



*Each issue of La Toque profiles a member of our Chefs' Council<sup>SM</sup> and describes how his or her training and experience combine to form a resource rich with creative ideas for our clients.*

## P R O F I L E

# Shelley Handler

Food Writer/Consultant



Finding her art was important to chef Shelley Handler. "Everyone in my family had something, either music, painting, sculpture, or dance. I studied dance for sixteen years, but the rigors of a dance career was hardly my idea of a good life. I began cooking; when I got positive responses to my food I knew I had found my medium."

At the Center for Culinary Development, Shelley is known for her artful out-of-the-box creativity, especially in children's food products. She has created winning ideas for everything from new kinds of pizzas to wildly colored canned fruit and crunchy snacks.

Although trained at the top of the culinary food chain at the **California Culinary Academy** and with apprenticeships in Switzerland and Italy, Shelley relates easily to the mainstream American consumer.

While she has cooked for prestigious Bay Area restaurants such as **Chez Panisse** and **Campton Place**, she also writes regularly for the decidedly mainstream *Family Circle* Magazine and other similar publications.

Of all her endeavors, Shelley says teaching has been her richest learning experience. Teaching children's classes at San Francisco's acclaimed farmers' market over many summers and running a children's cooking camp has taught her how to win kids over to healthier foods.

*"The more kids are made part of their own food chain—of the growing, shopping, cooking and dining process, the more they'll be willing to try new foods."*

## Inspired by Inspiration

Watching people get excited about food is one of her greatest thrills. Shelley loves watching children go from suspicious plate sniffers to enthusiastic cooks who are also young connoisseurs, sniffing apples at the market. "I'm not shining you on here," she says, "Seeing their eyes light up about food and cooking is a big buzz for me."

Her enthusiasm and passion pour out regularly at CCD in the form of amazingly creative food ideas. She has seemingly limitless ideas about how to serve up better health while also improving taste and enjoyment.

## It's all about taste

This never-fail CCD mantra has never been more true than when applied to children. Shelley says that often by simply delivering foods that are closer to fresh, they are naturally tastier, even to children.

### Shelley's Really Cool Fruit Salad for Kids

- 2 cups melon balls
- 2 cups melon cubes (use another kind of melon)
- 1 cup seedless grapes
- 1 cup banana slices, mixed with some lemon or lime juice
- Plus any other fruits you really like, cut any way you want
- 8-10 mint leaves, snipped with scissors into skinny little strips
- 1/4 cup honey and 4 tablespoons fresh lemon or lime juice mixed together

Put all the fruit together in a bowl. Add the mint strips. Add the honey-lemon (or lime) juice and mix the whole salad well. Eat, with or without Yogurt Sauce



It's all about understanding today's consumer. People of all ages are less involved with food preparation these days, and thus tend to go for whatever is easy. It's not because they don't care, Shelley says, but because they are so pressed for time. People who don't know how to cook very well can be completely flummoxed by food in the raw. To make matters worse, she says, food marketing has effectively cut Mom out of the loop, who's often at work while the kids catch up on the latest new cereals and other foods on TV.

## The freezer aisle is hot

That snap 6 p.m. decision about dinner is often made in the freezer aisle, where many of the best recent food innovations are found, according to Shelley.

Convenience and taste aren't the only benefit of frozen foods. Shelley says frozen is often closer to fresh than "fresh" when it comes to nutrient value, since flash frozen vegetables can retain more nutrients than those that sit around for weeks labeled as "fresh" produce.

## Helping the veggies go down

One of Shelley's specialties is working more vegetables into recipes. For kids, that means being creative. One idea is to top

green beans or other vegetables with roasted sweet nuts such as almonds, instead of plain blanched nuts. Others include a gratin-breadcrumb topping, or a drizzle of Ranch or other salad dressing on broccoli. Unusual shapes and unexpected combinations such as cinnamon and carrots can also help win acceptance from the younger crowd.

## Take nutritional credit for consumer-added ingredients

Always ahead of the pack, Shelley believes one of the long lasting trends is "speed scratch" preparation. This hybrid of convenience foods and fresh ingredients presents opportunities for manufacturers to take some easy nutritional credit. For example, she suggests that entrees could follow the lead of breakfast cereals, which display nutritional values with and without milk.

On a skillet dinner package, for example, why not simply recommend that the consumer add a cup or two of fresh or frozen vegetables, and then include the nutrient value of those vegetables on the nutrition label? School lunch kits could do the same, Shelley suggests, by recommending the addition of milk and a piece of fruit.

