

Food

NETWORKING

By Wendy Miller | Photos by Jonathan Palmer

Love of Cooking Leads to Celebrity for Chef Brigitte Nguyen

Brigitte Nguyen smiles into the studio camera and chats engagingly about three ways to use apples from a Central Kentucky orchard. With her warm, easy style, it feels as if she's talking to her sister or best friend. As she continues to chat, she makes the multitasking parts of cooking — the slicing, dicing, frying, baking — seem utterly effortless.

With such happy calm, one would think she has spent decades in professional kitchens. But Nguyen is not your typical celebrity chef. Her background is in corporate accounting. She did not hit the top by leaving a small town for city lights. Quite the opposite: She abandoned a successful career in finance and her life in Southern California to move to Lexington, Ky., for love. And now, a mere six years after relocating, she is living the dream of the culinary world.







Ingredients for Nguyen's aptly named rainbow sesame slaw

Nguyen has not one but two television shows. The first and longest-running of these programs began in late 2010. "From the Kitchens of..." is a nationally televised series produced by the Cooking Channel, an offshoot of The Food Network. Sponsored by major companies such as Kenmore and Pillsbury, the program demonstrates the full potential and versatility of well-known kitchen appliances and familiar grocery store brands. In Nguyen's hands, simple Jimmy Dean pork sausage crumbles are transformed into an exotic sausage, mushroom, and cranberry tart; and Pillsbury buttermilk biscuits become tender "shells" for zesty lime fish tacos.

Her second show was rolled out less than 12 months later,

in June 2011, on channel 56, Fox's local affiliate. "The Kentucky Proud Kitchen" is the perfect complement to "From the Kitchens of..." It finds Nguyen preparing luscious seasonal dishes that showcase local "Kentucky Proud" products. From summer tomatoes green and red to fall's bounty of squash and apples, from corn meal to flour, from sweet sorghum to sharp cheddar cheese, a majority of the ingredients are grown and/or crafted right here in the commonwealth.

Nguyen's sparkling personality is a necessity for media success but is not alone sufficient. None of this almost fairy tale story would be happening without her innate passion for cooking (and eating), her mother's influence, a healthy dose of self-application, good formal training, and a natural instinct for following leads.

From childhood, there has never been a time Nguyen can remember when she wasn't interested in food. Even as a small girl, she was obsessed. She devoured cookbooks. The beautiful pictures grabbed her, and she would read the recipes as though they were gripping novels, always wanting to know what happened next.

Fortunately, while she was growing up, her home life rein-

forced that penchant. Dinners were family times that cemented relationships and confirmed her sense that food and love were inextricably linked.

She credits her mother with establishing that connection and keeping it alive.

Although a very busy woman after the family immigrated to the United States from Vietnam in 1975, Nguyen's mother always found time to cook. She had a knack for converting simple staples into wonderful meals. Nguyen would go shopping with her and also help her whip up delicious dishes from supermarket items and the bounty of California's year-round farmers markets.

"Cooking was always my mom's way of relaxing, plus it was a way of bringing our family together," she reminisces. "As a kid that was what kept me centered, too, because I had parents going this way and that way and commuting to work and an older sister off doing her own thing and a grandma, so every day we sat down, the five of us, all together, at dinner. I think everybody should have that."

When Nguyen went away to Claremont McKenna College, also in California, she continued to cook whenever possible, but her double major of economics and Spanish allowed little time. After graduating and landing an auditing job at Deloitte, one of the country's most prestigious accounting firms, her time in the kitchen decreased further. It was a frustration that she tucked away, however, the rewards of her position being more immediate.

Then she met now-husband and Georgetown native Michael Prather. At the time, she lived in Los Angeles and he lived in Reno, Nev. But then he moved back home to Kentucky. As the relationship got serious and the long-distance logistics more complicated, they decided to close the miles, so she handed in her resignation, packed her bags, and moved to the Bluegrass.

