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Looking Ahead: The James Beard Awards

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On Monday, May 3, the James Beard Foundation will celebrate the 20th anniversary of its annual awards honoring the nation's finest chefs, restaurateurs, and restaurants. Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco interviews **Susan Ungaro, the River Vale resident who is president of the Beard Foundation**. New Jersey chefs, Ungaro says, "are just as talented and creative as anyone else in the country."

A New Jersey chef hasn't won the top prize in the Mid-Atlantic region (which includes Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington, DC) since Craig Shelton of the late Ryland Inn took the honor in 2000.

Yet, this year, four local chefs were among the 20 Mid-Atlantic semifinalists: **Andrew Araneo** of Drew's Bayshore Bistro in Keyport, **Andrea Carbine** of À Toute Heure in Cranford, **Maricel Presilla** of Cucharamama in Hoboken, and **Joe Romanowski** of Bay Avenue Trattoria in Highlands.

"It's a really good showing for New Jersey," says Susan Ungaro of River Vale, president of the Foundation.

In addition, **Ninety Acres** at Natirar in Peapack-Gladstone was among the 31 semifinalists for best new restaurant in the nation, **Marie Jackson** of Flaky Tart in Atlantic Highlands is a semifinalist for outstanding pastry chef, and **Greg Moore** of Moore Brothers Wine Co. in Pennsauken and **Gary Vaynerchuk** of Wine Library TV/Wine Library in Springfield are among the semifinalists for outstanding wine and spirits professional. Unfortunately, none of the Jersey contenders made the finals.

Since taking the president's job in April 2006, Ungaro, former editor-in-chief of *Family Circle* magazine, has had a lot on her plate—sprucing up Beard's Greenwich Village townhouse, where chefs are invited to "perform" in the same kitchen where Beard led his cooking classes; instituting an online membership enrollment program; and, most notably, restoring the luster to the Foundation's reputation, which had been tarnished by a financial scandal that culminated with her predecessor pleading guilty to second-degree grand larceny.

To that end, Ungaro hired the nonprofit Scholarship America to handle an average of about \$150,000 given out in culinary scholarships each year, and moved the \$400-a-ticket Awards Gala and Reception from a Manhattan hotel ballroom to Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center. After all, she notes, "The culinary community is incredibly artistic."

The James Beard Foundation's mission is to foster understanding of American cuisine. How do you define American cooking?

Feedback

Through the lens of James Beard, it's recognizing that our country is so vast in its resources that American gastronomy is cooking with in-season and fresh ingredients, and knowing where your food came from. James Beard is considered the godfather of American cuisine. Over 50 years ago he started the movement that, I think, has taken hold of America.

How would you describe your job?

I consider myself the ultimate salesperson for this organization, to be able to communicate what's exciting about us, why we exist, what we can do for our constituents—which are the people in the culinary community, the consumers that we want to become members, and our sponsors—and make sure we run the most incredible events, so that everybody says, "You've got to go to the James Beard Awards. It's a night you'll never forget, especially if you love the people in the food industry."

What were some of the biggest challenges you had in taking the president's job in the wake of a financial scandal?

I looked at those challenges as an opportunity to reestablish the foundation's integrity and to make the foundation a much more talked about place across the country. James Beard represented the ultimate American chef. He was the first one, really, to be on television, teaching us how to roast chicken, make a salad. To me, the most important thing was to bring the Foundation more mass with class. That was one of my mantras when I came. Not enough people know who James Beard is.

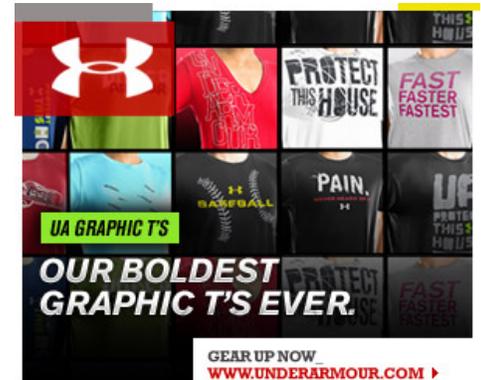
You've said the James Beard House is one of the nation's best-kept secrets. What does it offer the average person?

