



Des Jardins



The Interview

WITH JANET REILLY

A Culinary Voyage With Traci Des Jardins

When **Traci Des Jardins** opened *Jardinière* in Hayes Valley, the soon-to-be culinary legend—then 32 years old and already knighted as *The Next Big Thing* by foodie institutions from the James Beard Foundation to *Food & Wine*—felt the weight of the positive buzz surrounding her. She delivered on the hype: Her very first restaurant, now celebrating its 21st anniversary, became an instant sensation, taking *Des Jardins* to the next level of her career. But it was her appearances on food-competition series like *Iron Chef America* and *Top Chef Masters* that catapulted her to celebrity chef status—a role that doesn’t come naturally to the somewhat introverted *Des Jardins*.

Born in the Central Valley, daughter of a farmer, *Des Jardins* is living her dream. With six restaurants in San Francisco and a passion for using her fame to help others, *Des Jardins* is not only a star in the kitchen but in her community.

On a sunny February afternoon, I booked a reservation for two at *Jardinière*, where *Des Jardins* opened up about her beginnings as a young woman in male-dominated kitchens, the pros and cons of reality TV stardom, and the state of restaurants in SF.

Bon appétit!

Q You grew up in Firebaugh, California, a small agricultural town. Were food and cooking important parts of your childhood? My dad was farmer. He grew cotton, sugar beets and rice, a small-scale sort of agribusiness. His dad was born in Louisiana, so that’s where the big food culture came from. He was an avid hunter and cook. No problem inviting 45 to 50 people over for lunch or dinner. He just loved food. And then on my mom’s side, I’m Mexican more than anything else. So on that side, I grew up with my grandmother making flour tortillas every day.

When did you realize you had this passion—talent—for cooking? I became a real hobbyist cook in high school because I was so bored. I had subscriptions to *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit* and I would work my way through these really elaborate recipes, driving to Fresno to get the ingredients. I ended up graduating from high school a year early and started at UC Santa Cruz when I was 16. But I was too young. I had a typical teenage meltdown and I dropped out of college. My parents were pretty pissed at me because they didn’t have a college education, so I was the first great hope.

What did you do then? Well, I had two passions—skiing and cooking. My parents said, “We’re not supporting you if you’re not going to college.” I said, “OK, I’ll become a cook.” I found this really serious job in LA working for a chef who had just come over from France and was cutting-edge. So, I didn’t ski for 15 years. I just went full force into the world of cooking and

working 12 to 16 hours a day for 20 years.

When you were starting out and doing your formal training in France, LA and New York, I doubt there were too many women in those kitchens at that time. Did you face some unique challenges as a young woman? It was hard. I think I was so young and so focused on what I wanted that I didn’t let it get in the way. I never thought about what I couldn’t do. I was just focused on what I could do and making it work for me. But there was a lot of noise. For years I defended that and said, “Oh, it was fine for me. There was no discrimination.” But, of course, there was discrimination! It was very challenging to be a young woman with 17- to 23-year-old guys—I was in France in a kitchen with 25 to 30 people and I was literally the only girl. We know what goes on in the minds of young men at that age. They’re thinking about one thing, and it’s tough.

Where did your steeliness and sense of adventure come from? I think it was just a “can-do” attitude. I look back on it now and I think I was just really naïve. I loved cooking. The restaurants we have here now—like the French Laundry—didn’t exist then. There were a few in New York, but not the Michelin-starred restaurants we have now. So, the only place you could

get that experience was in a foreign country. I was determined to make it work.

What was your path to San Francisco? Growing up in the Central Valley, I was always more of a Northern California person. My mom would always bring me here to restaurants and plays and for school shopping. I felt like San Francisco was my big hometown. I knew I wanted to live here, where an interesting food scene was happening, but I also knew if I came here immediately I would never go anywhere else. So I made myself move to LA, and then to France and New York—always with the goal of coming back here. I moved here in 1991, which was part of the master plan. It was coming home for me.

In 1997, you opened *Jardinière*. Was it a success from the get-go? It was. I was already pretty well established by then. I had been the Executive Chef at *Rubicon* and had won James Beard’s “Rising Star Chef of the Year” and *Food & Wine* Magazine’s “Chef of the Year.” I was 28 when I won both of those. I loved working [at *Rubicon*] with **Drew Nieporent**—and, of course, **Francis Ford Coppola**, **Robert De Niro** and **Robin Williams** were investors. I loved that restaurant, but there wasn’t room for me to be a partner there.

Pat Kuleto acquired the option to open a restaurant in this building [where *Jardinière* is now located], and got in touch with me and said, “Would you be interested?” He had already opened *Boulevard* with **Nancy Oakes**, and I was like, “Yeah, let’s start.” But it was a lot of pressure. I had already hit a really high bar so there was a lot of expectation around what I was going to do.

More than 20 years later, *Jardinière* remains a beloved San Francisco institution. To what do you attribute its longevity?

I think it’s the commitment to quality. It’s hard to maintain that over a continuum and to stay interesting and relevant. Our core business is the people going to the theater and we play to that strongly. We make

sure we’re efficient. Also, look what’s happened in Hayes Valley. It was a derelict location when we opened. What’s happened two blocks over is remarkable.

You’ve since opened five other restaurants (*Arguello*, *The Commissary*, *Mijita Cocina Mexicana*, *Public House* and *TRANSIT*). Did you always want to have a restaurant empire? I’m a businessperson, obviously, but I’m a creative person when it comes down to it.

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Continued, page 74