



And She Can Cook Too!

Chef Monti Carlo

BY BROOKE ALLEN

When Monti Carlo auditioned for MasterChef in 2011, she was “in a really bad place” in her life. “I’d run out of money, and my son and I were facing homelessness,” she said. “I was actually researching homeless shelters for him and I here in L.A.”

On the verge of being homeless, Carlo’s quirky personality landed her a role on the popular TV show MasterChef. As a home cook who had only made meals for her family, she admitted to being nervous. “I was so intimidated. I didn’t consider myself a master chef,” Carlo says.

Once she worked up the courage to audition for the show, she realized she only had the proper ingredients to cook one thing — apple pie.

“I had never seen MasterChef, but there was an audition the very next day just a mile away from my apartment for the show. I didn’t have much in the way of food at the house at all because I was really, really broke, but I did have some honeycrisp apples that my son and I had splurged on earlier that day. I had to use the cream I was using for my coffee to make caramel. Yes, I had to drink my coffee black.”

Her makeshift apple pie recipe would completely alter her life. “Apple pie is my favorite thing in the world,” Carlo says. “It’s the recipe that changed my life, and it’s my favorite recipe to make for my kiddo and for myself and for my loved ones, and it always reminds me of where I started. I love it the most — I really do.”

Once Carlo made it to the audition with her mini apple pies, she doubted her cooking skills were good enough. “When I got there with my apple pies, I didn’t have enough to make a big pie and they were like little tiny hand pies. And I brought them in my son’s diaper box because I’m all class. And yet, when I got there, everybody had all...these fancy dishes and stuff I’d never even heard of. They had china plates, and I don’t even have anything to serve the pies on.”

Although Chef Carlo felt out of her league, her comedic nature sealed her a spot on the show. “Out of all the people that I auditioned with that day, I think I was the only one that got a call back... When I auditioned, it was pretty obvious I didn’t know a lot of the culinary terminology or technique, but I kept making the producers laugh, and yeah, I think that’s why they called me back and they gave me the opportunity.”

Carlo was a top five finalist on MasterChef that season. With her success, came more entertainment opportunities, such as being featured on multiple cooking shows like “Help My Yelp” and “Cutthroat Kitchen,” but being more accessible also meant being easily criticized.

“I did 15 years of morning radio as one of the first female lead hosts in morning radio in the country, and I did comedy as well. I’ve always been someone that had that in the public eye type situation, so...with radio DJs, many people have complete access to you. So, you’re getting texts and phone calls and e-mails the whole time that you’re on the air. A lot of times it’s not nice — it’s not nice. So, you develop a really thick skin.”

Even within her comedic career, she faced backlash. “Same with comedy, I think if you really want to see if you can make it in entertainment, then stand up on a stage with a microphone in a room with 300 drunk people and try to make them laugh,” Carlo says. “So, I think I really got my chops there. By the time that I left MasterChef, I ended up doing morning radio again and I ended up hosting a show on FYI [Cable Channel], and any of the kind of gross things that people said — it didn’t really bother me. I mean, people try to get in your head, but that that’s going to happen every step of the way in your life, right?”

When dealing with on-air insults, she always bounced back with kindness. “You are the person that gives them that that power and I don’t give people that kind of power. Usually when someone says something horrible to you, it’s really a reflection of where they’re at...I think it’s really more about realizing that people that are lashing out like that with so much emotion at somebody they’ve never met are really kind of hurting themselves and you just have to be kind. For me, it’s all about just being kind. I think the world could use a lot of that right now.”



She wants people to realize their inner-strength by having the confidence to speak out. “You have to stand up for yourself, whether you’re a man or woman, and I think that’s what I’ve been loving about the women’s movement right now is that women collectively are finally saying it’s ok to stand up for ourselves...no matter how hard it is.”

While Carlo has many passions, her charity work with helping children is something she’s exceptionally proud of. Carlo volunteers with Common Threads, a non-profit that teaches “underserved neighborhoods and families and children how to cook and how to shop for food, and how to really overcome a food desert, and overcome the lack of nutritional education that happens in the neighborhood.”

Carlo also works with Careers in the Culinary Arts Program that “teaches kids in high school culinary skills, which is amazing, and they also fund their college they don’t just teach them what to do in a kitchen, they also get them internships.” She also supports youth through the Save the Children organization in Puerto Rico, where she was born and left when she was 6.

“I’m Puerto Rican and it really hurts me very much to talk about it,” she explained. “Six out of 10 kids in Puerto Rico are living beneath the poverty line. I grew up really poor. I missed meals and I know what that feels like and it just shouldn’t happen. We live in a world where that just shouldn’t happen anymore. I volunteer because it helps me make sense of the world. It’s actually selfish — it makes me feel better. It makes me feel like something good is happening.”

As a Puerto Rican chef, she is excited about bringing her native flavors to mainland U.S. while bringing attention to her island in general. “We really need that attention, and we really need people to visit,” Carlo says. “Remember that we’re American, too... Puerto Rico’s open for business. We have an awesome mission there and have incredible food that will blow your mind. We’re more than a hurricane. We’re more than a national debt. We have an incredible cuisine and incredible history and culture. I would love for people to discover that.”



