

Better Living

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Colleen Diskin's
Mother Load
column

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These Jersey "kids" rock... literally. They have their own music cable TV show.

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Let the American
Crossword Puzzle
Tournament begin!



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ALYSSA O'DOWD
Rocks



ELIJAH STILLITANO

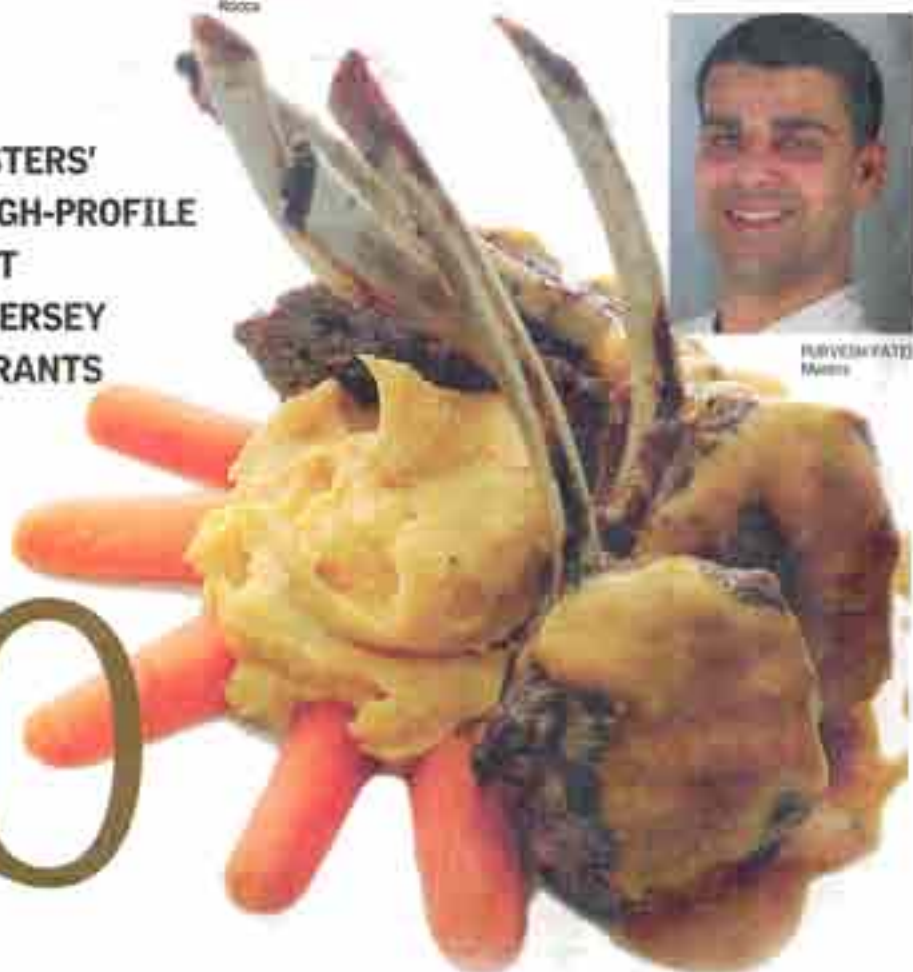
THREE
'YOUNGSTERS'
EARN HIGH-PROFILE
SLOTS AT
NORTH JERSEY
RESTAURANTS

TOP
CHEF
BY 30

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FURVENCİYATO
Mama



This trio's cookin'

How 3 'youngsters' got top chef spots

They worked long hours in kitchens – washing dishes, prepping meals, decorating cakes – to rise to top jobs in North Jersey restaurants by the age of 30.

Their backgrounds and experiences vary – one has no culinary degree, another hates to cook anything but dessert, and the third considers his kitchen his own personal science lab. But all three of these young chefs are now setting the agenda for some of the region's best-known dining experiences. — **Elisa Ung**

See them in action: Video from the chefs' kitchens at northjersey.com/thirtyandunder
In their own words: A Q&A with each chef at northjersey.com/foodblog

Wunderkind cooks: Elijah Stillittano, Purvesh Patel, Alyssa O'Dowd.



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Elijah Stillittano

By **BILL PITCHER**
STAFF WRITER

Elijah Stillittano's job interview lasted five months. Five months of 16- or 18-hour days and seven-day workweeks. Five months of lunches by day, dinners at night and receptions in between. Of Christmas parties and bridal showers and wine dinners.

