

Chef Luis Amado

A Profile of Passion

Written by Ellen Anderson

How did a young man selling churros on the streets of Guadalajara, Mexico become a World Leader in Pastry education? Passion. As the great German poet Hebbel said “Nothing great in the World has ever been accomplished without passion.” And passion is what Chef Luis Amado is all about. As a street vendor in Mexico with 5 churros carts, he rode his passion to soar to Olympic fame.



As the son of a chef, young Luis was born in to a family where food was lifeblood. The quest for knowledge sent him across North America to the cool climate of Grand Rapids Community College. After graduating he set across the Atlantic to master classical European Pastry. Two years later he returned to



America, working in California, Indiana, and then landing back in Michigan. In 1998, he became the Advanced Pastry Arts Instructor at Bakers College in Michigan. There he leads the Baking and Pastry Arts Program, develops the curriculum, teaches, and coaches young students to success in national and international culinary competitions. In the summers he returns to his homeland and brings his talent and fervor to young students in Mexico and Latin

America, leading workshops and sharing his knowledge to develop better programs in universities and Latin American Hotels.

Chef Amado's skills and flair shine in competition. He has won over 17 gold medals and 6 best-of-show awards from the world's highest acclaimed culinary competitions. In 1996 he received a Gold Medal in the Culinary Olympics hosted in Berlin, Germany. He has been bestowed medals throughout his career and leads his school as a team coach. Not a year goes by that Chef Luis Amado has not achieved kudos from his peers. Last year he won the Grand Prize in a Mexican Recipe Contest with his Mojito Swordfish with Avocado and Pineapple Pico de Gallo. Just reading the recipe irrigates the taste buds. The

palate is lavishly rewarded with 21 ingredients and a horde of flavors including tomatillos, roasted pepitas, guava juice, pineapple, mint, and rum.

What really drives this global leader is his instrumental role in the creation of the Culinary Institute of Michigan, a division of Baker College. This \$11 million institution, the only culinary school of its kind in the central United States, sets itself apart with creativity, innovation, and cutting edge facilities. Chef Amado was influential in the planning and programs for the pastry and baking. It will offer a



degree strictly in chocolate where students will study in a temperature and humidity controlled laboratory. The 39,000 square foot building will also have 2 restaurants: Courses, a casual, fine dining restaurant, and The Sweet Spot a pastry shop. The Culinary Institute will be the first culinary institution in the world to offer a 5 year masters degree in hospitality, taking culinary education to the next level.

I spoke to Chef Amado about his life and his current role in developing a school that will set the standards for Pastry education in America. His exuberance resonated!

Chef Amado tell me how it all started, when did you get your first taste of a passion for food?

I grew up in Guadalajara, Mexico. My father was also a chef. He traveled the world and for some reason he ended up in Mexico where he met my mother. So I lived there until I was 19 years old. I worked in different countries under different chefs and learning under different styles of cuisines. I worked in different restaurants, a year here, six months there.

Was your father a pastry chef?

No! He was everything, but pastry. I started doing hot food. I eventually found so much more; I cannot think of the right words, my English is still not very good.

No, your English is fabulous. It is better than my Spanish. You found your passion?

Absolutely! Yeah, I mean pastries are my passion. When I was 19 years old I dropped out of school for two years to open up a pastry shop. Actually it was the streets of Guadalajara. I owned five little churro carts, these carts were made like a hot dog cart. Like they have in New York.

What sparked you to move on?

I worked like that for two years, but then I wanted to learn more. I moved to Spain when I was 21 years old and finished my vocational school. Then in Belgium and Brussels I studied chocolate. I became fascinated with chocolate ever since growing up in Mexico. It is like a love affair that I have with chocolate.

When you say you have a love affair with chocolate, what is your favorite pairing with chocolate?

I will say spices, perhaps cloves and cinnamon are my favorite.

Tell me about your college; it was grown tremendously in the last decade.

I started the program here in 1997 and I was one of the founders. We started with 12 students back then. I have to tell you the whole story so that it makes sense. I went to the Culinary Olympics in 1996 and I got hired over there by the chef who founded the school where I work now. He offered me a job in the United States and offered me help becoming a legal resident. So I came to the United States and started the program with a few students. We now have over 700 students and in September we will be migrating to a brand new \$18 million state of the art facility. It is a 4-story building, brand new facility, we just outgrew this place. 90% of our students are from out of state, it is a big thing and I am very proud of it because I was there from the very, very beginning. It was just like a dream.

Is the building strictly culinary?

It is all culinary and at this point we are going to offer five different degrees ranging from certificates to bachelor. They are going to be in baking and pastry sciences, culinary arts, and food and beverage management. And, I am writing a curriculum for a chocolate science degree. I am going to be, I believe, one of the few schools in the country that will specialize in teaching the science of chocolate, a chocolate degree. In other words if somebody just wants to study to be a Chocolatier and only specialize in that, we will offer that degree.

Will the students also have to get an associates degree in Pastry and Baking?

No, they don't. Just in chocolate. I lead the program and developed the curriculum. I hired all the staff. I am also publishing a book on Pastry that focuses on Latin American ingredients and Latino desserts.

When will it hit the stands?

That is probably going to be early next year. Right now all of my energy is devoted to developing the Culinary Institute of Michigan. I am bombarded with work. I spent over 8 years writing this book. Some of my pictures and recipes can be found on my website.

I salivated over your Mojito Swordfish recipe.

Actually, I won a recipe contest on that one.

What did you win?

I won \$2000 dollars, it was first prize. I enter a lot of recipe contests. I don't have any free time, but I find a way to send recipes in. I kind of know how and what they are expecting. They want a nice photo. It always helps to send a photo with a recipe for a contest and if you can make it pretty and get the right angle, that puts you at an advantage.

