

Hannah Santos

Hannah Santos believes food is the glue that binds a family. It's not surprising then that her Uptown restaurant has become "home" for a dedicated following who love the exotic dishes and lively ambience of Hannah's Bella Bistro.



When Santos re-opened her restaurant in the historic Waterloo Hotel in 2005, her loyal customers came back with "tears in their eyes." She was just 22-years-old when she opened the first restaurant and her creative and entrepreneurial vision just keeps expanding.

"You only live once and I refuse to live with regret," says Santos. "I don't like the idea of anybody putting a box around my capabilities. I believe if you can dream it, you can do it."

In addition to her bistro, she has opened Hannah's Tapas Bar & Lounge in the lower level of the same historic building. Santos is also working on producing a reality television cooking show that highlights her fundamental belief that food brings people together.

Santos moved with her family to Waterloo after spending her youngest years in Toronto. Her passion as a chef may be traced to her maternal grandmother who spent hours in the kitchen with her young granddaughter, creating delicious meals. Santos has strong "emotional memories" of going to her grandmother's home every weekend for Saturday and Sunday dinners. In particular, Santos recalls her grandmother's luscious desserts, especially a triple-layer birthday cake with chocolate and "lots of rum."

Santos has become well-known for her "fusion" approach to cuisine. She has been called "fearless" as she combines ingredients from different countries into a single dish. Santos, who loves to travel, knows this can be a delicate balance. "In order to pull fusion off you have to have a good background of all the culinary styles."

Judging by reviews Santos' culinary risks have been met with resounding enthusiasm. One reviewer wrote: "If you're looking for a healthy dose of wild abandon fused with a dash of island magic, you'll be as bewitched as I was recently by Hannah's Bella Bistro. . . This talented young chef rebelled from her minimalist continental training (thank heavens!) Her food has an edgy, unabashed style that combines South Asian, Polynesian and Mediterranean influences with a dash of gutsy Louisiana French attitude."

Santos has received many awards including being named in the prestigious "Where to Eat in Canada" publication. She has also cooked for former Prime Ministers Jean Chretien and Paul Martin during their visits to Waterloo.

It is a long way for a young woman who started out working as a line cook at a roadhouse when she was fourteen years old. Hunkering over a deep-fryer was not her idea of a

career, however, and she recalls seeing a chef walk by in white coat one day with a platter filled with fresh, colourful food. Hannah Santos knew that's what she wanted to do.

Fortunately for diners in Waterloo, her gifts in the kitchen are matched by her courageous approach to business. She says, "The creativity that is necessary for preparing great food in a kitchen is the same creativity that is required to run the business end of a restaurant."

Photo courtesy of The Waterloo Chronicle.