

CHEFOLOGY

A Hollywood Story



Akasha Richmond From Yogi to Michael Jackson's Personal Chef

Chef Interview by Gayle Keck

When did you start cooking?

I actually came to L.A. to study yoga, not to be a chef. The yoga teacher owned the Golden Temple restaurant, so I went to work there. Michael Jackson was a regular. One day, he asked me and a friend to start catering parties and doing dinners for him. When you're 23 years old and working in a restaurant, making \$4.75 an hour and Michael Jackson asks you to cook, you're kind of like, "Yeah!"

How long did you work for him?

I was Michael Jackson's chef for 14 years, on and off. I did all the tours with him. I started meeting people in L.A. and Hollywood, working for a lot of celebrities. I did catering and consulting, too.

How was it working for celebrities?

The thing about celebrities that I love is they're really fun, charismatic people and they're creative and fun to work for – so I had a great time. Michael Jackson was one of the greatest people I've ever known. So much fun. So charismatic. Going all over the world with him – that was a great experience. I went to 34 countries with him! Then I worked for Barbra Streisand, too, and that was really fun.

She has a reputation for being very particular.

She loves really good food. Being a private chef, you have to enjoy what you're cooking. If you're working for someone like that, you have to like the kind of food they like. And you have

NOW: AKASHA restaurant/bar/bakery
(Culver City, CA, since 2008)

THEN: Golden Temple vegetarian restaurant; private chef to Michael Jackson, Billy Bob Thornton and Barbra Streisand; caterer to Pierce Brosnan and other celebrities

MENTORS: I never had the opportunity to work under a really great chef who was my mentor. My mentors are cookbook authors like: Claudia Roden, Joan Nathan, the Jamisons. My other mentors are the investors in my restaurant, who taught me a lot about business and branding.

AGE: I'm in L.A. – no one talks about how old they are!

GREW UP: Miami and Hollywood, Florida

EDUCATION: I learned by reading books and all the traveling I did. I learned a lot going to markets in other countries.

FAVORITE RESTAURANTS: K-ZO; The Test Kitchen (closed) where they had different chefs come in every week; Rivera; Scarpetta; The Bazaar; WP24; Delfina (San Francisco); Chez Panissé (Berkeley) I like rustic, simple, delicious food – but I thought Alinea was one of the best meals I've ever had.

PUBS: *Hollywood Dish*: More than 150 Delicious, Healthy Recipes from Hollywood's Chef to the Stars

LIMELIGHT: Access Hollywood, Entertainment Tonight



Interior shots of AKASHA restaurant/bar/bakery in Culver City, CA.

to like the person you're working for and get along with them. There's a lot of restaurant chefs who couldn't do it!

Why's that?

The smart chefs know their customer and they're really into cooking for the customer. If what you want to make isn't what your customer wants, then you have a problem.

What's your advice for someone wanting to become a private chef?

The problem is that you have to work for someone to get really good references before you can work for someone! Maybe your parents know someone, or a friend works for someone. It's all about the trust factor, because celebrities – and CEOs – are very private. There are agencies, but the agencies all want you to have a reference, too.

Why a restaurant now?

I always wanted a restaurant, but it was never the right time. I have a 21-year-old daughter, and when she was a baby I certainly didn't want to open a restaurant.

Someone approached me and said, "You should open a restaurant." And I was like, "Oh, yeah, I'd love to open a restaurant!" We weren't that serious. We went to look at locations just to see what was out there. But we found this unbelievable location. So we took it, wrote a business plan and founded the restaurant.

What are some of the things that you absolutely won't compromise on?

I only use organic sugar and organic flour. Most of the produce is local. We make a lot of things here – we make our sambal sauce; we make all of our pickles; all



our own ice creams; for the bar, I make all the syrups – we make our own grenadine syrup out of pomegranate juice. I have a whole little jam, jelly and chutney side-business. We use a lot of that in the restaurant, too.

Why the side-business? You seem really busy as it is!

A friend of mine taught me how to make jam, and it's so much fun, I really, really love doing it! There's this real sense of accomplishment of going to the farmers' market, buying six cases of fruit, cutting it all up, cooking it down, making a chutney or a jam, putting it into the jars and sealing them. It's a great feeling!

