

PROFILE:

GLORIA FELIX

BY JOSHUA LURIE



Gloria Felix grew up in Ontario, a sun-scorched Inland Empire town best known for the Ontario Motor Speedway. She preferred to play outside until age 11, when she transitioned to the kitchen to watch her Mexican-Indian mother marry flavors from Mexico and Spain (her father's homeland). This resulted in paella, "the best nopales dishes" and "amazing" tortillas. It was in these early days that Felix became committed to freshness, since her mother refused to open cans.

Felix bemoans the fact that Eastsiders head west to eat dinner. To help ensure that they eat locally at her new restaurant - reservoir - she has taken the "garden to table" approach to a new level. Felix plans to have an herb garden and dwarf citrus trees (blood orange, Meyer lemon and kumquat) behind reservoir. She says, "If I need rosemary or basil, I can just walk out my back door." The menu changes according to what's in season, and what Felix finds at local farmers' markets.

Felix graduated with a psychology degree from Cal Poly Pomona and began working with adolescents with chemical dependency. For five years, she worked as an L.A. County paramedic, but "got burnt out," she says. "You can only go on so many drive-by shootings and overdoses." However, she did gain "great insight on how to deal with individuals." She transitioned to talent management, representing actors, musicians and comics, but grew "tired of babysitting."

At parties, Felix continually found herself in the kitchen. "I'd whip something up out of their cupboards, and I had friends say, why don't you do this professionally?" She discovered Le Cordon Bleu online, took a tour and began attending culinary school the following week.

In 2001, Felix graduated with honors from Le Cordon Bleu and secured an internship in Edinburgh, Scotland, at the Grand Sheraton Hotel, but ended up getting deported instead. She had the misfortune of landing at London's Gatwick Airport on 9/11 with no return ticket or end date on her work papers. That she had a bag full of kitchen knives probably didn't help either.

Felix returned home to Southern California and found work with Fred Eric at Vida in Los Feliz. She respected his "cutting-edge" food and started working for free. After just two weeks, he added her to the payroll. Felix started in pantry, preparing salads and cold appetizers, before moving to Vida's grill.

Felix never stayed in one kitchen for long. "I started this career later on in my life," she says. "I wanted to get as much experience as I could. I knew exactly the path I wanted to go down and the chefs I wanted to work for, so I did."

She caught on with Suzanne Goin at Lucques despite some miscommunication. "They said they were hiring in the kitchen," says Felix. "I went down there. The chef said the position we have is in pastry...I said, you know what, I'm here, I'll go to work...I ended up working with Kim Sklar, who's an awesome pastry chef."

Ciudad offered Felix a position on their line, and before she left Lucques, had a "heart to heart" with Suzanne Goin. Felix told Goin, "I would love to work in your kitchen, but I just don't see myself as a pastry chef. She said, 'Call me back, and if something opens up, I'll get you in my kitchen.'"

Felix started on grill at Ciudad, and quickly transitioned to sauté. "That was one of the hardest kitchens," says Felix. "We were doing 200-250 covers a night because of the Staples Center and the theatre. I was doing all the paella, all the hot dishes and I would have ten pans on the line. It was brutal."

After six months, Goin called Felix. Two weeks later, Felix was working in Lucques' pantry. "[Goin] comes from the school of Chez Panisse," says Felix. "I learned how to run the best pantry. It's all about freshness and technique. All the dressings were made fresh. Nothing was poured from squeeze bottles, which I loved."

Six months later, Goin and business partner Caroline Styne opened A.O.C. and hired Felix on the line. She says, "It was kind of cool, 'cause [Goin] saw something in me."

Felix shifted to Grace, working for Neal Fraser. She worked every single position on the line: grill, sauté, pantry, even desserts. Felix considers Fraser a mentor, emulating "the way he runs a kitchen. He's just kind of a Zen guy. He's not a screamer. He's all about teaching." At reservoir, Felix intends to be "more of a hands-on teacher. If you make a mistake let's fix it."

Felix left Grace to become the opening chef at Blair's, in Silver Lake. She says, "It was a great way on somebody else's dime to get an education." This was Felix's first time as executive chef, "responsible for a kitchen, responsible for a staff. Hiring. Firing. Food costs. Someone doesn't show up, you have to figure out what to do. Your dishwasher doesn't show up, you're back there washing dishes...I got to see a lot of the headaches, which is definitely helping me with my restaurant now."

Reservoir was supposed to open last fall, but Felix couldn't pass up the opportunity to work as Gordon Ramsey's sous chef on his competition cooking show, "Hell's Kitchen." She says, "At the time, I was opening the restaurant with [pastry chef] Elizabeth Belkind. I said, 'Look, this is what I'm going to do, are you okay with this?' She said yes, and I kind of left it in her hands to keep the ball rolling, so I went off and did the show. It was back-to-back seasons...I spent about five months." During filming, Ramsey "kept saying, when you open [reservoir], you're going to call us and we'll do a 'Kitchen Nightmares' on your restaurant. I go, I know, and you're going to do it to yourself when you open up the London."

Felix got what she wanted out of the "Hell's Kitchen" experience, saying, "They paid me really well," and "It was really cool experience working with Gordon." Working on the show may have jeopardized her business partnership with Belkind, who's gone on to help run Cake Monkey bakery. Felix says, "It was definitely the right thing to do. It's hard to have two people in the kitchen. You kind of butt heads." Felix has no such conflict with new partner Darren Roberts, a ten-year restaurant industry veteran she met via Craigslist. "I'm doing my thing in back, he's doing his thing in front."

Felix has written an original menu, highlighted by Set Ups and Featured Dishes, where every set up is pairable with every protein. For example, pan-seared halibut, duck confit and grilled pork tenderloin are all designed to join roasted baby carrots with brown butter-cauliflower puree and braised leeks.

Reservoir will also serve pizzas. For four weeks, Felix trained with Peppe Miele of Antica Pizzeria in Marina del Rey to become certified in Verace Pizza Napoletana (VPN), true Neopolitan pizza. Reservoir doesn't house a wood-burning oven, so she's technically not allowed to hang a sign saying they have Neopolitan pizza.

Reservoir may be only 40 miles from Felix's hometown, but she was happy to travel the circuitous path from Ontario to Silver Lake to have her own restaurant.

RESERVOIR, 1700 Silver Lake Blvd., Silver Lake