(left) Monti works with kids through Common Threads

(right) Posing in a red dress designed by Stella Nolasco, Puerto Rico's most celebrated designer





This recipe below is for apple pie that got me into MasterChef's Top 100 and got me the opportunity to cook for Gordon Ramsay. This recipe makes one 9-inch double crust apple pie and takes about two hours. It is a labor of love BUT IT IS WORTH IT!

TOOLS

- 9-inch deep pie pan
- Rolling Pin
- Apple Corer
- Chef's Knife
- Food Processor
- Whisk
- Wooden Spoon
- Deep sauté pan
- Pastry Brush

INGREDIENTS

Pie Crust

- 284 grams pastry flour (plus some extra for dusting your

work surface)

- 1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1/4 teaspoon baking powder
- 170 grams (1 1/2 sticks) unsalted butter, diced into 1/2 inch cubes and frozen solid
- 128 grams of cold cream cheese (1.5 packages)
- 2 tablespoons ice water
- 1/2 tablespoon cider vinegar

Filling

- 1/2 cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon salt
- 1 pinch nutmeg
- Juice from one lemon
- 8 cups thinly sliced baking apples (about 1/2 inch thick) I use 2 gala, 3 large granny smith, and 3 large honey crisp

Caramel Sauce

- 1/4 cup butter
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1/3 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/2 teaspoon high-quality vanilla extract or vanilla paste. (I prefer vanilla paste)
- 1/2 cup chopped pecans

DIRECTIONS

Step 1

Chop cream cheese into large chunks and freeze for 30 minutes. Dice butter and freeze for 30 minutes. Combine flour, salt and baking powder in a gallon sized ziplock bag and freeze for 30 minutes.

Step 2

Add the flour mixture to a food processor, reserving ziplock bag. Add cream cheese to the processor. Pulse for about 20 seconds until the mixture is mealy, like cornmeal. DO NOT BLEND. Add the frozen butter and pulse five or six times until butter is pea-sized. Add cream and vinegar. Pulse again. The mixture should be crumbly. Spoon it into the ziplock bag, seal and knead until most of the mixture holds together in one piece. Cut open the bag and empty the dough onto a countertop dusted with flour. Divide in two. Shape and flatten into two 4-inch disks. Wrap and refrigerate for 45 minutes.

Step 3

Preheat your oven to 375 degrees.

Peel and core the apples, and then slice them thinly, no more than 1/2 inch thick. Put the sliced apples in a large bowl and toss them with the lemon juice. This gives them a nice flavor but most importantly stops the apples from oxidizing and turning brown.

In a small bowl mix together the sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, flour, and salt. Sprinkle the apples evenly with this mixture and toss again. Put the coated apples in a deep pan and sauté them on medium heat until steam starts to rise from them and they have started to soften. Make sure all the flour has been cooked out and the juices have thickened. Mix frequently with a wooden spoon during this process.

Take the apples off the heat and transfer them into a container and into the refrigerator. While they cool make a quick caramel sauce and an egg wash. In a small saucepan melt the butter on medium heat until it starts to look foamy but isn't browning. Add the brown sugar and whisk, whisk, whisk, whisk until there are no more sugar crystals. This will take about two minutes. CAREFULLY mix in the whipping cream. It will snap, crackle, pop all over the place so again BE CAREFUL. Whisk, whisk, whisk until the caramel sauce is nice and creamy. Take off the heat, add your vanilla and mix again. Add the pecans and mix again.

For the egg wash crack one egg in a small bowl and whisk in a tablespoon of heavy cream. Put it in the fridge.

Step 4

Your dough should be seriously chilled by now. Flour your work area lightly and roll out the pie dough. Pretend it's a clock and roll from the center of the clock out to 11, 12 and 1. Rotate a quarter turn, and roll from the center out again. If the dough cracks, simply press it together. Roll the dough out quickly (remember you want to keep it cold!) until it is a 1/4 inch thick. If it sticks to the rolling pin dust it with a little more flour. Cut out a circle of dough 14 inches in diameter. Grease your pie pan with a little canola oil. Press the dough circle into it and crimp or flute the border. (You want a double thick border). Dock the dough with a fork. (Just stab it gently to create holes at the bottom of the dough. This helps the dough cook evenly.) Cover the pie pan with plastic wrap and refrigerate dough again for thirty minutes. Then brush egg wash on the edges of the dough. Fill the pie with apples all the way to the top. Make

sure to press down as much as possible so that the cup-pie doesn't collapse as the apples bake and shrink in size. Top the pie with your oatmeal mixture.

Step 5

Bake for about 40 to 45 minutes at 375 degrees. The pie is done when the dough is crispy and the topping is bubbly. Let the pie cool for ten or so minutes. Top it with your crunchy caramel sauce and garnish each delicious slice with fresh whipped cream or vanilla ice cream



Cooking competition for Power Quick Pot, where Monti won \$10,000 for Save the Children, Puerto Rico