"I used to come in, make sauces, make the pre-cook, order, cook, go home, sleep for a few hours, and do it again. It was pretty intense," he said. "There were days I wanted to just give up, go upstairs and take a nap."

But he was too determined to show his bosses that even at 26 and with no formal

culinary training, he had the right skills, creativity and temperament to become the next executive chef at Chakra in Paramus.

Two weeks ago, the restaurant announced his promotion. A sous-chef since the restaurant opened four years ago, Stillittano now is in charge of the kitchen, its staff, its menu and the 200 customers waiting in the dining room and lounge.

Born in his Edgewater home and initially home-schooled by his mother, he enjoyed cooking fried eggplant, chili and lasagna as a favorite diversion. "Cooking was my extracurricular activity," he said. For high school, he enrolled in Bergen County Technical School, where, he said, an instructor recognized his potential and rewarded him by riding him harder than anyone else in the class.

Out of school, he cooked for Unique
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Purvesh Patel

By **ROBERT BIESELIN**
STAFF WRITER

Mantra's Purvesh Patel started his career in the same place as most chefs. At the dishwasher.

"I started dishwashing at the age of 14 and had to work my way up to every station," said Patel, 28, who is originally from Lenox, Mass. "Working in the kitchen was something that I've always liked. It's like a rush. Even when I was the dishwasher, I loved the pace. I didn't like cleaning dishes, but the atmosphere was great."

Alongside his older brother, Biraj, who worked as a line cook in Lenox, Patel developed a lust not only for fast-paced

work, but also for food. Watching his sibling, Purvesh saw his once-menial job morph into the gateway to a potential career.

"My brother was always kind of an influence on me," he said. "I looked up to him when we worked together, and that motivated me to really get into food."

After his brother moved on to other pursuits, Patel found guidance from another chef. At Church Street Café, also in Lenox, he became further immersed in food and culinary tradition working under chef Clayton Hambrick, who had served as the personal chef to Ethel Kennedy.

When his brother decided to start his own restaurant – Zarole in Ridgewood – Purvesh decided to follow. He took a break to study criminal justice and even worked as a corrections officer in West-

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Alyssa O'Dowd

By **ELISA UNG**
STAFF WRITER

In 2004, Craig Levy was set to hire a pastry chef for his new Glen Rock Italian restaurant, Rocca. Then, "at the 10th hour," he got a call from Alyssa O'Dowd.

A Culinary Institute of America graduate, O'Dowd had packed an impressive amount of pastry experience into just a few years. She worked under celebrated chocolatier Jacques Torres at Le Cirque 2000, spent five years at The Restaurant in Hackensack and later honed her cake skills at the Totowa specialty bakery Sweet Sisters.

"I was so impressed with her credentials," said Levy, who hired her almost immediately. "She has a very specific talent that she was able to find at a young age. A lot of it is natural, but she obviously has the passion for it, in addition to having the right people teach her."

Now 30, O'Dowd serves as the pastry chef at both Rocca and its adjacent Rocca Market. She's equally comfortable hand-decorating a pile of elaborate sugar cookies, baking focaccia, crafting a towering Cat in the Hat birthday cake, making ice cream and sorbet for the market or composing a poached-pear parfait or caramelized nut napoleon for the restaurant's dessert menu.

"There's quite a range between your average bakery and what she does," Levy said. "There's nothing in the middle, at least in this area."

O'Dowd's love of pastry was sparked as she was growing up in Elmwood Park, helping out at her aunt's catering business in Ho-Ho-Kus. She was constantly moved by "the delicateness... the beauty of desserts." So she attended the CIA to study pastry exclusively. "I don't like to cook," she says.

She starts each day at Rocca early in the morning, baking focaccia, then moves on to pastries, ice creams and sorbets, truffles and individual desserts for the market. Each day she goes through 30 pounds of flour, eight dozen eggs and 10 pounds of chocolate. Her collection of cookie cutters totals in the hundreds, and she puts them to use in seasonal cookies for the market – look for bunnies and chicks in April, bees and beehives in June, pumpkins, ghosts and witch hats for Halloween. She also runs a cookie-of-the-month club at Rocca.

