



Sticking With It:

Chef Faith Shirk Builds a Life around Food and Family

BORN AND RAISED in Lancaster County, Chef Faith Shirk isn't making plans to live anywhere else. When thanked for taking the time to chat, she shrugs it off, saying, "It's cool. I'm just portioning out some ham." In a quiet, day-lit corner of her current culinary home, Reflections Restaurant in Leola, we discuss food, family, and finding work that satisfies.

Growing up home-schooled with a limited social life, Shirk says cooking was one of the few things she felt she was good at, and liked. Early exposure started when she'd make dinner for her father and brothers while her mother worked nights. At 18, Shirk started cooking at Squire-Side CAFE in New Holland and then at Shady Maple in East Earl. She picked up the trade over the next five years before realizing her culinary aspirations had outgrown the smorgasbord.

In 2009, Shirk enrolled at the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts in Lancaster, earning her degree in Culinary Arts and Restaurant Management. In 2010, she landed an externship at Lily's on Main in Ephrata, and worked her way up to sous chef alongside Kelly Kapinos, who left her post as chef in 2013 to become General Manager at Reflections.

"That was more the type of cooking that I wanted to do," Shirk says of Lily's higher end menu. "Everything that I learned previously carried over, and I just kept picking things up as I went."

In the spring of 2013, Shirk took a two month break to have her first daughter before coming back as a part-time line cook at Lily's. "After we had the baby, my husband and I considered doing the stay-at-home-mom thing," she says,

adding, "I love my kids, obviously. But being at home all day? Nah, I have to work."

Shirk stayed on until 2014, when she learned a second daughter was on the way. In a change of course, she reconnected with Kapinos, who needed a server at Reflections. "It was a big transition," Shirk says of the move from kitchen to dining room. However, knowing the rigors of kitchen life from her first pregnancy, she opted to serve part-time instead. "As a server, I was able to pick up on what people liked to eat." Ultimately, the new role would give her an advantage in the next move.

Soon after Mother's Day in 2015, Reflections found itself in need of a head chef. Kapinos approached Shirk for the job. "I definitely wanted a position in the kitchen," Shirk says. "But I didn't know the chef position

would be available so soon."

Suddenly, Shirk found herself learning how to cook a menu she'd only been serving while getting to know the flow of the kitchen and its staff. "I wasn't used to working 50 hours a week," she says before praising the staff at Reflections for helping her through the transition. She also gives full credit to family and friends that continue to help her strike a balance between home and work life. "There's no way I could do this without their support."

While Shirk is partial to the modern, upscale "comfort food" she cooks at Reflections, taking chances is also something she craves. A recent entrée – blackened salmon with popcorn – was received favorably despite a few raised eyebrows. "Kelly and the owner, Jim Garland, let me be creative and I appreciate that," she says, underscoring that, ultimately, people like what they like. "I have to kind of watch the flair because we're not a city restaurant. We are what we are. But it's a comfortable atmosphere here and people come because they like the food."

Inspiration for her menu comes from dining locally and referring to a close network of co-workers, chefs, and instructors from culinary school, where she says there were five women to 15 men in her graduating class. Her advice for aspiring chefs, regardless of gender: "Just stick with it. If that's what you're passionate about, stick with it. Don't let people push you around. Because they will."

In her experience, the best way to combat any pushing around is by keeping a level head. Shirk runs her kitchen on a code of respect and says this yields better results in working relationships and in the food. "A lot of chefs are known to be aggressive and loud, but I feel like people respond better to just speaking."

Future plans for Shirk include "just sticking with it", as she's found satisfying work at Reflections, where she can achieve her professional goals. "We've been here a while," Shirk says of the Manheim Township establishment with roots dating back to the 1700s. Confidently, she assures, "I don't think we're going anywhere."