



• PROFILE •

# From Deli Dreams to Cookbook Celebrity

By Emily Mangini

Cara Mangini is a multi-tasker. As a chef, restaurateur, and cookbook author, she has to be. Mangini is also the first to admit she can be a bit indecisive. Ask her what she wanted to be when she was five years old, though, and the answer comes quickly and without hesitation: "I wanted to work at the Woodside Deli." She paused before adding, "Then I wanted to be a dancer, and then later work at a fashion magazine. But yes, first I wanted to work at the Woodside Deli."



These days the Redwood City native is based in Columbus, Ohio, not behind a deli counter but running Little Eater, a plant-based eatery that uses sandwiches and salad to showcase the local, seasonal produce of her new hometown. Located at Columbus' culinary hot spot The North Market (think San Francisco's Ferry Building), Little Eater is complemented by Mangini's other venture, a green grocery and specialty market, Little Eater Produce and Provisions.

While neither meat slicer nor mortadella resides in her produce-inspired empire, Mangini still connects her girlhood dreams to the businesses that she has crafted. "There are a lot of things at The Deli that serve as inspiration to me, for example the idea of having a market with food service." It's not just the deli's floor plan that shaped her vision, though. "Even at a young age, I remember there was a lot of joy in that experience of going to get a deli sandwich, of getting really good food. All of the specialty food items - they were really fascinating and compelling to me - I wanted to try them all." In hindsight, Mangini realizes that "The Deli" was her first exposure to a gourmet grocer, and the power of that "first" lives on. "To this day, it's one of my first stops when I come home."

At both restaurant and market, Mangini's goal is to create that same food-focused magic. Instead of a Godfather sandwich piled with deli meats, hers are stacked with seared butternut squash steaks topped with caramelized apple and onion jam, or egg salad sandwiched between housemade pretzel buns. There are



Cara Mangini - Photo by Matthew Benson

also warm quiche, cheddar biscuits, and hearty scoops of vegetable medleys, like sweet potato and black bean succotash.

Beyond establishing herself in the Columbus culinary community, she has also produced her first cookbook, "The Vegetable Butcher" (Workman Publishing Company). An authoritative produce tutorial, the book is chock-full of step-by-step instructions on how to select, prepare, and cook everything from artichokes to zucchini.

The cookbook hit the stores last spring and Mangini spent the majority of the year on a national book tour. In between travel, book-signings and cooking demonstrations, she was a guest on NBC's "Today Show" teaching the hosts to make her grilled eggplant and mozzarella stacks, the

Hallmark Channel's "Home and Family" showcasing her popular Turkish carrot yogurt dip, and Country Music Channel's "Reel Eats." Not to mention doing interviews for radio and for publications including The New York Times, TIME, and Glamour.

The frenetic pace has paid off: "The Vegetable Butcher" has landed on Amazon's 100 Books for a Lifetime of Cooking and Drinking (among works by culinary legends Julia Childs and Jacques Pepin) and earned a nomination for a Good Reads Award.

The new year brings a fresh round of events and appearances, including a spot on the roster at Culinary Institute of America's prestigious spring event, World of Flavors International Conference and Festival. The pace has been exhausting, but the first-time author stays focused on what the work represents: a true dream come true.

"I started work on the book four years ago, but really it's a culmination of over 10 years of working toward it, exploring the world through produce. It is a real dream to finally see it in print and on the shelves," Mangini said.

While the book and the Little Eater locations emerged in Ohio, Mangini's culinary journey began in Redwood City. "Food has always been the center of my family's universe, and I knew at a young age that there was real magic that happened around the table." For Mangini, "food," "family" and "Redwood City" are synonymous. "I was really lucky to grow up with both sides of my family in Redwood City. Now looking back I realize that not everybody has that."

"Because my (paternal) grandfather had these businesses in Redwood City, I've always had this great pride in the city," she said. "He had this great hope and passion for creating a vibrant downtown community, and creating a city where business could thrive. I guess I adopted that same entrepreneurial spirit."

Along with evoking feelings of home and family, Mangini also connects Redwood City with entrepreneurship. Her paternal grandfather, Natale "Nat" Mangini, owned and operated two Lock Drug Stores — one on Broadway in downtown Redwood City, and one on Woodside Road. Her maternal grandfather, Robert Galiata, was a traditional butcher and fishmonger in San Francisco.

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Mangini has found that sense of community spirit in her adopted home, where she was recently selected by the magazine Columbus Underground as number two on a list of the city's best chefs. "It's what I love about Columbus, there is that same sense of potential, and that feeling that your success is equal to the energy that you put into your business. It's very similar to that feeling that my grandfather had in Redwood City."

From her maternal grandfather she garnered his respect for the customer, and the craft of providing the best-quality food. "At a young age, he taught me that your customers are your business and the way you handle their experience is equivalent to your success."

Mangini's professional journey into the culinary world was not a straight shot from Redwood City to Columbus. After graduating from Chicago's Northwestern University with a degree in journalism, Mangini moved to New York City with visions of working for a fashion magazine. Instead, she found herself climbing the corporate ladder of The Estée Lauder Companies, working for the hair products company Bumble and bumble. But 10 years in, Mangini had an epiphany: "I realized that I was drawn to business, but I didn't want to run the company that I was in." When a mentor asked how she would spend a perfect day off, she knew her answer. "Even being an indecisive person, I knew right away that I would spend the day cooking for the people that I love. So, I set out to figure out how to turn that into a business."

From this moment of clarity came enrollment in New York's Natural Gourmet Institute, a culinary school that focuses on health and wellness through natural and organic food preparation. It was also the start of an intensive year in which she lived life in the beauty industry by day, and pursued her culinary dreams at night, keeping her chef's knives and kitchen shoes tucked in her desk drawer. Saturdays were devoted to school, and Sundays to her first culinary job, working as the first vegetable butcher at Mario Batali's (then) nascent Italian food mecca, Eataly. "I loved working as a vegetable butcher because it gave me a chance to demystify vegetables for people. I'd teach

customers how to chop and prepare their produce. It really showed me that even in a big city with sophisticated cooks, vegetables can be intimidating."

Mangini had also traveled to food havens like Spain, Italy, France and Turkey, and noticed that cooking with vegetables came much more naturally in other countries than it did in the United States. These experiences planted the seed for what would grow into her personal and professional mission. "My ultimate goal is to put vegetables at the center of people's plates, to honor the work of our farmers and support the health of my community, wherever it is."

The name, "Little Eater," is the direct translation of her Italian last name, but Mangini insists that her enthusiasm for produce does not equate to starvation. "This food, it isn't about deprivation, but abundance, diversity and flavor. I believe that vegetables are worthy of celebrating, that they are beautiful ingredients that connect us to nature, the seasons, and can bring great joy."

The veggie expert is often asked the big question: Is she a vegetarian herself?

"I realized over time that what is important to me is to bring everyone to the table," she responds. "I worry that labels, whether it be 'vegetarian' or 'healthy,' can scare people away. For me, it's about being produce-inspired." 