"Everything's fresh, made with the finest ingredients we can get our hands on," O'Dowd said, though after a long day looking at her own sugary concoctions, she doesn't ultimately eat many of them herself. (Except for the scrapings while

See **O'DOWD** Page F-4

O'Dowd

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making devil's food cake.) She's particularly proud of Rocca's crème brûlée, which uses Le Cirque's recipe. "Every so often, I get into a mood where I want to do plated desserts with a lot of components," she says, but she finds the restaurant's customers prefer simpler sweets.

O'Dowd now lives in Hawthorne. She is married to Gary O'Dowd — an executive chef for a banquet facility — whom she met when both worked at The Restaurant. They have a 2-year-old son, Riley, who has already learned to love chocolate.

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Alyssa O'Dowd, pastry chef at Rocca in Glen Rock, filling chocolate shells with creamy chocolate.



DANIELLE P. RICHARDS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

■ White chocolate passion fruit cheesecake

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| 2 cups finely ground graham crackers | 3 8-ounce packages cream cheese, room temperature | ½ cup sour cream, room temperature |
| 10 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted | Pinch salt | 1 cup heavy cream, room temperature |
| 1½ cups granulated sugar, divided | 5 eggs, room temperature | Passion fruit curd topping; recipe follows |
| | 6 ounces good-quality white chocolate, melted | |

To make the crust, spray a 10-inch springform pan with vegetable oil spray. Preheat oven to 325 degrees.

In a small bowl, mix together graham crackers, butter and ½ cup sugar. Transfer to the pan and press down evenly on the bottom. Bake until golden brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Set aside to cool, then wrap the outside of the pan tightly with an extra-wide piece of aluminum foil.

With stand mixer or with an electric mixer in a mixing bowl, cream the cream cheese, salt and remaining sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs slowly, then pour in white chocolate, scraping the bowl as needed. Add sour cream

and heavy cream and continue mixing until well-blended.

Pour into the prepared pan and bake in a water bath until set — about 45 minutes to 1 hour. Remove from oven and chill for at least 30 minutes, while making the topping.

Servings: 12.

Per serving: 719 calories, 52 grams fat, 31 grams saturated fat, 290 milligrams cholesterol, 53 grams carbohydrates, 11 grams protein, 373 milligrams sodium, 0.4 grams dietary fiber.

From: Alyssa O'Dowd, pastry chef at Rocca, Glen Rock.

Passion fruit curd topping

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|-------------|---------------------------|--|
| 2 eggs | ½ cup granulated sugar | 4 tablespoons unsalted butter |
| 2 egg yolks | ½ cup passion fruit juice | 5 ounces good-quality white chocolate, chopped |
| Pinch salt | Zest of one orange | |

Place eggs, yolks, salt, sugar, passion fruit juice and zest in a mixing bowl. Whisk until well-combined.

Place over a double boiler and cook until the mixture thickens, whisking constantly. Remove from heat and whisk in butter and chocolate, mixing until smooth.

Pour over the chilled cheesecake and let set for at least 4 hours.

COVER STORY

Stillittano

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Foods, a catering company, then worked his way into the kitchen at America, a highly regarded Tenafly restaurant, washing dishes and stocking the pantry before getting his break. "You know how that goes," said Kenneth Collins, America's chef-partner. "Someone leaves, he gets pushed up, and that's how things went." In 2004, when Collins turned his attention to opening a New York City restaurant, he left Stillittano and his sous-chef in charge of the kitchen.

"He was a diligent cook, and when I showed him how to do something, he would do it," Collins said. But he didn't expect his young cook to be running the kitchen of one of the region's highest-profile restaurants so soon. "I knew he had some ambition, but I didn't sense at the time that he would be doing as well as he's doing."

Four years ago Stillittano followed America's manager, Brian Powell, to a new venture in Paramus. Chakra was being billed as a hip, exotic restaurant and lounge, with 187 seats, ostrich leather booths and a big indoor waterfall. From the first night — and for the next 3½ years — it was simply Stillittano and executive chef Edward Lake in the kitchen.

Lake left for a corporate job in the summer, but Stillittano held on to his New American menu through his five-month audition. His first menu since being named executive chef has more of a fine-dining feel, with escargot and foie gras, with contemporary touches like pear skin salt and cranberry risotto.

"I think when Chakra opened we got caught up in the hype and just tried to get people in the door," Stillittano said. "I want to get back to the food being noticed first."

