

October - December 2010

# Personal Chef

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE UNITED STATES PERSONAL CHEF ASSOCIATION

**Monica Thomas**  
**Tailored Taste**  
**Personal Chef Service**





*Monica Thomas*

*Tailored Taste Personal Chef Service*

# *Hard Work Gets and Keeps Clients for Monica Thomas*

*by Carol Anderson*

“A successful personal chef business takes hard work,” says Personal Chef Monica Thomas. “Even if a client ‘falls off the ceiling into your lap’ you need to work hard to keep that client happy.”

That’s great advice from this six-year successful personal chef.

### ***Monica’s former job – oops, make that jobs***

Yes, jobs – eight of them since she graduated from college. And even in college she went through three majors before settling on a degree in Elementary Education, with a concentration in Special Education. (Monica admits she has a short attention span.)

What were those eight jobs? Here’s the list: school teacher for three years, typist for two years, graphic artist for three years, office manager for two years, first female vice president of administration for a British company for five years, independent event planner for seven years, sales and catering manager for two-and-a-half years, and her last pre-chefing job that was the least desirable – an event planner for government meetings for two years. And then she saw the Culinary Business Academy/United States Personal Chef Association advertisement in *Cooking Light Magazine*.

### ***The favorite job – before becoming a personal chef***

You can see from the list of jobs that only one had anything to do with food. When she interviewed for the job at the caterer, Monica wanted to do something directly food related. However the business manager insisted she should be a Sales/Catering Manager.

Monica says, “I’d never sold a thing in my life and told him that. He insisted I could sell. I insisted I could do just about anything BUT sell. He hired me anyway and put me in charge of selling events at an off-premise venue.” As a result, this reluctant salesperson sold over \$700,000 worth of catering services. She thinks the reason for the success was that the product being offered was truly the best in town – and that made it easy.

Besides learning to sell, she also learned the importance of paying attention to detail and following through, both of which have contributed to her success as a personal chef. Monica explains, “If you sold the job, you ran it from beginning to end – planned the menu down to the exact number of ounces of each food item on a plate, organized the rentals and created the packing list for the trucks, and determined the number of servers, bartenders, captains and plate-scrappers needed for each job. At the job you would oversee the on-site set-up and execution of the event, and ensure the floors were mopped and the museum returned to its museum status before departing – generally around 2 a.m. Then you were back at your desk the next morning at 8 a.m. to sell some more. It was brutal, but fabulous.”

### ***Monica’s first “personal chef” experience***

After spending four years in St. Louis, Monica and her husband Mike moved back to the Washington DC area, initially moving in with her sister and brother-in-law. Because Monica was not working during this time, she cooked dinner every night. “When we moved into our own place, my sister was heartbroken to lose her private chef!” Monica said. “I was working as a government meeting planner – my ‘yawn’ job – when I found out about personal chefs.”

“One day I called my husband from the job and said I wanted to quit and become a personal chef,” she said. “He said to absolutely, go for it.” Monica’s sister also wanted to have a chef back! Within two weeks Monica had quit her job and was off to the Culinary Business Academy (CBA). That was in 2004.

Upon returning from CBA and starting Tailored Taste Personal Chef Service,

her sister became the first client and continues to act as a guinea pig for testing new recipes. The second and third clients came within two weeks – co-workers of her husband overheard him describing Monica’s new work to a colleague. She met both of them the following Saturday and came home with two checks!

### ***Those start-up challenges***

Monica says that conquering doubts was the hardest part. Her first cook day took 8.5 hours, which she admits was scary...yet with better menu-planning and MUCH better execution, she learned to control the process.

Regarding the menu planning task, after another long cook day, Mike admonished Monica to “remember that this is not Christmas Eve dinner, it’s their meal for Tuesday night.” That helped her realize that every dish had to be great, but not elaborate with 20 moving parts to it.