Having made a break in her career trajectory, Nguyen had the opportunity to make a sharp turn and start life over. It didn't take much reflection to see where the next road led: the kitchen.

Arriving in Central Kentucky in 2006, she enrolled in Sullivan University's culinary school, an 18-month program that would give her the formal skill set she needed to become a professional chef. In addition, the curriculum included externships, such as a stint working under chef Ouita Michel at Midway's well-respected Holly Hill Inn.

Sullivan also offered exciting extracurricular experiences, such as catering at the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. There



Nguyen set up lunch and dinner buffets, served formal plated meals, coordinated events, helped the floral designer with decor and arrangements, and worked cocktail parties attended by top dignitaries

"I even served President Bush Senior," she recalls with excitement.

While the Olympics were glamorous and fun, they were also extremely labor-intensive. But the ex-

penditure of effort was ultimately rewarded by a second stint.

"I worked hard in Beijing and was given managerial responsibilities when the managers had days off," Nguyen continues. "I expressed interest in working with them again for Vancouver [in 2010], so they invited me back. This time they brought a much smaller group, as they were able to hire locally in Vancouver."

Even with her full schedule of studies, apprenticeships, travel, and cooking gigs, she somehow made time, no matter what, to

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CHINESE CHICKEN BURGERS WITH RAINBOW SESAME SLAW

2 pounds ground chicken
2 tablespoons soy sauce
2 tablespoons sugar
1 tablespoon sesame oil
6 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon minced lemongrass
1/3 cup sliced scallions
6 hamburger buns with sesame seeds
6 tablespoons butter, softened
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
6 tablespoons hoisin sauce
sliced scallions
Sriracha Lime Mayo: recipe follows
Rainbow Sesame Slaw: recipe follows

In large bowl, mix together ground chicken, soy sauce, sugar, sesame oil, garlic, lemongrass, and scallions. Divide mixture into 6 patties and set aside. Place grill pan over medium heat. Spread softened butter on hamburger buns and place on grill pan until light brown.

Wipe grill pan with paper towel and brush with vegetable oil. Place chicken patties on grill pan and cook over medium-high heat, turning once, until internal temperature reaches 165° F, about 7 minutes per side. During last few minutes of cooking, baste each burger with 1 tablespoon of the hoisin sauce.

To assemble, place 1 tablespoon Sriracha Lime Mayo on each bottom and top bun. Place chicken on bun bottoms and top each with 1/3 cup Rainbow Sesame Slaw. Serve with any remaining slaw and mayo on the side. Garnish with scallions. Makes 6 servings.

Sriracha Lime Mayo: In small bowl, mix together 3/4 cup mayonnaise, zest and juice of 1 lime, and 2 tablespoons Sriracha Chile Sauce. Set aside.

Rainbow Sesame Slaw: In medium-sized bowl, mix together 2/3 cup julienne peppers (red, orange, yellow, or any combination); 2/3 cup julienned snow peas, strings removed; 2/3 cup julienned jicama; 1 1/2 tablespoons rice wine vinegar; 1 tablespoon sugar; 1 tablespoon soy sauce; 1 teaspoon Sriracha Chile Sauce; 1 teaspoon sesame oil; and 1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds.

emulate one more of her mother's examples: She started entering cooking contests.

This was a smart move because it offered good practice, lots of networking opportunities, and eventually plenty of national exposure.

The first competition she entered took place in Napa, Calif., in 2007. "Build a Better Burger" was sponsored by Sutter Home Winery. She sent in her recipe at the last minute, almost on a whim. It was selected, and she was one of the top 10 finalists out of 8,000 entries. Her Vietnamese five-spice pork patty won "First Runner-Up in the Best Alternative" (less than 50 percent beef) category.

That experience confirmed not only her sure palate and ability to compete, but also her total comfort with being in the public eye.

"Being out there made me realize I was completely confident cooking for an audience, that I revel in it," she says with a smile.

