy – and on what's really important about a meal.

FOOD FOR Thought

SUSIE CUSHNER

BY KARA ROTA

As I pull open the heavy door of the James Beard House on West 12th Street and 7th Avenue in Manhattan's West Village, the first thing that hits me is the smell. Chestnuts roasting, shallots caramelizing, the unmistakable and glorious aroma of the very best meats prepared by those who really know what they're doing.

This is what the James Beard House smells like over 225 days of the year, as chefs from all over the country and the world come to "perform" at fundraiser dinners in the Beard house. And that's not even the main reason why Susan Kelliher Ungaro, appointed President of the James Beard Foundation in 2006, took the job.

"I loved what James Beard stood for," Ms. Ungaro muses as we sit in her cozy office at the top of a creaky yet grand winding staircase, on the third floor of the 1844-built brownstone. Susan Ungaro came to the James Beard Foundation after 12 years as editor-in-chief of *Family Circle* magazine, where she celebrated her 25th anniversary in 2001. Since joining

the Foundation, Ungaro has pioneered a multitude of initiatives to further the Foundation's mission of celebrating, nurturing and preserving America's diverse culinary heritage, and helping to lead the complex future of the nation's relationship with food.

"The James Beard Foundation is going to be celebrating our 25th anniversary in 2012," Ms. Ungaro says with true enthusiasm. "It's a very exciting time for us. Anniversaries are important hallmarks of having not only survived, but succeeded –making a difference and making a mark in what you want your foundation to represent." A new book called *The Best of the Best* celebrates 25 years of America's outstanding chefs, and this May's James Beard Awards will continue to celebrate James Beard's legacy.

Ungaro's ability to communicate the importance of the Beard legacy and the goals of the Foundation has certainly served her well in recent years. She has accomplished such achievements as moving the James Beard Awards ("the Oscars of the food industry") to Lincoln Center's

Avery Fisher Hall, and initiating the James Beard Foundation's Annual Food Conference, held last year in Washington, DC and this year at the Hearst Towers in New York. "We gather thought leaders from all different walks of work in the culinary world, from academia and government to chefs and restaurateurs to leaders of nonprofit organizations fighting hunger. We gather to talk about what's really important in the food world today. We've just launched this year our Leadership Awards, which honor work outside of the fields that are traditionally included in the James Beard Awards. [They recognize] people who are working to fight hunger, improve school lunches, improve public policy; people who are doing work in big corporations to feed America healthier and more sustainable food."

The increase in public awareness on such "food politics" issues in recent years might be new to some, but they are an enduring part of Beard's philosophy. "James Beard was talking about cooking in season long before it was trendy,"

explains Ungaro. When Joe Baum opened the famous Four Seasons restaurant in New York in 1959, Beard was brought in as a consultant and helped to create the initial concept of seasonality in changing menus. “So many more restaurants now, not only do they tell you today’s menu but they tell you what artisanal cheese maker, where the lambs were slaughtered, where the fish came from,” says Ungaro. “It’s a sign of caring – from the restaurant’s point of view – about educating their diners

affair and an opportunity for greatness still resonates with many today.

“He’s considered the godfather of American cuisine,” says Ungaro. “What I loved was that he came to New York wanting to be an opera singer or on Broadway. And what do most aspiring singers and actors have to do? Wait tables. Well, he found a different way.”

Beard grew up in a boardinghouse his mother ran in Portland, Oregon, and when he came to New York, he opened a suc-

reflects. “If anything, I think [shows on channels such as The Food Network and Bravo] have brought back the idea that being able to cook a meal is something to aspire to. In the 1960s and 70s, it wasn’t a status thing. Feminists certainly wouldn’t have wanted to say, ‘I can cater a great party; I can cook a great meal.’”

The role of women in the cooking and food industry has been complex, fraught with a history of the unpaid labor of homemakers and the skills of truly talented home cooks taken for granted, followed by decades of women going without recognition in a chef-glorification culture dominated by men. Ungaro has overseen a time in which that is slowly chang-



Clockwise from below: Susan Ungaro at a celebrity chef auction in 2011. The exterior of the James Beard house on West 12th street in Manhattan.

