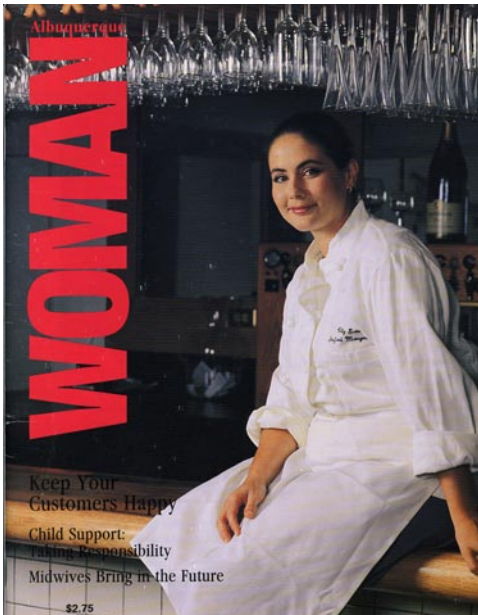


Stefani Mangrum Thais It All Together



At thirty years old, Stefani Mangrum has taken more risks than many of us could ever imagine taking. But with courage and a lot of hard work, her dream of owning a restaurant in Albuquerque is alive and well downtown.

Downtown Albuquerque. We hear more and more about it. How it is reviving... slowly. The El Rey, the KiMo, La Posada, and the City Grill. The City Grill & Wine Bar sits on the north side of First Plaza, facing the large open space above the Galleria. The blue awning has been replaced by blue and turquoise market umbrellas covering the permanent outdoor seating area. This urban bistro serves an eclectic menu based on Pacific Rim Cuisine at both lunch and dinner. Stefani Mangrum is the driving force, co-owner, and chef behind this charming downtown restaurant.

"I love downtown. I'm a city kid. But, I'm a true valley girl—I live down here, too. I don't go above San Mateo. I don't like the traffic."

I arrived for our interview at 2:30, and found Mangrum fixing a final lunch. It was the lull before the storm, that unique, quiet time in restaurants after the lunch crowd has gone, but before the dinner clientele starts to arrive. After serving the lunch, she joined me near the black and white tiled bar, and we talked, accompanied by Billie Holiday singing the blues. Mangrum's dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she was wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals. She was open and friendly, with quick energy and a warm smile.

Mangrum's first job was cooking—at Sorella's, a juice bar and health food restaurant in San Francisco—when she was fifteen years old. She started modeling at the same time. Over the next nine years she moved around a lot—with school and modeling jobs. While working in Japan and France, she also cooked in friends' restaurants. It was great training. It was also great money. But, temptation was there, too. She had a bout with drugs. After some hard personal work, Mangrum saw for herself she needed to change, to commit to a more positive direction. She decided to return to cooking full-time.

While she was earning her degree from the Hotel and Restaurant Program of City College of San Francisco, she also attended two years of regular college classes. "It was long and hard," Mangrum said. But, if she was to have a culinary career, to be able to attract investors, she knew that an education was necessary. It's obvious this woman is not afraid of risk or hard work.

After apprenticing at one of San Francisco's finest restaurants, Cafe Americain, and becoming executive chef at Pasta Bella, Mangrum came to Albuquerque. "I came here specifically... to open a restaurant. It's something that's 'untouchable' in San Francisco." Moving to Albuquerque, to be near her family, and

focusing on cooking were ways for Mangrum to return to her roots, even though she was born and raised in San Francisco.

That city was one her biggest influences. "In San Francisco, there's so much diversity of cuisine. So many Mom and Pop restaurants, where you could eat dirt cheap, sit at a counter, eat Thai or Indonesian one day... I *loved* it. We were regulars at all these places."



Her mother was a wonderful cook, but hated it. "We went out to dinner every night." Part of the reason was her mother always worked or was in school. She is now a psychotherapist with a private practice here in Albuquerque.

It was her father's mother, the stable one, who taught her to cook. "Her theory on life," Mangrum said, "was—every little girl should know how to cook, sew, clean, which was something quite foreign to me! My mother and her mother were independent, strong, pro-feminist women. They had their careers, and it was all very mental for them."

