

Restaurateur elevates culinary scene



Restaurant owner/chef Amanda Cohen is a champion of “the vegetable-forward movement.” Photo by Georgi Richardson at Maggie Marguerite

New York City’s Lower East Side is home to Dirt Candy, the city’s premiere vegetable-focused restaurant. At the helm is chef/owner Amanda Cohen, a prominent advocate of what’s known as “the vegetable-forward movement.”

While at its previous location, the restaurant received two stars from *The New York Times* – making it the first vegetarian restaurant in 17 years to receive that distinction – and was recognized by the *Michelin Guide* five consecutive years. Dirt Candy’s current location opened in January 2015, and garnered more attention when it became the first NYC restaurant to eliminate tipping and share profits with its employees.

Cohen was the first vegetarian chef to compete on TV’s “*Iron Chef America*” and her comic-book cookbook, “*Dirt Candy: A Cookbook*,” is the first graphic novel cookbook to be published in North America. The Canadian restaurateur recently spoke to *Unity* about vegetables – naturally – and more.

Q. How would you describe your restaurant in five words?

A. We make vegetables fun.

Q. What is your least-favorite vegetable to eat, and why?

A. Every vegetable is awesome, it’s just harder to find the awesomeness hiding inside, say, a rutabaga than it is to uncover it in a carrot. But it’s there.

Q. Which dish, that’s currently on your menu, did you once find intimidating and/or nearly impossible to cook?

A. The Grilled Broccoli Dogs. They were a radically different dish that I experimented with for months

before throwing it out in frustration and, in a fit of anger, making a joke about broccoli hot dogs and then realizing that, yes, of course. Broccoli hot dogs.

Q. For parents struggling to get their kids to eat vegetables, what dish would you recommend and how is it prepared?

A. It’s not just kids. Everyone’s struggling to eat vegetables because they feel like they should be eating them, but you can’t cook vegetables like meat and expect them to turn out delicious.

A few small tips:

- Fat carries flavor. Vegetables have no natural fat, so make sure that you use oil or butter when you cook vegetables. And if you use oil, cook some onions and garlic in it first to flavor it.
- Salt your salads. No one salts salads and it makes a huge difference.
- Shock and blanch. Drop your vegetables in boiling water for 20 to 30 seconds, then drop them in ice water. Sometimes that’s all the cooking they need and this will preserve their color and keep them looking pretty on the plate.
- Grill your greens. Grilling hearty greens like kale and collards gives them a meaty, rich flavor.

Q. Your IMDb profile says you once worked for (musician) Moby. Were you his personal chef? How long did you work for him?

A. I was the first chef at TeaNY, Moby’s vegan tea shop on the Lower East Side (now closed). I was there for about three years, doing all the cooking and baking in my tiny apartment because they didn’t have much of a kitchen (the only equipment in the shop were some portable hot plates and toaster ovens). I used to be up at 4 a.m. to start baking and then I’d have to haul everything from my apartment in Spanish Harlem down to TeaNY.

Q. When did you last spend an entire day not centered on food, and what did you do?

A. The first day of work I missed in seven years that didn’t involve cooking at another restaurant was when I went to my nephew’s bar mitzvah.

Q. Before opening your own establishment, at which restaurant did you learn the most about the restaurant business?

A. Everything I thought I knew about the restaurant business went out the window when I opened the original Dirt Candy. There is no crash course in the restaurant business more brutal and eye-opening than owning your own place. Until then I thought I knew about this business, but I didn’t know a thing.