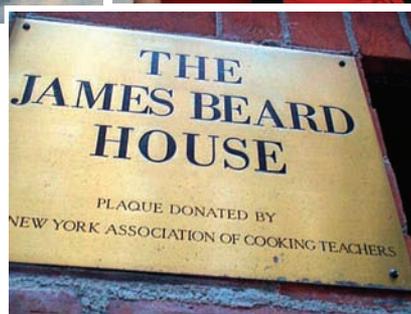


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about where their food comes from... I think what [the Foundation has] done in this country, and the media has helped this tremendously, is that we’ve raised people’s consciousness about words like “food miles,” “cooking in season,” “artisanal.” All those words are really changing how people think about shopping at the supermarket and what they put in their bodies. You are what you eat, so know what you eat. That mantra is something that we really endorse.

“There is no doubt that the typical American diet needs work. We know that from the work of [Michelle Obama] and her campaign, Let’s Move, fighting the diabetes epidemic in America. And people could say, well, the James Beard Foundation is all about fine dining and thinking about food all the time, but we really care a lot about the fact that we want food to not only taste good but to be good and healthful for you.”

Beard’s own beginnings were those of aspiration and determination, and his approach to cooking as both an everyday



successful catering company for hors d’oeuvres and canapés that inspired his first cookbook. Beard made a name for himself as an author (eventually penning 24 cookbooks), a teacher, and a pioneer in food television. Ungaro remembers “episodes of Beard on the Today Show with a young Bryant Gumbel and a young Tom Brokaw, teaching them how to make homemade pasta and roast chicken. Back then, food was a new kind of content for programming.” In fact, those early episodes were filmed in James Beard’s kitchen, long before in-studio kitchens on talk shows became common.

“Thank God for television,” Ungaro

ing, not least with the Foundation’s 2009 focus on Women in Food as a theme.

“I really was very proud of the fact that we decided to celebrate Women in Food,” says Ungaro. “As with the rest of business in America, women are still a minority. I was just at the Fortune Most Powerful Women Summit, and there are 12 women in the Fortune 500. When you think about that, about being a chef and restaurateur and getting the kind of recognition that you have to have to become a success – it’s just that much harder for women. I was really proud of the fact that a lot of women who are doing great things and achieving great success are James Beard Award winners; more and more women are getting nominated... I’m confident that women are making headway in the business of the restaurant world; I think we certainly have had a lot of power when it comes to the media world.”

As a multiple award winner, a participant in President Clinton’s Women’s Roundtables, and someone who was honored by President Reagan’s Office for Consumer Affairs for her “outstanding

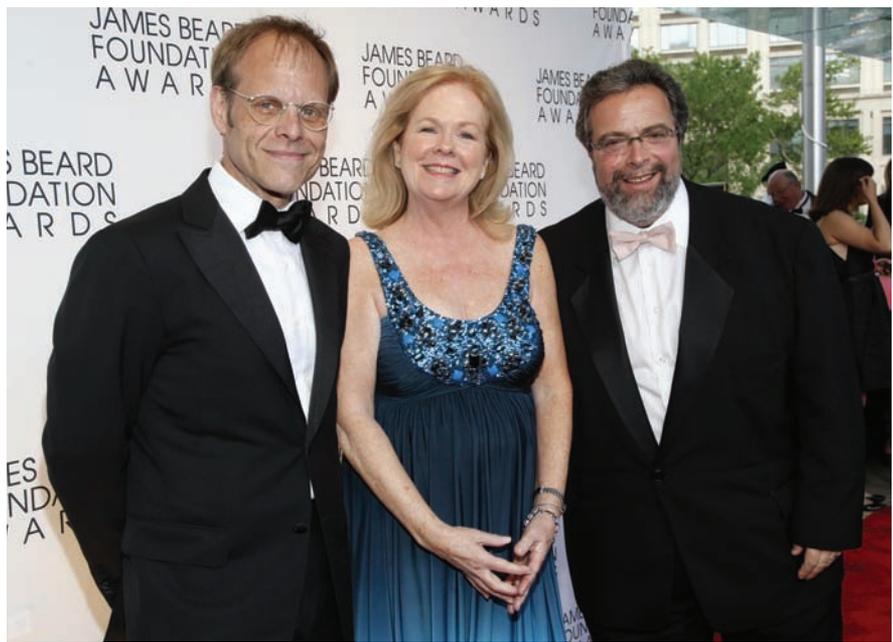
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contribution to increasing consumer awareness in America,” Ungaro is a strong example of that power.