Her mother and her father's mother differed in their religious beliefs. Her mother is an atheist, and her paternal grandmother was a devout Latin American Catholic. Their lifestyles were different, too. Mangrum grew up in a Victorian house with gardens in the Castro district, the middle of the gay scene, during the '60s and '70s. She referred to her upbringing as "an alternative lifestyle. It was not Ozzie and Harriet." She learned to make her own decisions.

Mangrum arrived in Albuquerque in August 1989. "My family has strong ties here. My grandmother [her mother's mother] was an anthropologist and worked with Southwestern Indians, so I spent a lot of time here. She owned the old hotel in Cerillos before it burned down. My grandfather owned the Mine Shaft Tavern in Madrid, and I took care of it for about a year in 1981 when he first took it over."

Her mother was in Albuquerque, and wanted Stefani to be closer to 'home.' The timing was right. "I got tired of the big city. It was too expensive, too much time, too much dirt.

"I worked around town—at the Rancher's Club, Peter's Fine Catering for a number of years, the Artichoke Cafe. Sort of learned the lay of the land. What people wanted."

Finally, about two years ago she started the process to have her own restaurant. Putting together the financing for City Grill was "quite difficult," she said. She used all her life savings, went to family for more, and Larry Sandford, her partner, brought in the wine. She did not use a formal lending organization. "It was essentially every nickel and dime I could gather up."

City Grill has been open since February 1992 under Mangrum's management. She believes she opened her restaurant about one year too early. "It was taking a big chance coming downtown. It's just waiting for the bookstores to come, more theater to come, and more restaurants to bring it into a metropolitan downtown." She said there were a number of restaurants getting ready to open, and predicted that in two years or less 'downtown' will be bigger, more active than Nob Hill.

While Mangrum believes Albuquerque is ready to support more fine restaurants, there are drawbacks. "It's difficult to change people's habits. Having them know we are here. City Grill? Where's that?" And

then there are the myths about safety and parking. "I feel safer down here than I would in many other places in the city," Mangrum said.

"I've been watching Albuquerque trends for about ten years. Seen what's happening with food. I've seen great growth in the palate of Albuquerqueans." When asked to define the type of cuisine she specializes in, she hesitated! "I really don't know what it's called... Pacific Rim Cuisine—but there are so many influences—Oriental, Thai, French, California, South American. It's pretty much whatever I feel like doing. I don't know ahead of time."

City Grill has a wine and beer license. They had a liquor license for three months, but Mangrum prefers the energy of a beer and wine bar. "People come here to *eat*... and to drink wine... and enjoy it. And have the complement of the food and the wine, as opposed to ... drinkers, where the food is secondary. I hate it when a plate comes back full. I ask, 'What's wrong with the food?' A liquor license makes the *bar* more important."

"Tell me a little about your personal life," I asked... Silence... She had already told me she works 9 am to 11 pm weekdays and later on weekends, with Sundays off. There isn't a lot of time left* "Is there a personal life?"

"Not much," she said laughing freely.

"I live in a big old rickety house in the downtown area." She called it a shot-gun house, which each new owner kept adding on to. She lives next door to her mother, whom she calls her best friend, and her father, who runs a close second. Her family ties are important to her. As she started to talk about her house, her hazel eyes lit up. "Gardening. Sitting on the front porch and reading books. One of the joys of my life."

"I have my rose garden and my vegetable garden... that keep me sane. I'm a sucker for all animals. I have five cats, and I know every hummingbird in the neighborhood... I have a boyfriend who used to work with me, but then were arguing... and so we decided we couldn't work together."

I asked what her dreams were for the future.

"What I'd like? I would like to be at a point where all I had to do was cook, and think of wonderful things to do. Have enough staff and not have to worry about costs. And just do incredible food. I'd like it to have a reputation like Chez Panisse [in Berkeley]. I would grow my own herbs and vegetables. And maybe take a holiday once a year." We both laughed. "I probably could now [take a vacation]. But, I have to keep my eye on everything." Because now she cooks, orders the food, sometimes sweeps the floors and does the dishes, keeps the books, schedules the staff, and does the hiring and firing. She looked at me and smiled, "I have control... and wouldn't give it up at all... I *love* this restaurant."



<http://cinnabarbridge.com/publications/articles/>