

Confessions of a Kosher School Cafeteria Chef

It was 10 o'clock in the morning when I interviewed Chef Tony. As usual, you could already smell the roasting potatoes complete with garlic and paprika and though it was only 10AM, I wanted those roasted potatoes with garlic and paprika. But sadly, those were being roasted for the first lunch run that starts at 10:30AM, five days a week, and doesn't stop until the kitchen closes at about 1:30PM. In most every public school in America, lunch has finished cooking by 8AM, which means that it's been sitting for hours by the time the average student (that would have been me) actually ate it. But that's not how Chef Tony does it. Nope, Chef Tony and the Chefs at about a handful of other SAGE kitchens practice what's called "batch cooking". Batch cooking is a method of cooking that comes as close to cooking-to-order as possible, even if that's cooking for 1500 people, which is how many mouths Chef Tony and his kitchen staff serves on a daily basis. Plus, he does it with the help of only 6 other employees and no stove. "The kitchen is about 40 years-old. We're the 'red-headed stepchild' of budgeting. No one's budgeting for the kitchen but if you look at the research, we all know that good eating goes hand-in-hand with good academics". And it's true. If you Google, "good eating and great grades" a host of resources come up on your screen. But between the iPads and the SMART boards and the salaries of some of my colleagues (cough, cough), the kitchen isn't seeing any cash-love. But that's not a problem for Chef Tony, a man whose been in the food business since he was 12 years-old when he began washing dishes at a Greek diner in Long Island and a year later was promoted to line cook. Though his mother was a "good Catholic girl", his father was Jewish and passed down a respect of Jewish culture. Chef's personal kitchen is kosher 'style'—he doesn't mix meat and milk and doesn't mix meat and milk

equipment but also doesn't require his personal food to be hechshered.