People think they can't come here for dinner. Anyone can come to the James Beard House and enjoy the dinners. Go online and see what's cooking; you just don't pay the member rate. If you become a member, you just get a greater discount. But anybody can call up and make a reservation, or you can go to Open Table now and make a reservation.

The cost of attending a dinner at the Beard House typically ranges from \$125 to \$165 per person.

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Do you worry that that might be a bit steep for many people?

No, we think it is a bargain for what a diner gets—champagne and cocktails, and a five- to seven-course meal with fine wine pairings, plus no tipping. A similar dining experience anywhere would often cost considerably more.

What's it like?

You walk through the kitchen—literally—for the cocktail hour so you're right there, in the action. Then, at the end of the evening, the chef is introduced and you can ask questions about the meal you had. Also, the dining experience is very communal. There are tables for four and up. It's not just the celebrity name chefs who create a fantastic experience for the diner. Every chef who comes here, for them performing in James Beard's house and being in his kitchen is an honor, and they consider this dinner or luncheon experience that they're doing like performing as an artist in a musical hall.

Do you think it's a good thing that a cult of celebrity has developed around many chefs?

They're the most likeable celebrities you could possibly be working with. Some people might say they've taken down the quality of dining. I think they've lifted it up. [They're] educating Americans about better ways to eat and cook.

How do the New Jersey chefs and restaurateurs you've worked with at the James Beard House compare with those from elsewhere?

They are just as talented and creative as anyone else in the country.

Have your own food tastes changed since you started working at the Beard House?

My palate has been expanded incredibly—absolutely.

In what ways?

When a chef has created a menu for you, you're going to experience flavors and ingredients you've never had before. I never had cockscomb. It was interesting—a little rubbery—but interesting. Certainly, in the past four years I've experienced more of an exposure to molecular gastronomy. One of the trends these days is to honor the animal from nose to tail. You can be sure that before I came here I don't think I ever tasted as much pork cheeks and pork belly. I'll try anything once, within reason, in terms of the culinary world, and that's a good thing.

You've said that you want the Beard House “to be a place people turn to for education on good nutrition practices as well as fine dining.” What strides have you made toward that goal?

We started a series called Beard on Books. It's less formal and a contribution is only requested, like going to a museum. It's twice a month at lunch time. We bring in people writing about any subject of food, and it's an opportunity to have a conversation with the author about food. We do educational conferences, and we've stepped that up. We just did a very exciting recipe contest with the New York Coalition for Healthy School Food. The key thing is that we want to make sure that, yes, we're all about the culinary world, and our awards salute the best in media, cookbook writing, and the restaurant and chef world, but we also can't ignore the fact that this country is not as healthy as it should be in the way it consumes food.

Many chefs have said fine dining is dead. Do you agree?

I don't think it's over; I think it's been challenged because of the economy. There's an evolution; some of the fine dining chefs have migrated to embracing a more casual dining venue to also stamp their name on. Everybody's had to adjust their pricing. But so have car companies.

Has the exposure to all these fine dining experiences made you want to try more adventurous cooking at home?

Oh, God, no. I was the editor of *Family Circle*, and so I know the science of how to make a soufflé. Do I want to make a soufflé? No. I want to make an easy cake, brownies, cookies. I'm a typical American woman, mother of three. I want my dinner ready in 30 minutes or less. On the weekend, that's when my family might enjoy roasting a chicken, a turkey, a rib roast, making a stew. We still have a 15-year-old at home, and you kind of fall into a pattern: You make what everybody's going to want to eat. And I'm very proud that my kids eat their veggies.

Do people often ask you to recommend restaurants?

Absolutely. But I give them the answer that James Beard used to give: 'My favorite restaurants are the ones that know my name.'





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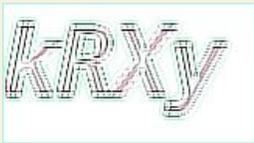
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