

2013 TOP CHEFS — TWIN CITIES —



MIKE RAKUN - MARIN/MILL VALLEY KITCHEN | **JASON SCHELLIN** - THE BUTTERED TIN | **LASHAW CASTELLANO** - BOROUGH
LISA HANSON - MONA RESTAURANT | **STEPHAN HESSE** - UPTOWN CAFETERIA | **JD FRATZKE** - THE STRIP CLUB
TYLER SHIPTON - BOROUGH | **PAUL BERGLUND** - THE BACHELOR FARMER | **JAMIE MALONE** - SEA CHANGE
CHRISTINA NGUYEN & BIRK GRUDEM - HOLA AREPA FOOD TRUCK

FOODSERVICE NEWS

LISA HANSON MONA RESTAURANT

BY NANCY WEINGARTNER

When Lisa Hanson decided in her mid-20s she wanted to be a chef, she applied to the best school research could find, the CIA in New York City. "It was a campus of 2,000 kids with a bag full of knives," she says. "We were all armed, (so) it was low crime."

She already had a bachelor's degree in business from the University of Southern California, so culinary school was "easy and fun" in comparison. "I have to study wine? Twist my arm," she says, with more of a grin than the famous mysterious smile of the Mona Lisa for which her restaurant is named.

In school Hanson was exposed to every major cuisine, plus food costing and wine. She must have paid close attention because her restaurant, Mona in downtown Minneapolis, opened last year to rave reviews. "My first menu got three-and-a-half stars from Rick Nelson (critic for the Star Tribune)," she says, proudly. That was just the beginning of the accolades, but perhaps the most memorable one was for her thick-sliced, deliciously smoked bacon which inspired her bartender to have two slabs tattooed on his arm. A permanent endorsement of her culinary magic.

After graduating from the CIA, Hanson took an externship (externships are paid, as opposed to internships, which may or may not be, she explains) with three-star Aquavit in New York. Her first day on the job, she was taught how to unlearn everything she'd learned. She was tasked with making hollandaise sauce and started the laborious culinary school way. The chef rounded the corner, saw what she was doing, grabbed the bowl from her hands and started whisking it over the heat of the fryer. "I thought, 'cool,'" she says.

Innovation is part of what makes Hanson both a culinary whiz and a savvy businesswoman. Just recently she wanted to add several hot sandwiches to the menu, but knew they would bog down the hot line. Appraising the situation, she decided she could add the grilled cheese sandwich to the cold line, which she mans, if she used a panini press. But she didn't have one, so she decided to use the waffle iron. "I try to be creative with what I have," she says. "I don't like the clutter." And the result is a fun



presentation to a classic. It's hard not to be intrigued with waffled bread (but be sure to add bacon to it, even if it is extra.)

"I like to do things I've never done," she says.

Hanson's love of cooking comes from her mother, who used to whip up huge spreads from scratch for school-day breakfasts. "I was so full when I got on the bus, I used to beg for cereal," she says. To prove to her friends she wasn't exaggerating, she arranged a field trip to her house so they could see the massive breakfasts for themselves.

Before Hanson embarked on the culinary route, she was part of the software craze, then a financial planner. Actually, her careers in corporate America helped prepare her for running a restaurant, because "two years with an expense account exposed me to some great meals." And she learned as every chef does that cooking professionally as opposed to at home is not about the seasoning, but about the coordination.

She's spent time on the West Coast being educated in business and the East Coast learning to cook professionally, but finally landed in the Midwest because she missed her piano, which was being stored at her parents' house. Plus, she wanted



to own a house and grow a garden. The Twin Cities provided, not only proximity to her family, but also a vibrant restaurant scene.

Being the sole owner of your own restaurant might be every cook's dream, but it's not always as glamorous as reality TV makes it out to be. Hanson admits that in addition to her executive chef title, she cooks two stations, does the bookkeeping, orders supplies, handles

staffing, answers phones and runs to the bank to get change. And since the restaurant was created in her fertile mind, it's personal if someone doesn't enjoy their experience at Mona. Yet, after long days, she still goes home and cooks on her "crappy electric stove," using mismatched cookware. "That's how I knew this was the career to stick with," she says. "I was enjoying cooking at home."

