

## TOP WOMEN COOKS FOR 1996

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Because so much can go wrong in the cheese-making process, Chenel rarely takes time off. Once a year she shapes up at the Rancho La Puerta spa in Tecate, Mexico, and last fall she spent ten days in France and Italy, as much to compare and refine her cheese-making skills as to relax. Right now her biggest problem is filling mail orders, as well as those from distributors.

Although not averse to remarrying, Chenel says she would never share her business. "I couldn't risk losing any of it if the marriage failed."

**CINDY PAWLCYN** 40, chef and corporate partner in Real Restaurants, Inc., Sausalito, California

Born in Minneapolis, Cindy Pawlcyn has come a long way in her 40 years. While in high school, she worked in a cookware shop with a cooking school and decided that the chef's life was for her. And how! Now she is a corporate partner in Real Restaurants, Inc., with headquarters in Sausalito, California, and she oversees the kitchens of nine (at last count) restaurants in the Napa Valley, San Francisco, and elsewhere.

Although each of her chefs is encouraged to create, all must fit the style she established—a lusty, spicy, and herbaceous cookery with lush mashed potatoes, highly seasoned Southwestern and Asian-style vegetables and salads, and much wood-grilling and roasting of meats, such as pork chops, steaks, burgers, rabbit, and fish. Among Pawlcyn's trademarks are rich, brassy homemade ketchup and fried onion rings as gossamer slim and golden as spun glass. There are also great chocolate cakes, some spiked with Jack Daniel's, others with hot chilies.

After earning a degree in hotel and restaurant administration from the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Pawlcyn honed her craft at the famed Parisian cooking schools La Varenne and Le Cordon Bleu, then worked at restaurants in Chicago and Minneapolis. California won her heart when she did stints at restaurants in the Napa Valley and San Francisco, and in 1982, with partners William Upson and William Higgins, she opened Mustards Grill in Yountville County.

That remains her favorite start-up, even though, building on its success, she created triumphs in San Francisco outposts such

as the Fog City Diner, Roti, Bix, the Cafe Museo at the new Museum of Modern Art, the Buckeye Roadhouse in Mill Valley, and Tra Vigne, an Italian trattoria in the Napa Valley. With Beetlenut, a Chinese beer garden(!) in San Francisco, a new Fog City Diner in Dallas, and another soon to open in Las Vegas, Pawlcyn's rounds form a widening circle.

All of which means, of course, there is little time for a personal life, but Pawlcyn has lucked out with a nine-year marriage to Murdo Laird, "a very understanding screenwriter" whose grown children have adopted her. They share a Napa Valley home, where he writes. For dinner, she cooks or takes home food, and they eat on their deck "ninety percent of the time." For when she's not home, she has taught him to prepare three perfect dishes: chilequiles, "a mean tomato and red wine pasta sauce," and really good cheese toast. Failing that, he eats beans and rice.

**JUDY CONTINO** 42, owner, Bittersweet pastry shop, Chicago

A bright-white and tidy shop is the setting for the refined and richly fragrant cakes, pies, cookies, breads, and muffins of Judy Contino. Specializing in delicately trim cakes in the Continental style, she arrives at her shop around 10:00 a.m. and leaves well past midnight, feeling secure only if she has given the staff a good start on the morning's production. Among triumphs are anything made of chocolate, crunchy *biscotti* with hazelnuts, cushiony coconut macaroons, buttery orange shortbread, and sublime espresso cookies.

Born Judy Griego in Albuquerque, New Mexico, she feels she has lived in Chicago "forever." Although she had no special interest in cooking or baking as a child, she loved sweets and at 27 decided to go into restaurant management. To understand basics, she began working in kitchens, where she was soon beguiled by the baking process and abandoned her managerial aspirations. She then baked for a café that was an adjunct to the tony Ambria restaurant, where the chef supervised her pastry work. Contino is otherwise self-taught from books and magazines. Friends who loved her cakes and cookies urged her to open a bakery, and 3½ years ago several invested in Bittersweet.

She and her police-detective husband of 19 years have no children but still lead a pressured life. "Jimmy helps me out at the shop and is very understanding," Contino

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