

Chef Davida Becenti Cooks Up Community, Life Lessons Through Food September 8, 2022

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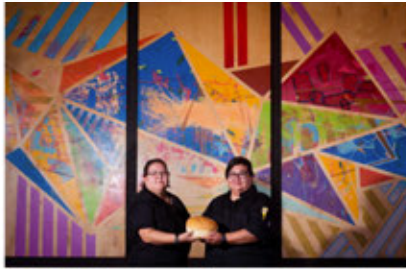
HOME LOCAL/STATE SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS OPINION OBITUARIES CLASSIFIEDS JOBS

Chef Davida Becenti cooks up community, life lessons through food

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Davida Becenti, executive chef of Indian Pueblo Kitchen, left, and Christina Becenti, executive chef of Indian Pueblo Kitchen, right, pose inside the patio of the Indian Pueblo Kitchen located at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque. (Chester Robb/Innovative)

It's Monday, which means chef Davida Becenti is working.

Though the Indian Pueblo Kitchen, located inside the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, is closed for the day, Becenti still has to make sure orders are in for the upcoming week.

Let's not forget the schedules for her team.


Call it a day for administrative work. Becenti knows that in order to have the freedom to create dishes for the restaurant, all of this has to be done.

"I've only been here for two months and it's a great challenge to myself," Becenti says. "I wouldn't be here without my team. They are strong and willing to learn more. It's amazing to have a great support system."

When it comes to creating dishes, simplicity is key.

Growing up Polynesian and Dineé, she learned from an early age the importance of the Three Sisters — beans, corn and squash.

Becenti was raised in the Astor-Farmington area and began cooking when she was about six.



Davida Becenti, executive chef of Indian Pueblo Kitchen, prepares squash and potatoes in the kitchen of the Indian Pueblo Kitchen. (Chester Robb/Innovative)

"Being a Native family, when people come over to visit, you cook," she says. "One day I said, 'I'll make potatoes.' It was an appreciation for them to come over and eat."

Becenti isn't the only one in her family to enjoy cooking. Her sister, Adriani, is currently her banquet chef at the Indian Pueblo Kitchen and is a vital part of the team.

"When we were younger, I told her that I would be the chef first," Becenti says with a laugh. "We would always challenge each other. We still do."

Becenti stepped into the role of executive chef and hit the ground running. Her first move was to take the door off of her office, as she wanted her team to feel free to communicate.

"I love my team to the moon and back," she says. "I don't want there to be a barrier when it comes to communication."

Not too soon after she began, she had to make a quick turnaround and create a Cuban dinner for 400 people.


"We had three days to put it all together," she says. "That was stressful, but we came together and made it as perfect as we could."

The following week, she had to switch over and create an Indigenous dinner.

Again, Becenti turned to her team to figure it all out.

"Each person brings value to the table," she says. "Sometimes I'm not thinking the right way and there will be an idea on how to make it better."

Whether it's at work or in her personal life, Becenti is always cultivating community.



Davida Becenti, executive chef of Indian Pueblo Kitchen, works with her staff. (Chester Robb/Innovative)

"My passion is cooking and I'll use that to create conversations," she says. "I'm an ally for the gay community and will lend support any chance I get. I don't really rest, even when I'm off work."

It's not uncommon to find Becenti teaching her children life lessons through food.

"We make PB&J and then take them Downtown and pass them out to people," she says. "We do that twice a month. I'm trying to instill compassion in my children and that we need to help one another."

There are not two days of work that are the same for Becenti. She never knows what's going to pop up.

This is the reason she tries to create routine by saying "Good Morning" to everyone each day at work.

On Wednesdays, she brings doughnuts to the staff.

"I want to make sure they feel appreciated because they do work hard," she says. "There are some days of administrative work."

But each day, she gets to taste the food.

"I will taste everything before it goes out to make sure it's not too salty or too rich," she says. "There are days we need to make it over and dump it. With food, it's about consistency."

Everything she uses is locally from the farms. I want people to know that the food they are eating comes from the farmers in New Mexico. We do our best to make sure that the ingredients are home grown to New Mexico."

While the two months as executive chef has been exciting, it's also come with some stress for Becenti on a personal note.

A few weeks ago, her older sister, Christina, was killed in a car crash. Becenti had reached out weeks before and sought her advice for a different Indigenous meal she was creating.

"I called her and said, 'Chris, I need help,'" Becenti recalls. "She told me to cook lamb chops and put gold flakes on top. So my team went out and got it all together."

Christina's funeral was the day before the event.

Becenti's boss told her that she could skip the event.

Instead, Becenti went to the funeral and drove back to Albuquerque to be at the helm of the dinner.

"My sister would have wanted me to do it," she says. "At the funeral, I told everyone that Chris would have wanted us all not to cry and share stories of her making us laugh. She brought us together as a community. After the event was done, I wanted to pick up the phone and call her. I couldn't. Being Native American, we know the spirit is gone, so I sat outside and talked to her. That night, I saw a shooting star. I knew she would have been proud of me."

Being on her feet all day and cooking can take a toll on what Becenti feels like cooking at home — her go-to meal?

"Red Bull," she quips. "It's a liquid diet."

All kidding aside, Becenti admits that she doesn't usually cook at home.

"My husband, Orion, is my chef," she says with a smile. "He's a dispatcher for the Albuquerque Airport. He always has something waiting for me at home."

If she doesn't get a meal at home, she will eat at the restaurant.

"If I have time, my favorites are buffalo stew or gnocchi with bread," she says. "Sometimes even a simple burrito with squash and potatoes will hit the spot."

Editor's note: Cocina Connection is a once-a-month feature that takes a behind-the-scenes look at a New Mexico-based chef, who, in turn, shares some recipes.

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SPAN AND POTATO BURRITO

- 1/2 cup vegetable oil, for frying
- 12 ounce can of Spam, sliced
- 4 Russet potatoes, medium/large in size
- peeled and sliced
- 1 small onion, diced
- Flour tortillas
- Salt and ground black pepper, to taste

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium. Add the sliced Spam, potatoes and onion, fry browning occasionally until potatoes are tender and golden brown. (Optional, add green chilis. Wrap in a tortilla and enjoy.

