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Cooking up a Career

Part III: From Culinary Student to Executive Chef—a Q&A with Jennifer Backman

*Written by Tom Verde
Photography by Scott Erb and Donna Dufault*



Executive Chef Jennifer Backman

Thirty-three-year-old Jennifer Backman began filling lunch orders at an early age.

As a first-grader in the Bellingham, Washington State public school system, she traded her turkey or tuna sandwiches for the coveted PBJs of her classmates, then asked what they might want the next day. She made their orders at home while her mother remained blissfully ignorant of her youngest daughter's wheeling and dealing.

As an adult, Backman continued to cut her own path through the culinary world. She combined a successful education at *Johnson & Wales University's* (JWU) Culinary Arts program in Providence (Class of 2004) with the occasional adventurous side trip, such as a summer in Germany where she learned, of all things, how to perfect Italian pasta.



These days, she's the Executive Chef at *Weekapaug Inn*, a high-end resort overlooking Block Island Sound in Westerly, RI. Backman draws her menu-planning inspiration from the location, with its fresh fish and farm produce, as well as from her own instincts on the right and wrong way to run a kitchen and prepare a meal.

In this third and final interview with current and former culinary students, we asked her about the value of a culinary school education and how it influenced her own career.

Foodies of New England: When did you decide you wanted to be a chef?

Jennifer Backman: When I was about 13 or 14, I sat down with my dad to discuss my future and he asked me what I liked to do, and I said, "Well, I like to cook, but you can't do that for a living." He said, "Sure you can." So that's when I learned that you can go to school, and train, and become a food professional.

FNE: What made you chose Johnson & Wales?

JB: I took culinary classes at *Bellingham Technical College*. One of my instructors there had been an instructor at JWU and told me about the program there. At the time, I was trying to decide



between JWU and the *Culinary Institute of America (CIA)*, which are really the top culinary schools in the country. But, that summer I worked in an Italian restaurant with a chef who trained at CIA, and I preferred the work ethic and everything about the style of the instructor I had who had been at JWU, so that's why I chose the school.

FNE: Was the education there worth it?

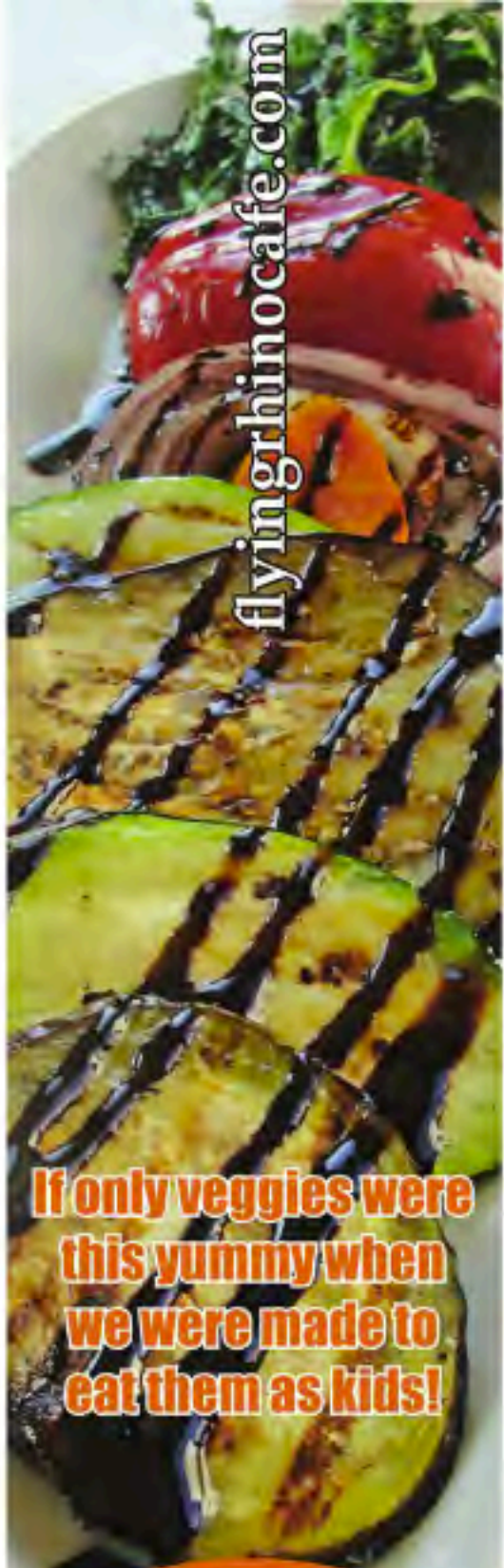
JB: Getting a degree helps. Certainly, there are kitchens that won't hire you without one. The biggest thing that I

got out of culinary school was the networking. If you just go to school, and go to class, and get your grades, I don't think there is any point in doing it. But if you go to school, and you stay late, and your chef has some other project on the side, or someone is doing a catering event, all of a sudden you start to network, and the connections become a part of your network later on down the road.

FNE: So the education doesn't end with the degree.

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JB: Not at all. When I graduated, I didn't plan on just going to one place. I wanted to go to different restaurants and learn different skills under different chefs and see what they had to offer, and then move on to the next. There's no finish line. [A culinary career] is a work in progress; every day I evolve as a chef, and every day my staff evolves as cooks, and we grow and learn together.

FNE: What have you learned here at the Weekapaug Inn, and how have the bounties of southern Rhode Island contributed to that education?

JB: This is a small, high-end, guest-focused, boutique resort, where the food plays a huge part in what we do here. In many cases, we are providing guests with all their meals, so it's an opportunity for us to serve them something different every single day. We get, probably, 80% of our products—seafood, vegetables—from the local area. My staff knows the names of the farmers who deliver to the back door because they're a part of what we do. A chef is not a chef without a farmer.

FNE: And is that something you can learn in culinary school?

JB: I think schools are starting to try to teach that, but it really comes from working with people that believe in it. When the farms deliver, the first thing all my cooks do is stop what they are

doing and run to the order and store it properly. They'll take everything out of the boxes, they'll look at it, they'll make sure there are towels underneath the product, so if water comes off it, it absorbs properly and it saves the life of the vegetable. The delivery drivers will tell us they've never seen any operation do what we do. It's a passion that becomes a way of life.

Thinking about Culinary School? Find out more on Johnson & Wales University by visiting www.jwu.edu and the Culinary Institute of America by visiting www.ciachef.edu.

The Weekapaug Inn is located at 25 Spray Rock Road, Westerly, RI, 02891; Local Tel. 401.637.7600; Toll Free 888.813.7862; For more information visit weekapauginn.com.

