

# New Jersey

## MONTHLY

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## Table Stakes: Hudson Table's Allen Bari

Allen Bari knows his way around tables—including the green felt kind.

By [Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco](#) | March 15, 2016 | Appears in the [March 2016](#) issue



Allen Bari put his winnings from high-stake poker into launching and running a cooking school in Hoboken.

Photo by Yvonne Albinowski

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Trained to crunch data in financial tables, 31-year-old Allen Bari of Hoboken is best known for his performance at a different type of table—the felt-covered kind. After losing his job at Morgan Stanley in 2007, he raised his commitment to high-stakes poker from part time to full time. In 2011, he overcame a field of 865 players to win a bracelet at a World Series of Poker event in Las Vegas. He came away with about \$874,000.

That year, Bari's total tournament earnings exceeded \$1 million. He has supported himself with poker ever since. Tuesdays find him at the Parx Casino in Bensalem, Pennsylvania, munching yellowtail sashimi as he



Over the past year, however, Bari has devoted most of his time to yet another table. Hudson Table, a cooking studio he founded in Hoboken in November 2014 with advice from his older brother, Taposh, a vice president at Goldman Sachs.

At the school's spacious, well-equipped teaching facility, clients pony up \$75 to \$115 for a hands-on, themed cooking lesson with one of a rotating cast of chefs. Then they dig in to enjoy what they've made.

Bari's expansion from cash pots to metal ones stems from a 2010 poker trip he and his then girlfriend, now wife, Allison, made to Atlantic City. To feed their mutual passion for food, they took a class at the Viking Cooking School at Harrah's.

"I didn't realize how fun it was, hanging out with 14 other people you don't know and having this commonality around food," he relates. "We were paired up with two people we probably wouldn't have hung out with outside of that class, and we ended up having a blast. It's the ultimate experience of having food bring people together."

Other fires were stoked. "You could see which group made better asparagus or better scallops," he says. "My competitive nature saw the potential in that. I thought, This can be improved on and brought to Hoboken."

Bari saw psychological benefits as well. "In poker," he explains, "there is always someone losing if you are winning, and no one likes to lose, so it can be a miserable environment. If I win a pot, people are yelling at me. I can't complain too much because poker's given me everything I have." But the cooking school, he proudly notes, "actually creates happiness."

At Hudson Table, the chips are of the edible kind, as in the Tacos, Burritos and Whole Enchilada class last October, led by Eton Chan, a chef for Facebook in Manhattan, who also ditched a career in finance for one in food. "Compared to other cooking schools," says Chan, who lives in Spotswood, "this is the most hands-on that I've seen."

At that class, Bari introduced Chan, then faded into the background to help the chef's assistants fetch ice buckets for the wine brought by many of the dozen participants (mostly in their 20s and 30s). Bari pitched in to wash utensils, clear and wipe prep tables and, for the celebratory meal, push the prep tables together and set them with white china and candles.

Bari says his most valuable skill at poker, "the ability to read people," helps ensure that his clients "get the experience they want and have a good night." His facility with numbers also helps. "I know my pricing, my break-even points," he says. "In poker, I'm making on-the-spot decisions every two minutes, and business is very similar to that."

Careers in poker and food were never in the cards for Bari. Born in Jersey City, he grew up speaking Russian as well as English and eating fast food and his mother's bland Russian cooking. His family had emigrated from Belarus, his mother and brother's homeland; his father, an engineer originally from Bangladesh, died shortly after Bari was born.

The family moved to West Orange when Bari was five. His mother, a computer scientist for Western Union, eventually remarried and had another son, Neil. (Now a programmer with a Princeton startup, Neil has been refining hudsonstake.com.) At West Orange High School, Bari played hockey and soccer; his mother attended every game. He loved math and science.

"I did well at school because it came easy to me," he says. Though ranked near the top of his class of 450, he was kept out of the National Honor Society because he was a smart aleck who thought he knew more than most of his teachers.

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"Financial security was a big thing in my family," Bari relates, accounting for his decision to follow his big brother into business. He majored in economics and finance at Rutgers, which gave him a scholarship. Bari excelled academically, joined a frat and played rec sports. He also played lots of poker in the dorms and in what he calls "underground games."

He soon realized he was good enough at poker to make money at it. His winnings enabled him to graduate from campus grease trucks to restaurants like the [Frog & the Peach in New Brunswick](#).

Bari's first job after college, with insurance giant AIG in Berkeley Heights in 2006, proved so easy that his boss let him split for Atlantic City at 11 am on Fridays. "I was making more playing on weekends than I was at my job," he says.

He left for a better-paying job at Morgan Stanley in Manhattan, but hating the "painful commute" from West Orange, he moved to Hoboken, full of food shops and restaurants. "Even back then," he says, "I was thinking of new businesses."

After being laid off from Morgan Stanley in 2007 and going all in with poker, he scored his first big win, \$96,000, at the Venetian in Las Vegas in January 2008. Travels to European poker tournaments whetted his appetite for fine food.

But in 2010, "poker wasn't doing that well for me," Bari confesses. "Between 2008 and 2010, I probably lost over \$200,000 between backing myself in tournaments and backing other

people and a few bad investments.” He’d also started dating Allison DeVincentis, the younger sister of a high school friend from a warm Italian-American family.

“I had the idea [for the school] before I started dating her,” Bari says. “She encouraged me to do it. Now she helps more with the business; initially it was more my brother Taposh. She’s Italian; food is a big part of her family life.”

In May 2011, Bari won more than \$200,000 at the Seminole Hard Rock Café in Hollywood, Florida, leading to his entry in the World Series of Poker event in Las Vegas that June. “Until I won that tournament, I didn’t have enough money to invest,” he says. In November 2012, he tweeted his plan to attend culinary school and open a restaurant.

The pace was to be intense: culinary classes by day, restaurant-management school five nights a week, poker on weekends. But another AC visit changed all that. Food poisoning landed him in the hospital. “I got sick just at the right time,” he says. “If I’d gotten sick two or three days later, I would have lost \$10,000 in tuition instead of a \$300 deposit.”

Deciding he didn’t need a culinary degree, he stayed with the restaurant management program, graduating in 2013. Since running a restaurant would have taken more time than he was prepared to give, he created a modern, comfortable cooking studio in a residential building overlooking Hoboken’s 14th Street Viaduct. Allison handles social media and sometimes introduces the chef.

Bari estimates that 30 to 40 percent of his classes sell out, including a recent seasonal cooking lesson with Justin Antiorio of [Anthony David’s](#) and [Bin 14](#) in Hoboken, and a Parisian Bistro couples class. A farmer’s market theme, though, was a bust.

“I can’t live off my poker winnings for the rest of my life,” Bari admits. The school “is a profitable business and, at the same time, I think I’m doing something positive for the community. I’m providing about 15 part-time jobs. It feels good to provide that. If my business frustrates me, I can step back a little bit and play more poker. It’s a good balance.”

Bari expects to compete this summer at the 2016 World Series of Poker in Vegas. But as for Hudson Table, he says, “This is my future. The more you realize how much crap is going in people’s food, the more you realize the only real way to control what’s going into your stomach is if you create it.”

*Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco lives in Leonia and has fond childhood memories of watching the men and women in her family play nickel-and-dime poker after festive meals. Her website is [macfusco.com](#)*

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