Meet Katy Sparks: Chef & Restaurant Consultant

When Katy Sparks left her family's Vermont farm at age 20 to start culinary school at Johnson & Wales, it's unlikely she ever imagined herself -- a mere five years later -- becoming sous chef to Bobby Flay as he opened Mesa Grill in New York City or, in 2014, winning an IACP award for her e-cookbook, *The Journey*, just one of many accolades this ground-breaking female chef and restaurateur has racked up over the course of her illustrious career.

Sparks is still in the restaurant business today, but no longer standing behind a hot oven directing her staff until 3 am before enjoying an after-hours libation at her once beloved, now-shuttered, West Village hangout, Florent. Instead, she's happily ensconced with her husband in the Berkshires profiling the work of "soil-powered food and farmers" in her latest project, an online documentary series she created titled *Edible Natural World*. In the series, Sparks profiles local and regional food makers, focused on those committed to sustainable, regenerative practices, before demonstrating unique and easy-to-make recipes inspired by their work. Away from the camera, Sparks serves on the board of Berkshire Grown and is dipping her toes into the water of sharing her years of experience with fellow restaurateurs via her consulting business. "You don't want to come in as an expert," she notes, "People here are experts already, and we have all the makings for a Berkshire-based cuisine. So if there's one common thread for me, I want to encourage people to source local, sustainable food in season."
We asked Katy to share her take on the local food and farming scene, the best advice she ever received in the business, and how she sees hospitality changing in a post-COVID world.

**What brought you to the Berkshires and what keeps you here as a creative and chef?**

My husband and I moved to Woodstock six years ago and then, after being priced out, to Alford three years ago. We now live in a home that sits on five acres. We wanted to put down roots, and the Berkshires is startlingly good for culture and access to the arts and people who care about community -- and it's in striking distance of New York City! Before I moved here, I knew about the Co-op and So-Co Creamery, where we would always stop on trips back and forth to Woodstock -- and pray the ice cream wouldn't melt before we got home -- but I didn't know about Rubiner's or Guido's Fresh. Once I was here, I got so intrigued about everything going on, and that's how *Edible Natural World* was born: I wanted to talk about food as if it was as inspiring as a piece of art and to learn why farmers do what they do.

What also keeps me here is the culture. My husband usually makes plans for us. We go to South Mountain Concerts in Pittsfield and see three to four programs each fall. And I love the Mahaiwe in Great Barrington; I was excited to see Ruth Reichl's film "*Food and Country*" there for the launch of the Berkshire Film Festival this year. Between culture, craft breweries, and food, it's what makes the Berkshires special.

**What's your own home kitchen like and how do you cook when it's just you and your husband or friends?**

For me it's never about the kitchen. I barely pay attention to brands. I don't sous vide. I love a mortar and pestle. I have a great Japanese knife, but it's special because a friend and fellow worker gave it to me. We have two wood-burning fireplaces, one in the kitchen and one in the living room, and sometimes we put a steel pan on it with live logs and make a ribeye steak. And to make friends, I have a foolproof tactic, I invite people over for dinner, and if I don't know them well enough, I might invite them for a drink. Not surprisingly, I haven't found people here to be unwelcoming.

**What's the best advice you've received as a chef?**

The best advice I ever got was from Debra Ponzek, Bobby Flay's ex-wife and a James Beard-award-winning chef in her own right. This was at a point where I was an Executive Chef and there were not many women in the field. Every day, these guys would come in with meat or vegetables for me to buy, and I remember asking her, "How do you tell them to take it back? It's not up to snuff." And she said, "You have to remember that your name is on the menu. And if your name is on the menu, you're not going to take any crap, because you've confirmed that you've approved of everything that comes out of the kitchen." The other piece of great advice was from Eric Bromberg, the co-owner of Blue Ribbon, a restaurant that started in SoHo and was considered the restaurant for other restaurant people. He told me that you have to walk through the experience of a restaurant as if you're a diner. You need to be able to imagine everything - the music, the lighting, the decor. Everything should be alive for you. I love that about the restaurant business. People sweat over the weight of a fork. Everything is a decision.

**How do you see the restaurant business changing due to COVID?**

There's going to be a major shrinking of operators. People are getting out of the business due to the difficult lifestyle, but I will never put the restaurant business down for the count. It's true that COVID has raised prices on food and the cost of fine dining has gone up, which has really bit into healthy profits. That means that where restaurants can differentiate themselves now is in service. People need to feel seen and cared for when they go out to dinner. They need to feel like people are delighted they are there. That has slipped a little I think, but the way to get people to come back is through warmth and
Join the Du Bois Freedom Center and Du Bois Forum at Jacob’s Pillow on July 7, 2023, from 4:30-5:30 pm for PillowTalk and 7:30 pm for dinner for an evening honoring Pulitzer Prize-winning Du Bois biographer and historian David Levering Lewis. Scholars, writers, musicians, and artists will reflect upon the impact of Dr. Lewis’ scholarship and public engagement.

Later that evening, join James Beard Award-winning chef Bryant Terry, author of Black Food, for a Du Bois-inspired menu under the stars. This event also features a performance by Lecolion Washington and staff/faculty at Community Music Center of Boston, the largest outside provider of arts education to the Boston Public Schools. The PillowTalk is free. Dinner reservations are required.