*"On a skillet dinner package, for example, why not simply recommend adding a cup or two of fresh vegetables, and then include the value of those vegetables on the nutrition label?"*

In either case, everybody wins. The consumer gets clear and easy to follow directions on how to make convenience foods healthier, and the manufacturer gets credit for the nutritional value of something as good as fresh broccoli, and thus receives "gilt" by association.

Shelley further explains how adding fresh vegetables can balance and improve taste and texture. Quickly steamed, they would add a great tasting crunch. She believes that these kinds of "speed scratch" ideas, which make good nutrition easy, tasty and creative, are guaranteed winners with today's convenience oriented consumer.

## Putting kids in the food chain

Shelley feels it's essential to get children more involved with the foods they eat. Her example of a workable, wonderful way is Alice Water's Edible Schoolyard program in Berkeley, CA,



### Shelley Handler's favorite speed scratch

- fresh vegetables on top of cheese pizza or in a frozen stir-fry skillet dinner
- canned beans and strips of herbed chicken to prepared vegetable soups
- fresh fruit into frozen yogurt, ice cream or pudding

where children plant, grow, harvest, clean, cook and eat their own garden foods.

Shelley explained how this kind of program, much like her cooking camp, helps kids understand the process of how foods come to be. It teaches them to appreciate the taste differences of fresh

foods. Also, since food is such a control issue for kids, this way, they can take that control with positive results.

Even the busiest parents find ways to make this happen on some level, by giving children choices. With a basic packaged food like chili or stir-fry, parents can let the kids choose what ingredients to add, and then let them help with the cooking.

The more kids are made part of their own food chain, Shelley says, the better. The more they're involved in the growing, shopping, cooking and dining process, the more they'll be willing to try new foods.

## Good nutrition and great taste— at school?

The opportunity to feed school children is big. Because many schools no longer do their own cooking, the job gets passed to local restaurants or foodservice companies. Parents are demanding quality nutrition and getting it. Shelley loves the fact that elementary school children recently gave two thumbs up to burgers made with prune puree (replacing the fat) and pancakes made with sweet potatoes.

The race is on, Shelley says, for food companies to come up with economical, acceptable nutrition in foods kids actually like to eat. Just fortifying existing snacks can be a simple first step.

Breakthroughs are coming, afterall, with many local school districts looking for healthier alternatives for vending machine snacks.

## More out-of-the-box thinking

Staying open to possibilities is a full time job for everyone involved in the food industry. That's why CCD casts its net wide and deep for great chefs, smart marketing thinkers, and big idea people. Shelley Handler manages to be all of the above.

Having served on the CCD Chefs' Council<sup>SM</sup> for over eight years, she knows how to bring it all together: great taste, good health and real world viability. She is, as her name clearly implies, a "handler" with a capital "H". Thanks Shelley, for everything you do!

### Blue Food and Other Things Kids Love

Reconciling a kid's desires with his parents' needs is no small task. While the following findings have nothing to do with the search for healthful solutions, they are a reality check about what kids want most.

The popularity of blue food is simple psychology: If kids think that their parents think that something is gross, they love it. Thus the appeal of gummy worms, slimy goopy candy and at least the idea of those grossly-flavored jelly beans first introduced in the popular Harry Potter books. Maybe parents should pretend to think that broccoli is gross?

Here are some findings of kids (6 to 12) favorites in food:

- Blue is the favorite color for food, especially among boys. Girls also like red, pink and green.
- Kids are much more interested in dipping foods, mixing flavors and otherwise playing with food than just eating a sandwich.
- Bits and pieces and colored sprinkles are popular, as are foods that change their colors when heated or cooled.
- Strong flavors, such as watermelon and strawberry and sour flavors are growing in popularity.

Tapping into what America eats and translating it into mainstream products is the hallmark of The Center. Using an outside culinary perspective helps our clients to develop delicious, exciting new products. For more information on our unique approach please contact us at 415.693.8900.



## CCD TREND EXPERTISE IN THE NEWS

# Extra Extra

## CCD predicts, "Quesadilla is next grilled cheese"

Kimberly Egan, Restaurant Hospitality, Feb. 2002

"The future adults of this world have palates that are so much more diverse and sophisticated than any other generation," says CCD's Egan.

American Demographics  
March 2002

"This is a brand conscious, tech-savvy consumer group," Egan said. "Some parents may see their tweens eating DimSum while surfing the net."

Prepared Foods  
November 2001

"Food and technology seem to go hand-in-hand for these tweens," says Egan. "Perhaps computer food snacking could be a whole new sub-segment—food items that aren't messy and are computer-friendly."

Restaurant Hospitality  
February 2002

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