What is your most memorable contest?

I guess, my most memorable competition will be, not a contest, but a competition. The Culinary Olympics in 1996, and then in the year 2000. Those would be my biggest accomplishments. The contests they are just fun and you know if I win money, I donate part of it to a fundraiser. I try and do a lot of things for the community.

Are you working on another competition?

Not right now. We are just focusing all our energies to writing and finalizing the curriculum for the new school. But yeah, I plan on going back to the circuit as a coach, take students to the Culinary Olympic or some other large competition.

What do you see as the new trends in pastry?

I hope to be part of the new trend in leaning more towards the use of international ingredients, like Latin, Caribbean, and tropical ingredients. I think that it is going to happen eventually. There is nothing wrong with vanilla from Madagascar or raspberries, brown sugar, things like that. I think it is time to get more into flavors like hibiscus, tamarind, lychee or some other flavors that have not been explored. I would like to contribute to that movement when my book is published and just show people that there are a lot of other ingredients that taste good in the dessert cuisine.

Latin America has so many great spices, herbs, and fruits. My favorite is Passion Fruit.

Absolutely, absolutely, tremendous, like coconuts, four kinds of coconut, chilies, you know some people say, "why do you put chili pepper in your chocolate?" and what they don't realize is that a lot of chili peppers are not hot and spicy.

Exactly, they are bursting with flavor.

You just have to know how to balance it. I am teaching all of my students that it is important that the food look good, taste good, but also let's try to innovate and add something to the world.

Do you like molecular gastronomy?

I am not into molecular gastronomy myself. I do respect it a lot. I don't think it's wrong, but personally, I don't believe it is going to last.

It is very showy, but when it comes down to it, flavor and taste, that is what is important.

Absolutely, I don't think I'm old school really. I think that a dessert with 3 or 4 ounces in ingredients, small bites, you know fruit caviar and all these innovative things, myself, I don't think they are going to last.

Right, so what is your style?

My style, I could not put that in one word. I would say perhaps contemporary, alternative, unique. Strong flavors and if I am going to serve a mousse or a cake, I will keep my decorations very simple, very clean, but with memorable flavor. Flavor is very important.

Looking back, have you had any big kitchen disasters that still haunt you, in any or your competitions, or working in the kitchen?

Actually a couple of times before a competition, it has happened twice, I cut my finger really big, like 9 stitches in between my fingers at 3:00 in the morning. I look at my chef, this happened 12 years ago, and my chef, Tony took me to the hospital and got it stitched up, went back to the competition and won best of show. I continued my display with one hand. Six years later I had a similar experience cutting with an exacto knife. The knife went on top of the ruler and cut the tip of my finger. It was a good thing because I ended up winning the competition again. Oh, and I probably delivered 100 wedding cakes and a few of them just fell down.

With your students, how can you tell this kid has got it, he has what it takes, what makes that particular student really stand out?

I need to see them work for 10 minutes, see how they hold a knife, a plate, and then I can see whether they are going to make it or whether they can be taught. I try and teach them what they really need to know, what is current and what is happening right now. I don't want to say that I teach them shortcuts, but I don't spend a whole week teaching them cream and glaze or how to make pie dough. I try to teach them what restaurants require them to learn. Our curriculum, we have an advisory board that has different representatives from the industry and we listen to them. They want them to know not only the basics, but to put the food out fast, great tasting, and looking good. They don't need to know all classical desserts by heart.

What percent of your students are concentrating on a career in pastry?

I would say about half. Right now Pastry and Baking is very popular. We have an 18 month waiting list to start the program. What makes us unique is that I will only accept a 7 to 1 ratio, unlike other schools that have maybe 20 or 25 students. Here we only believe in 7 to 1 in pastry. I think in culinary arts they have a ratio of 12 students to 1 instructor. The chocolate Lab is designed to have only 7 students. Everything is state of the art. I want each one to learn how to work with all this high technology, but at the same time I also expect them to learn how to work with nothing. They have to prove they can do it by hand and then they can do it in the machine. Do you see what I am saying? We don't want a robot.

Where area do your students come from, you are the only culinary school in the central United States.

All over the Midwest and we also have a lot of Latin American students. During the summertime I teach a lot, I travel to Venezuela, Mexico, Guatemala, I have been able to recruit a lot of students from that part of the continent.

Can you place them in jobs when they graduate?

They all get jobs. With my tenure, it is so nice to have students graduate and 5 years later they are executive pastry chefs in places like Las Vegas. They call me and it is just amazing. You will see them come and go and I think I have the greatest job in the world to be able to pass knowledge!

To influence these young kids and make a difference.

Absolutely, and also to learn from them. I learn so much from them and I also learn how to break the rules and I don't say no. It is good not to say no and let them fly a little bit. Let them make mistakes and I feel that is my teaching style. Let them express themselves.

When you are critiquing a dessert, it hits your palate, what is the one Spanish word that says “wow, this is amazing!”

Magnifico! I usually just smile because the student sees me smile and that means I loved it.

I am curious; if it's your birthday what would you order and who would you have prepare it?

That is a wonderful question. I would say strawberries and cream, fresh. Very popular Mexican dessert, it is just strawberries and fresh cream and sugar. And it would have to be made by my mother. Yeah!

And what would you have for dinner? I bet your Dad would fix your dinner, right?

Yeah, definitely! I would have my dad fix me good old tongue tacos. Beef tongue tacos with salsa verde.

You are an inspiration; I would love to visit your school!

Come to Michigan, my house is your house; we would love to show you.