

says. "I have very little time or energy to cook, so he generally picks up a bite after work and I have something here." Week-ends are especially busy, what with special-order cakes. She also serves light and pretty lunches at café tables, with a soup, a salad, and a quiche available on each of the six days that the shop is open.

Even with Mondays off, she has little time for exercise. "I love sweets and put on weight easily," Contino says, "so I often cut out meat and potatoes and just eat pastry. I guess that's not very healthy, but here I am."

JESSICA B. HARRIS, Ph.D., 47, author of *The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking*, New York City

Although her doctorate from New York University is in performance studies and she teaches English at Queens College, food and social history are the twin subjects of this Brooklyn writer. Jessica B. Harris, Ph.D., travels widely, gathering recipes, lore, and cookware wherever she goes. Her previous books document the influence of African cooking on the cuisines of Brazil (*Tasting Brazil*), the Caribbean (*Sky Juice and Flying Fish*), and the Americas (*Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons*).

Harris's most valuable book, published last year, is *The Welcome Table: African-American Heritage Cooking*, for which she rates our award. It offers not only tempting and well-explained recipes for dishes we regard as Southern soul food but also glimpses of the lives of the people behind them. She draws on her own African-American family experiences and those of others she interviews, adding a generous measure of archival research. Engaging old photographs provide charming, poignant insights into the past.

Among delectable choices in this book are pickled shrimp, a savory pepper-cheese grits soufflé, and sunny sweet potato biscuits. Realizing that at its most traditional this heartwarming, down-home food now is considered fatty and highly salted, Harris includes hints on lightening up, even though these recipes-of-record appear in their authentic forms. It is not too surprising a concern, considering that her mother was an accomplished cook who studied dietetics.

Although Harris does not think her work obviates marriage and a family, she does think her busy schedule as teacher and writer makes a personal life difficult. "Until I was thirty-five, I wanted the American dream," she says, "—white picket fence, sheepdog, husband, two point three children. Then, between thirty-five and forty, I realized that

instead of getting what you want, maybe you get what you need. Right now, my life is pretty interesting and exciting."

SARAH STEGNER, 31, chef, the Dining Room, Ritz-Carlton Four Seasons Regent Hotel, Chicago

No woman ever wore a hat with more assurance or rakish aplomb than Sarah Stegner does in her high, starched white toque. It is the symbol of her leadership as chef of the Dining Room, the formal and pricey restaurant in Chicago's Ritz-Carlton Four Seasons Regent Hotel. At only 31, this savvy and remarkably intact woman oversees dinners seven nights a week plus a lavish Sunday buffet brunch. A native of the Chicago suburb of Evanston, she grew up well fed by a grandmother who was a caterer and by her mother, who stressed natural, straightforward dishes.

In 1984, at 19, Stegner enrolled in a local cooking school, then landed a job cleaning fish in the Ritz kitchen, eventually working her way through all the stages of training. Six years later, when her chef-mentor Fernand Gutierrez became the hotel's food and beverage director, he passed the toque to her. Taking some time out to work in several prestigious restaurants in France, she came to respect high-quality ingredients, French cooking techniques, and free-wheeling American concepts.

Already a winner of several culinary awards, including the James Beard Foundation's Rising Star Chef of the Year (1994), Stegner is still working toward her own style. Her most fully developed dishes are a flaky asparagus and Gruyère strudel, rata-touille ravioli, honey-glazed salmon in smoky tomato sauce, and a lusty venison steak with butternut squash puree.

Aware of the health hazards of her job, this buoyant chef works out, and every Saturday morning Stegner and five friends walk along Lake Michigan and discuss "anything, except food."

Such a high-pressure schedule is shared by her fiancé, also a chef. The day of their engagement was the first they spent together in six months. Is a restaurant of their own in the future? "Maybe," Stegner says, "but right now I appreciate the opportunity to work in this kitchen with the scope and access to great ingredients that it gives me."

NATHALIE DUPREE, 50ish, please, cooking school teacher, Atlanta

As rewarding as it is to master the real art of classic cooking, practicing it is not always possible in our busy workaday lives. Enter



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