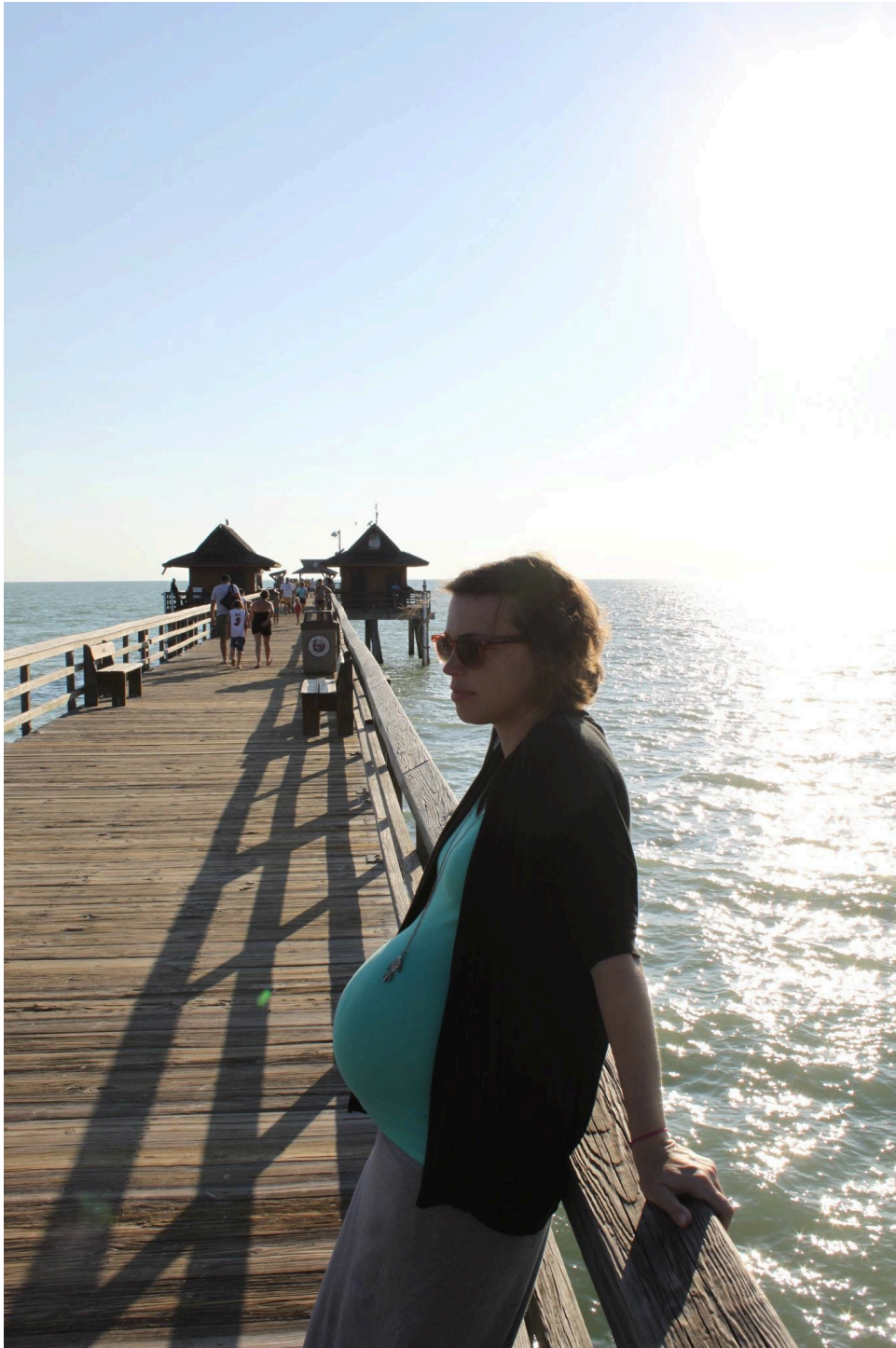


Chef Tony



The Only Grill We Got—He can only fit about 30 chicken breasts at a time so be gentle the next time you complain there's no chicken breast. Remember: 1500 mouths to 30 chicken breasts

I want to be clear about something. I really like Chef Tony. He can be gruff and considers himself the 'least politically-correct person you've ever met', but Chef Tony can't fool me. He is always talking about his children and grandchildren. When I was pregnant, he always checked up on me and asked me how I was doing. Even my husband is a huge fan of Chef Tony. One day, in my first trimester, I was having an insanely strong craving for Thanksgiving dinner. I was desperate for turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, the whole nine yards. I even cried. I'm not proud. But Boston Market not being kosher and my husband not up for cooking Thanksgiving dinner at 7PM on a Tuesday night, I went without (yes, I know, there are people starving all over the world but I was hormonal people, OK?). But wouldn't you know, the next day at school, we had turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy. I'm not kidding when I tell you I hugged Chef when I saw him that day after lunch . . . and after about four pounds of turkey.



There's a lot of turkey and gravy in there.
Oh, and baby.

Chef Tony got into the kosher business about 10 years ago after he sold his bowling alley snack business and took what he thought would be a part time job at a new Conservative Jewish Day School in West Palm Beach with SAGE Dining Services. Ten years later he's heading up one of the strictest and better kept kosher kitchens in South Florida. In fact, says Chef Tony, who is also known as the 'Mashgiach-

slayer', his kitchen is so together in terms of kashrut standards that he often hosts mashgiachs-in-training (as long as the mashgiach doesn't come into Chef Tony's kitchen and try to change anything. G-d bless the mashgiach who tries to question Chef Tony's standards). But working with an outdated kitchen, no burners (did you hear that? NO BURNERS), a staff of only six, and a limited budget isn't even Chef's greatest headache. It's not even the parents that like to come in for a 'meeting' to advise him on how to cook (apparently the biggest 'suggestion' is for homemade marinara sauce. Guess how much tomatoes are from Chef's produce guy (or any bulk produce supplier) when they're out of season? \$39. Also, take this into account. Have you ever tried making marinara without a stovetop?). Nope, it's not the parents. It's kashrut. The man's 'bread and butter' is also his greatest enemy. "I wish kosher could just be black and white. But it's like that old saying, 'Put two Jews in a room and you get three opinions.'" Every affiliation has its standard and when you're a large community day school with a strong observant staff, you're going to get the occasional staff person who questions the standards because it doesn't fit his or hers level of kashrut observance.



It Was Hot Dog Day Ya'll

How does Chef deal with it? He grins and bears it and though he likes to be a little, um, aggressive with his opinions, his passion for what he does, not to mention his incredibly strong work ethic, doesn't allow him to not consider the opinion, whether he agrees or not. For a man who was raised by a father who spent forty years in the Marine Corps., and who would have been a lifer himself if it wasn't for his wife (he's been married four times. He makes no qualms about his love life. "It takes a special woman to be married to a Marine Corps. officer and a chef."), Chef Tony, The Mashgiach-Slayer, just might be the most important and yet the most under-appreciated staff member on campus.



And You Think You Have Storage Issues?