Congratulations to Great Barrington-raised, now Brooklyn-based, artist Delano Burrowes for a profile in The Berkshire Eagle of his "Great Barrington Project: Unbleaching the Souls of Black Folk," which he recently brought to Reading, Pa., for a week-long Juneteenth celebration. Reading is one of the poorest cities in the U.S. and is filled with the voices of those who are marginalized noted Burrowes. Learn more about Burrowes on his website.
The *Berkshire Small Business Resource Expo* is a FREE event for small business owners taking place on June 30th at The Stationary Factory in Dalton. Though free to attend, pre-registration is required; light continental breakfast and lunch are included. This event will include over 25 different organizations on the exhibit floor with information about resources, grants, trainings, and support for small businesses. Attendees can also hear from panels of experts! All vendors will have at least a summary of their resources available in English and Spanish. Three workshops/panels on topics specific to supporting small businesses (with in-ear Spanish interpretation available as needed) will also take place. [Register for this special event here.](#)

Are you an arts professional looking to make a difference and inspire others through your expertise? MassHire's Career Speakers provides a platform for you to share your experiences, knowledge, and creative journey with diverse audiences, including students, professionals, enthusiasts, and communities at large. Together, let's inspire, educate, and ignite the imaginations of individuals around the world, bringing the transformative power of the arts to the forefront of society. Learn more by completing a [Career Speakers Interest Form here.](#)

Is your organization open to becoming a host for MassHire's student job shadowing program? By adding your organization, you'll have the chance to shape the future of the arts by nurturing young talent and sharing your staff's knowledge and expertise. Through this program, you can play an instrumental role in fostering a passion for the arts, promoting creativity, and building a vibrant artistic community. [Fill out a Job Shadow Host Interest Form here.](#)

**Creative Economy Jobs**
Find Berkshire County in-person, remote, and hybrid jobs that pay a minimum of $40K a year in all fields, including arts, education, nonprofits, and related, at 1Berkshire's The Jobs Thing. Among some of the current openings of interest are:

- House Manager, Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center
- Museum Project Director, Williams College
- Membership Manager, Hancock Shaker Village

You can also find exclusively creative economy jobs, including remote and hybrid opportunities, at MCC's HireCulture. Three sample postings are below.

- Artistic Director, WAM Theater
- Advancement Associate, Berkshire Opera Festival
- Front Desk Staff, Berkshire Pulse

Arts Funding and Resources

Curated information about funding and financial assistance for those working in the creative economy.

Resources for Artists and Arts Organizations

Mass Cultural Council highlights grants, action alerts, community events, opportunities, and resources. Find fellowships, explore artists' galleries, discover apprenticeships, and identify art spaces and resources by subscribing to MCC's Monthly Newsletter.

Creative Capital is a nonprofit, grantmaking organization funding artists in the creation of groundbreaking new work, amplifying the impact of their work, and fostering sustainable artistic careers. Examples of upcoming grants on their site include Art for Change Prize 2023 (Deadline: 7/17/23) and the Boynes Artist Award (Deadline: 7/30/23).

New England Foundation for the Arts cultivates and promotes the arts in New
England and beyond. Among their upcoming grants are the National Theater Project Presenter Travel Grant (rolling deadline) and the New England States Touring (NEST) (Deadline: 8/1/23).

ArtsHub is an ever-evolving idea designed to highlight and bring together the amazing artists, organizations, and events that are happening within the creative communities of Western Massachusetts. The site regularly updates with opportunities, events, news, and more. Among this month’s listings are MASS MoCA’s Assets for Artists program and the Studios at MASS MoCA Artist Residency and Berkshire Film and Media Collaborative’s Community Film Fund Grant Application for nonprofits.

MASSCreative advocates for a well-resourced and equitable creative sector essential to the economic and civic vibrancy of Massachusetts. See their COVID-19 relief resources here.

What | When | Where

What: Lucy Kaplansky Live at The Guthrie Center

When: July 1

Where: The Guthrie Center

Details: Lucy Kaplansky is an acclaimed singer-songwriter of rare talent, “a truly gifted performer with a bag full of enchanting songs” (The New Yorker) and “the troubadour laureate of modern city folk” (The Boston Globe). She has released eight critically acclaimed CDs, two of which were awarded Best Pop Album of the year by the Association for Independent Music.

What: Jazz & Classics for Change: Anat Cohen & Marcello Goncalves

When: July 16

Where: St. James Place

Details: Anat Cohen & Marcello Goncalves! A superb duo! — ever
charismatic, prolific and inspired Grammy-nominated clarinetist-saxophonist Anat Cohen has won hearts and minds the world over with her expressive virtuosity and delightful stage presence. “All About Jazz” praised her records saying that together they made for “one brilliant bonanza of Brazilian music from one of the greatest clarinetists of our time …”

What: Cécile McLorin Salvant

When: July 20

Where: Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center

Details: Composer, singer, and visual artist Cécile McLorin Salvant has developed a passion for storytelling and finding the connections between vaudeville, blues, folk traditions from around the world, theater, jazz, and baroque music.

Mass Office of Travel and Tourism

The Massachusetts Official Travel and Tourism (MOTT) website includes a FREE business database where you can list your business! To get started, visit their website, where you can sign on as a new business or update your information if you are already registered.

Are you making the most of the #mylocalMA campaign? Submit Your Story for a chance to be featured on social media and in MOTT’s My Local MA e-newsletter. You can find more information and resources at Lovemylocalma.com.
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