How do you decide where to draw the line on ingredients?

I look at every ingredient, and there are different factors. Of course, it has to taste great; it has to be a clean product. But if I have a choice between local, unsprayed citrus fruit that's not certified organic – but it really is – I'd rather have that than certified organic oranges from Mexico.

Is sourcing easy?

One of the reasons I did a restaurant now is I'm able to use the kinds of ingredients I want to use. Twenty years ago, your meat vendor wasn't bringing you amazing grass-fed steak.

But you could find those ingredients as a private chef?

When you're a private chef, you can just go to Whole Foods and get whatever you want. It's easier if you're only getting five steaks. Here, I need 50 delivered every other day.

What else has been different with the restaurant, vs. your private chef and catering business?

A lot of people open restaurants after working in restaurants for 20 years, and they have a sous chef who goes with them. I didn't have that kind of team. I was getting chefs who thought it didn't matter what kind of ingredients you used – it only mattered how you made the food taste. And that is just *so* not my philosophy. That was hard for me – but they're all gone!

Now I have an awesome team. An amazing team. Two of them came here for their externships from culinary school, and have been here ever since. They started as line cooks and now they're sous chefs.

You list your three sous chefs on the menu. That's a bit unusual.

They work really, really hard, and I come from the school that if you don't let other people be creative – if you're just a control freak – you're never going to have happy workers. So these guys do a lot of the specials, they run the line. I don't feel that it's fair to say I do everything when I don't. I put their names on the menu, and they're stoked!

How is it being a woman in the restaurant business?

I think it's a real boys' club, but the women who are really good are really well-respected. I don't put up with any bulls**t in my kitchen, either.

Do you make an effort to hire other women?

I don't tend to hire someone based on their sex. All chefs are nuts, it doesn't matter if they're male or female. You have to be a little nuts to be in this business!

Where do you get inspiration?

I have thousands of cookbooks. I have a huge vintage collection of early American, Hollywood and California cookbooks, dating back to the turn of the last century. I love Helen Evan Brown – she wrote *The West Coast Cookbook*. I have a lot of Asian ones, like David Thomson's Thai cookbooks. I have a lot of pastry books. I also love John Besh's book, *My New Orleans*. That's an unbelievable book!

If you could travel anywhere for inspiration, where would you go?

I'm dying to go to Vietnam. I really want to go to Sardinia. I've always wanted to go to Bali. So many great places! You can't master a cuisine without working in a country. I lived in India for three months, and studied Indian cooking. I cooked so long with Indians, in India, that I really understand the cuisine. I really hate it



Diners can enjoy an organic cocktail or healthy meal at AKASHA's bar.

when someone just throws some curry powder on a piece of fish and calls it "Punjabi Tandoori Fish Tikka" – 'cause it's not!

What's your favorite kitchen tool?

I just bought these new Japanese knives that I love – Togiharu. I also just bought a Chitarra, the Italian pasta cutter that looks like guitar strings. You make the pasta dough and then you put the sheet of dough on top of it and press the noodles down.

What ingredient is a must for Akasha's pantry?

I'm really into good sea salt. But I *do not* like kosher salt. I don't understand why chefs use kosher salt. It's a horrible ingredient! That's been my biggest fight with any chef that's ever been here! I hate it!

OK, kosher salt is pure evil! What sea salts do you like, then?

I use a lot of different kinds. There's a great one a friend of mine brings in from France; another one a friend brings in from Mexico that I don't think you can buy commercially; there's one from Bali that I like. I keep 10 or 15 kinds of sea salt around!

But why sea salt?

If you take a really good piece of fish and sprinkle it with really good sea salt, the flavor is unbelievable. Do the same with kosher salt or table salt, and it's just not the same!

What's your "last meal?"

I know exactly what I would eat. Don't laugh! I grew up in Florida, and my dad took us to Joe's Stone Crabs every Saturday night. That would be the meal: stone crabs, Lyonnaise potatoes, cole slaw, fried green tomatoes, creamed spinach. I also love fried chicken, and they have good fried chicken at Joe's. So if it was my last meal, I'd probably have fried chicken, too!