

# The Touch of Taste

International Business was Josie's first calling, but she made an abrupt about face when she realized that, though she was comfortable in her high-paying job at MCI, she was thoroughly miserable.

BY RUTH GARDNER-LOEW  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL THAD CARTER

I wasn't surprised when 36 year old Josie Parades told me that her best childhood memories were waking up at home in Brownsville, Texas to aromas of corn tortillas wafting through the rooms, and being allowed to join the women in the family while they cooked. When she talks about those moments, you understand why this petit, perky young lady is head chef at J.Black's. Cooking is her passion, and there's no other job in the world that she'd rather be doing right now.

Brownsville, in South Texas, is half an hour from South Padre Island, and Josie grew up surrounded by fresh fish and seafood. "I've been cooking and cleaning fish and octopus since I was 10," she says. "I enrolled in Le Chef Culinary School to learn how to become a professional, but the teachers didn't know how to peel a

shrimp, or how to get ink out of a squid." Not wanting to waste time, she decided to get on-the-job training, and quit the school to work in the kitchen at a Tex-Mex restaurant. In a pattern that's followed her everywhere since she worked in that first kitchen, Parades was made head cook in less than six months.

This passion for all things culinary is vicarious, passed down from her Mexican mother who, besides being a

great cook, studied medicine and herbs. Summers were spent in Mexico, and all shopping was done at Farmers' Markets. "You'd see the different tribal Indians coming down from the mountains with their produce and herbs, teas, bark, fresh meat, everything," says Parades. Those sights, sounds and aromas, and the magic of watching her mom transform market finds into delicious meals left an indelible mark on her, pushing Parades to live her dream of becoming a real chef.

When Le Chef Culinary School became the Texas Culinary Academy, Parades returned for more training, but says she got her real skills at restaurants like Tequila Texas, Eddie V's, Blue Star, a stint in North Carolina learning to cook Southern Fare, and backpacking all over Mexico getting recipes from women who make and sell food at watering holes and bus stops. Experience has her convinced that this kind of on-the-job training is the best way to

learn what food is really about. "Chefs need to know that their real talent and knowledge come from all the people who teach and show them how to do things right," she says. "The person who taught me doesn't have a title, but she's still cooking and she's still teaching me things. It's my mom."

Thirteen years have passed since Josie left her job at MCI and moved to Austin, and though she left the city once when there was an opportunity to improve her skills, Austin promptly lured her back. She's finally found her "home" downtown at J.Blacks. "It's a big family," she says. "Nearly everyone here worked together years ago at Eddie V's, and now we're together again."

At first glance, J.Black's looks like a typical 6th Street bar, full of college kids drinking beer and having a good time. But take the time to stroll in and look around, and you'll discover a young crowd of professionals on their way home after work. Pick up a menu, and you'll see that the upscale bar food is anything but typical.

Parades calls it "Gastro Pub." It's simple, but her talent and the quality of the ingredients take it out of the ordinary. For example, the fried Mac and Cheese made with a blend of smoked Gouda, Asadero and Sharp Cheddar served with a Pimento Cheese Cream Sauce gives new meaning to macaroni and cheese. The New Zealand Lamb Chops exemplify what can happen when quality and technique meet – tender, tasty lamb chops seasoned with just the right amount of salt and pepper and grilled to perfection...umm. Parades's signature, 'this is the real me dish,' is the Shrimp Ceviche. Its blend of red onions, avocado, Serrano peppers and cilantro in a spicy lime sauce is her idea of a real shrimp cocktail.

If you're an expert on pizzas and think you've seen it all, you're in for a surprise. J.Black's pizzas are an eclectic mix of familiar and not so familiar names, plus the fun "Build Your Own Pizza Pie." It's all about simplicity, craft and a master's touch. Gastro Pub, indeed!

You'd think Parades would be tired after her 12-hour workdays, but she feeds on the movement and the responsibility. From April until the weather gets too cold, when not working at J.Black's, she hangs out near Barton Spring cooking her favorite foods in a brightly painted little trailer, La Fantabulous. Parades calls it her "little piece of Mexico," a Cabo-style taqueria, where she indulges herself by cooking the food her mom taught her to love.

With work days starting before noon and ending after midnight, it's obvious that there's not much time left for a private life. "All of this is fine for now," says Parades. "Being a chef is hard work with long hours, but I have good friends, I love my job, and my life is full and happy." Parades says she's lucky to have the crew at J.Black's, plus her two loveable dogs, Preston and Monchichi for family. "I've had one really great personal relationship, and I know I'll have another one. When I do meet her, she'll definitely have to be in the restaurant business, because people who aren't can't deal with the pace and the demands. I'll meet that special person again...when the time is right." ■



