

Hejl to the Chef

Pancakes or Plaintiffs –
Attorney Marie Hejl Grills Them All

Story by Robert Calvert

HER PHONE MACHINE CLEARED UP the initial mystery: The Hejls pronounce their name to rhyme with *Nile*. Marie explained that the name is of Czech or Bohemian origin, accounting for the unusual spelling. Marie herself is anything but bohemian. She's a smart, energetic Austin woman who keeps busy practicing law and producing her own TV cooking show.

Precocious Pancake Wrangler

Marie's father seems to have been the one who got her going as a cook, teaching her to whip up flapjacks when she was scarcely tall enough to reach the top of the stove. These weren't just generic pancakes, either. Her parents believed in eating healthily, so little Marie started right out making her pancakes from whole-wheat flour.

Nearly two decades later, she still enjoys cooking simple, healthy food from wholesome ingredients.

The Hejls were a large, active family. Dad was an architect. Mom was in real estate. And Marie grew up with three brothers.

It was Marie's eldest sibling, Jim, who got her into television. He was involved with Access TV, and at 13, was

actually the youngest Access producer when he came up with the idea of creating a cooking show with his 10-year-old sister.

Early pancake practice paid off. The main menu item in Marie's debut show was Branded Pancakes. She started each one by writing her initials on the griddle with a thin stream of batter. As soon as the letters began to brown,

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Marie Hejl (pictured left in both photos) often invites guest chefs to join her.



she added more batter. When the flapjacks were done, her initials showed up darker than the rest of the surface - branded. In addition to pancakes, Marie made Happy Toast decorated with smiley faces. It was a Halloween show, too, and she wore a costume.

Kids Cooking! turned out to be a hit, continuing in reruns for a decade. Years later, when Marie was studying at The University of Texas at Austin, her chums still watched her show on TV. One can well imagine dozens of inspired undergraduates breakfasting on Branded Pancakes and Happy Toast before hurrying off to morning classes.

After completing her undergraduate degree, Marie entered UT Law School. It wasn't until just after she passed the bar exam that she experienced her culinary epiphany, when on a celebratory trip to Italy, she tasted *la cucina italiana*.

Counselor at Cooking

Marie returned from her Italian trip relaxed and ready to embark on her legal career. Despite career demands, she did not abandon cooking. Indeed, she began to take on a new role - cooking counselor.

Many of Marie's friends had married. They had spiffy kitchens and lots of

cooking utensils, but alas, they had never learned to cook. Knowing that Marie was a whiz in the kitchen, they asked the rising attorney for culinary advice. She was happy to help, typically saying, "It's easier than you think."

A natural entrepreneur, Marie recognized it was time to return to TV with another cooking show.

Home on the Range

Marie's brother had moved to California to create video games, so he was not available to work on her new project. She posted an ad at Access TV and quickly found a coproducer and cameraman - a Baptist minister who enjoyed working with television as an avocation. *Cooking with Marie* was on the air.

After producing a few episodes in her apartment, Marie began shooting at her parents' home, where the commodious kitchen extends into an open family area large enough for the crew

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Marie has expanded her repertoire significantly from the pancakes and toast featured in her childhood debut program, but she continues to emphasize simplicity and wholesomeness. Her recipe for Eggs Benedict uses whole-wheat muffins, for example, and her sauces often include a base of low-fat, low-sodium chicken broth. The message is still, "It's easier than you think."

She especially likes to cook pork. When *Southern Living* profiled her recently, she provided the magazine with a tasty recipe for Pork Loin Chops with Cranberry-Pomegranate Sauce. (The recipe includes Gorgonzola cheese, possibly a subtle tribute to her Italian experiences.)

Marie receives many emails in response to her programs. At least half come from male viewers, who tend to ask questions about reading recipes - What is a teaspoon? - and so forth. Initially most emails requested recipes, but Marie now posts those on her website.

We wondered what the TV cook likes to eat. It turns out she enjoys crab cakes, and she is on a quest to find which Austin restaurant serves the best ones. While the quest continues, she has developed a recipe of her own.

One of Marie's most popular programs was a "dinner-date" show in which she presented recipes viewers could prepare when inviting dates over to dine.

What should an intrepid suitor serve if inviting the TV cook herself to dinner? Crab cakes, of course, accompanied by a tart Sauvignon Blanc. The second course might be seared

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scallops or salmon with a wasabe tartar sauce. Riesling would be a good choice to pair with the salmon. Alternatively, Marie enjoys marinated tenderloin, accompanied by Cabernet Sauvignon or a good Chianti. Dessert? She wants coconut cream pie with lots of whipped cream or a chocolate torte, though she says she "wouldn't eat the whole thing."

Cook at Law

Marie continues to practice law with an Austin firm, confining her culinary enterprises to weekends, but she says that TV experience complements her legal work.

"Standing up on TV is similar to going to court to argue a motion. And especially working with guests - you have to be prepared to followup on what guests or witnesses say when they surprise you."

It seems like the sky's the limit for Marie. Her program now runs on about 50 TV stations - including some in other countries. She's developing a line of aprons, too.

We wondered how Marie keeps all these things going. "You get caught up in the work, having fun meeting people," she says. "It's easier than you think." ★



Top: It takes a village to shoot a TV show. When Hejl started *Cooking With Marie*, she produced a few episodes in her apartment before shooting at her parents' home, where the commodious kitchen extended into an open family area large enough for the crew to set up. Bottom: Hejl on location for her BBQ show.

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Marie's Crab Cakes

Serves 4-6 as an appetizer.

Ingredients

- 2 Tbsp. minced green onions (just the green part)
- 1 Tbsp. minced fresh lemon basil
- 3 Tbsp. freshly-grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 Tsp. Old Bay Seasoning
- 2 Tbsp. plain bread crumbs (more if desired)
- 3 Tbsp. light mayonnaise
- Freshly-ground black pepper
- 1 large egg
- 1 lb. fresh crabmeat (check for shell, but do not wash)
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Pre-made rémoulade sauce (if desired)

Instructions

Line baking sheet with parchment paper.

In medium-sized bowl, combine all ingredients except crabmeat and olive oil. Once all ingredients are combined, add crab. Toss gently to coat crab.

Using your hands, form crab mixture into tablespoon-sized, round patties. Place on lined baking sheet. When baking sheet is covered, place in the freezer. Chill the patties for about 15-30 minutes. This will help the cakes keep their shape when cooked.

In medium-sized skillet, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil. Place 2-3 crab cakes in the skillet and cook for about 3-4 minutes per side, or until nicely browned.

Serve immediately, dry or with a side of pre-made rémoulade sauce.

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