



Maria Wunderlin, executive chef at Rack & Helen's Social House.

NEAL BRUNS

Claiming Her Kitchen

Maria Wunderlin is more than just the head chef at the recently revamped, everything-from-scratch kitchen at Rack & Helen's Social House. She also

runs a small food empire as Corporate Executive Chef overseeing the Social House, Rack & Helen's Bar & Grill in New Haven and its JW Anderson's Catering business.

"I just figured out that I've written over 700 recipes in the past year and half," she said, looking surprised as she said the number out loud.

"The concept of the all-scratch kitchen means to me that we take the time to do things the right way. The way Grandma did. A lot of the recipes on the menu come from my mom and my Sicilian grandma. Food was a big part of my life growing up," said Wunderlin.

"We don't take short-cuts. We make our own dressings, pickles, mustards. Our own sausage from my grandma's recipe. We use clean oils with no preservatives, no MSG, no high-fructose corn syrup. The only thing we don't make in house are the bread products—but those are mostly locally-sourced, too."

Which is not to say it's health food, she cautioned, but "modern takes on old traditions." Meatloaf, fish and chips, a custom burger blend from Tim Didier Meats. The adult-rated cheese toasty.

"My favorite dish right now is the Creole shrimp tacos," she said. "We are not afraid of bold flavors. But you can still bring your mom in for a salad! The Berry Hippy Crunch salad is one of our top sellers."

It would be nice if this were an era in which we could just leave it at that: successful chef. The fact she's a woman, so what?

But we're not there yet. It must be noted—though women are increasingly joining the upper ranks of the restaurant industry world—female head chefs are definitely still a rarity.

"I encountered very few women in the industry when I first got into it," said Wunderlin. "I like to think we're on the brink of a new era. I just know how hard I worked to get here."

"My main goal is that the restaurant runs like a well-oiled machine. And have more female faces in the kitchen. That would be great, too." 4935 Hillegas Road, 260.203.3154, rackandhelens.com 

—Beth Behrendt