By May 2009, however, she was no longer runner-up. At the National Chicken Cooking Contest in San Antonio,





her Chinese chicken burgers with rainbow sesame slaw took first prize. She walked away with the title and a \$50,000 award.

Between Napa and San Antonio, her work in television began in 2008 when she participated in Food Network's "Ultimate Recipe Showdown," a show she would appear in the following year as well. The Kentucky influence was already evident in her first entry: Bluegrass beer cheese melts with bourbon barbecue glaze. Although she lost by a mere point, this competition would have more far-reaching importance when she was flown back for the screen test that ultimately led to "From the Kitchens of..."

"Food Network approached me when I came to their studios in September 2008 for the second season of the 'Ultimate Recipe Showdown.' The day after the competition they film post-competition interviews. The executive producer of the production company creating the show told me that I might be a good fit for the network, and I was able to meet with programming executives that day. I came back for a screen test later that year and continued to stay in touch and keep them abreast of what I was working on. By winter of 2010, I got the exciting call that they were interested in meeting with me to host 'From the Kitchens of...'"

Whether she was in New York or California, China or Canada, Kentucky had become Nguyen's home. She continued cooking and catering here, and soon her name and face were getting plenty of publicity in the Lexington print media. It wasn't long before the broadcasters followed suit.

Nguyen recalls the overture from Fox that led to "The Kentucky Proud Kitchen." "Carolyn Wyckoff read an article on me that Meredith Lane wrote for *The Lane Report*. She contacted me while I was on my honeymoon in October 2010 to discuss ideas for a local cooking show."

After watching many national cooking shows, Wyckoff thought a similar program that focused on local ingredients would be both relevant and well-received. With support from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture,

Nguyen likes to use fresh local ingredients for many of the dishes she creates.

she began project development. Nguyen was her first choice for host.

"I am not sure I would have pursued the idea had she declined," Wyckoff says. "The next step was a kitchen. After searching around and not finding one that met all the needs for television production, Michael Brickey [general manager] agreed we could build one. Brigitte's first input on the show was looking at the blank area where the kitchen would go and providing suggestions based on her knowledge of other studio kitchens. About nine months after the first call to Brigitte, 'The Kentucky Proud Kitchen' was on the air."

Wyckoff is pleased with the result.

"I believe this is one of the best locally produced shows around. We, of course, are excited about continuing and making it even more interesting to the viewers."

In between all the tapings and travel, Nguyen nevertheless finds time to give back. She is now in her second year of volunteering with Girls on the Run, a nonprofit organization that helps preteen girls live healthy lifestyles and make good life choices.

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The commitment came from a 2011 New Year's resolution, but the inspiration came from a field visit to Hidden Valley Ranch, which produces salad dressings, through "From The Kitchens of..." that took her to an elementary school in Houston.

"I loved being around kids," she says. "Their eyes light up when they try something new that they didn't think they'd like. That fueled that fire, and I came back here and thought: 'How can I get more involved in local schools?'"

Nguyen is clearly a lifelong learner, and the opportunities seem to find her. This spring, having added yet another dimension to her many culinary activities, she moved to the other side of the contest experience, judging the "Breakfast and Brunches" entries at Pillsbury's 45th Bake-Off, the country's longest-running cooking contest.

What happens next in her career will be fun to watch. It seems with such a meteoric rise, the sky's the limit. But Nguyen, with all her talents, is too modest to take a lot of credit for what, to an outsider, seems like a whirlwind success story. Instead, she just says with a slightly self-deprecating grin: "It's funny, but I sometimes feel like I am going at a snail's pace." 🐌



Nguyen deftly assembles her award-winning Chinese chicken burgers.

An advertisement for Aurora Pools & Spas. The background is a photograph of an outdoor patio with a stone floor, a fire pit with a fire, and several orange-cushioned chairs and a table. A dark grey box with yellow and white text is overlaid on the image.

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