She is the oldest of six children, whose parents arrived in America from County Kerry, Ireland. Her mother was a homemaker whose approach to dinnertime was based around the challenge of consistently feeding a family of eight. “People love to make fun of the Irish and their cooking skills,” says Ungaro with a good-natured wink. “I did grow up on a diet of spuds and meat well-done and lots of veggies. And the desserts – all kinds of cakes and scones and fruitcake; my mother would make an Irish fruitcake that I will defend strongly, and have. When I was the editor of *Family Circle*, with apologies to my dear mother, I learned more about how to cook in our test kitchens than I did from my wonderful mother...My tastes for cuisines expanded as I expanded my universe. I grew up in a house where we didn’t go out to dinner – it was pretty rare. I think the first time I had Chinese food was when I was in college.”

But something more important than the contents of the plates stuck with Ungaro from those family dinners. “I did have a wonderful upbringing in terms of valuing a sense of community around the table. I think what’s really special about food and dining is, yes, the deliciousness of the food, but what really makes a dinner special is the conversation and sense of communal feeling around the table, and that’s what we try to replicate 225 days a year at the James Beard house...The art of conversation, whether it’s about food or politics or movies or the arts. The Irish are known for being great about the gift of the gab, or whatever you want to call it, and I certainly learned that from my parents.”

After my conversation with Ms. Ungaro, I’m lucky enough to get an insider’s tour of the James Beard house, from the back patio where guests at the culinary arts organization’s regular fundraiser dinners sip cocktails, to the stove where, tonight, Aimee Olexy and Sean McPaul of Talula’s Garden in Philadelphia are preparing a meal that includes fig-brushed beef rib brochettes; hand-raised hens with savoy cabbage, royal trumpets, and chicken liver compound butter; and sweet November scallops with butternut broth, black walnuts, and Asian pear cider reduction.



Alton Brown, Susan Ungaro and Drew Nieporent at Lincoln Center for the James Beard Awards, May 2010

If a man’s home is his castle, then his kitchen is his throne, and James Beard’s kitchen is at once breathtaking and homey. It’s immediately clear why this historic kitchen, and the brownstone that houses it, were worth saving. “When Julia Child came back from Paris to New York, her editor Judith Jones asked her, ‘Who’s the first person you want to meet?’” Ungaro tells me. “Julia Child’s response was James Beard. They became fast friends, really good friends. When he passed away 26 years ago, he was a single, gay man with no siblings, no heirs. He left his estate, his house and everything in it, and his publishing rights, to his alma mater as well as his editor. Everything was being sold off, and Julia Child, along with [Institute of Culinary Education founder] Peter Kump said, ‘they can’t sell Jim’s house. Let’s take the house back, let’s buy it from them and make it a center for American cuisine.’ And that’s what they did.”

Experiencing food culture in a place as historically saturated as the Beard house, I wonder if this generation is missing out on something, and if so, where they can find it. These days, young people are less likely to find a classic recipe or learn a new technique from a cookbook than on a food television show, on a recipe website or in a cooking app downloaded to their iPhone. But Ungaro is largely optimistic about the power of technology to make great food accessible to a wider demographic.

“I think new media has democratized America’s interest in food. It’s something that has become a lifestyle to aspire to. And it’s not just eating at great fancy restaurants or unique cuisine restaurants, I think it’s that people feel that being knowledgeable about food is almost as important as being knowledgeable about politics, or other aspects of life. I just hope that we don’t lose the aesthetic value and comfort of sitting on a couch having tea and flipping through the pages of a cookbook to be inspired about cooking. I think those days – I’ll be long gone – are going to be over at a certain point. I’m the mother of three, my youngest is seventeen, and my kids are reading the *New York Times* online. They’re getting recipes online. I think [of] baby boomers, women like me who grew up with great magazines like *Family Circle*, who would keep loose-leaf binders with their favorite recipes. What are they doing now? They’re filing them on their computer. In some ways, it’s making access to a greater breadth of food knowledge available to everybody, and I applaud that. I just hope that we don’t lose...”

Here she pauses, uncharacteristically lost for words, if only for a moment, as she tries to articulate something that permeates the Foundation’s mission and Beard’s legacy; the house itself and every dinner eaten there; the conversation around the tables and the satisfied sighs after meals that are artful, thoughtful and truly fulfilling. “Food is so emotional and tangible, and you’ve got to use your fingers at some point, chances are. I think there will always be some aspect that you can hold in your hands.”