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■ Steak tartare

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|---|------------------------------------|
| 4 ounces New York strip steak, ground or finely diced | Salt and pepper, to taste |
| 2 shallots, chopped | 1 cup balsamic vinegar |
| 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard | ½ cup sugar |
| 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce | 1 egg, hard-boiled and chopped |
| 1 teaspoon ketchup | 4 cornichons (or 1 regular pickle) |

Mix together steak, shallots, Dijon, Worcestershire sauce and ketchup. Add salt and pepper to taste.

In a saucepan, combine the balsamic vinegar and sugar. Simmer until reduced by half. Let cool for at least an hour in the refrigerator.

Put the beef mixture on a plate and top with the chopped egg and cornichons. Drizzle with some of the balsamic reduction on the plate and serve.

Servings: 1.

Per serving: 401 calories, 12 grams fat, 4 grams saturated fat, 266 milligrams cholesterol, 58 grams carbohydrates, 37 grams protein, 907 milligrams sodium, 0.4 grams fiber.

From: Elijah Stillittano, executive chef, Chakra, Paramus.

Patel

From Page F-3

chester County, N.Y., but fell back into the restaurant business for good after Biraj asked him to manage the restaurant during a week-long vacation.

"That was it," he said. "I was back in the groove and never looked back."

Zarole closed in 2006. Biraj headed to SeaBlue at the Borgata Hotel Casino in Atlantic City, and Purvesh signed on to be executive chef at Mantra, the new contemporary Indian restaurant in Paramus. He's used the restaurant kitchen as his own little science lab, blending the tastes of his Indian background with the influences he picked up from his brother's French cooking.

"I love bringing new ideas and dishes to the Indian culinary division ... there's a lot of French and American influence in there," said Patel of his menu. "Basically I try to replace the overwhelming spiciness

[of traditional Indian food] with more flavor, I find it makes the food much more modern and much more inviting to newcomers."

Now, despite having come a long way from manning the sinks of a Lenox café, the accomplished chef hasn't forgotten his roots. Though he's the head of his own kitchen, Patel still looks up to the line cook who first inspired him more than a decade ago.

"Any time I need advice, I'll give [Biraj] a call and ask, 'Hey, what can I use this with?'" Patel said. "He's very good at what he does."

Apparently, the admiration is mutual.

"Over the years I've been able to see Purvesh mature and grow so much, not only as a chef, but also as a leader in the kitchen," Biraj said. "I never thought that he'd get to this point and become such a great chef. Looks like I was wrong."

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■ Rack of lamb with apricot curry sauce and saffron mashed potatoes

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|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2 medium red potatoes | 1 medium onion, chopped |
| 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted | 1 tablespoon Madras curry powder |
| ½ cup heavy cream | ½ cup crushed peeled tomatoes |
| 3 to 4 strands saffron | 1 cup chopped dried apricots |
| Salt to taste | ½ cup chicken stock, divided |
| Ground black pepper to taste | Cilantro to taste |
| 1 tablespoon corn oil | 1 rack New Zealand lamb |
| 1 tablespoon cumin seed | Olive oil |

Peel and boil potatoes until fully cooked. Mash cooked and drained potatoes with a fork. Add melted butter, cream, saffron and salt and pepper. Mix well.

While the potatoes boil, begin making the sauce. In a sauté pan, heat corn oil and add cumin seed until it's lightly browned. Then add onion and cook until it browns as well. Add curry powder and sauté for 1 additional minute. Add tomatoes and dried apricots and cook until apricots are soft. Set aside and let cool.

After the mixture has cooled, transfer it to a blender, add a dash of chicken stock and blend well.

Once blended, transfer the mixture back to a sauté pan and heat while adding the remainder of the chicken stock to give it a saucy consistency. Add salt, pepper and fresh chopped cilantro to taste.

While the mixture cools, clean and cut the lamb into individual chops. Then, drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with salt and pepper and grill for 3 minutes on both sides or until the rack reaches desired temperature.

To serve, place potatoes in center of a plate, arrange lamb next to potatoes and drizzle sauce on the lamb.

Servings: 2.

Per serving: 1,488 calories, 98 grams fat, 45 grams saturated fat, 265 milligrams cholesterol, 112 grams carbohydrates, 43 grams protein, 706 milligrams sodium, 13 grams fiber.

From: Purvesh Patel, executive chef, Mantra, Paramus.