### ***The value of a chef buddy***

Monica and Annise Jackson, a CBA classmate, struck up a friendship – one that continues to this day. They are cheerleaders for each other as well as sounding boards. Monica says, “I don’t believe I sent out a party menu the first three years without first running it past Annise for her opinion on the dishes as well as the pricing. She helped me price appropriately, which was higher than I first thought.”

For instance, her typical comments were – ‘fabulous menu, now double the price!’ Or ‘Are you crazy with this menu? Make dishes you know are fabulous – don’t reinvent the wheel.’ This support is invaluable and Monica recommends that all personal chefs find a buddy.

### ***Marketing that works for Monica***

Website, word-of-mouth and networking work for Monica. She didn’t try print ads because other personal chefs said they had wasted time and money with little or no results.

Monica says that even when she is busy, she is continually marketing, marketing and marketing. She knows that no matter how busy or slow she is, she must keep marketing.

“I think marketing is truly a matter of believing in your product,” she says. “It’s an easy sell when you know what you do will help improve someone’s quality of life. As my confidence grew, the selling became easier.”

Her website has propelled business along on its own; in the last two months, she has acquired four, new repeating clients from her constantly updated viral platform and considers it effective.

Not to say that personal networking does not factor in; she has several professional organizations she is active with – the USPCA Capital Chefs chapter, Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, the Art Institute of Washington (where she teaches) and through volunteer work for SOS (the Capital Area Food Bank), and the Ovarian Cancer National Alliance. Through these she has established a large network of people who consistently refer potential clients.

### ***The ups and downs of business***

The first year in business was good for Monica. Financially she broke even within six months and had a nice roster of clients. Her fourth client was a woman with severe allergies. “She was a challenge that helped me grow as a chef as well as gain confidence,” Monica says. “I cooked for her without killing her which was fabulous. She’d been eating only gluten-free waffles and suddenly the world of healthy food that didn’t make her sick was open to her. Even her aesthetician asked her what she was doing differently when she went for a facial four months after I started cooking for her. The aesthetician noticed that her skin had dramatically improved. How cool is that?”

Then came the summer and clients all seemed to disappear. She had two slow summers, but then the following summer business boomed. January had been

good for two years, but in the third year that month was dead. “I’ve stopped looking for patterns and just keep plodding forward,” she said.

### ***Monica’s typical week***

Four cook days a week is normal for Monica, although sometimes it is three and sometimes it is six. She serves all sorts of people. Monica said, “Six years ago I had a lot of ordinary folks and the common denominator was busy-ness. With the economic change, a lot of those clients couldn’t afford me any more. So my focus shifted to higher income brackets, single professional women (a 5 x 4 lasts a month and is a bargain for them), and parties. The majority of her clients are on special diets.

Monica does a fair number of dinner parties which she considers to be fabulous marketing opportunities because all the guests are potential clients.

## ***Business Stats***

Tailored Taste Personal Chef Service

Email: [chefmonica@tailoredtaste.net](mailto:chefmonica@tailoredtaste.net)

Website: [www.tailoredtaste.net](http://www.tailoredtaste.net)

Serves the Washington DC metro area

Attended Culinary Business Academy in 2004

Attained Certified Personal Chef (CPC status in August of 2006)

Serves as president of USPCA’s Capital Chef Chapter; Chapter of the Year in 2009

Serves as a Coach for the USPCA Chef to Chef program

Active in other food-related organizations:

- Local Exchange Coordinator for Women Chefs and Restaurateurs (WCR) and conference committee member for the WCR 2009 national conference
- Member of American Cheese Society
- Member American Culinary Federation
- Volunteer chef for SOS/OFL
- Volunteer chef for Camp Lighthouse



## ***Parties, teaching and cooking lessons***

She also goes down other culinary avenues for increased revenue:

- teaching the general public at Williams-Sonoma, teaching at the Art Institute of Washington's culinary department, and teaching one-on-one in clients' homes or as an interactive dinner party
- offering party services
- being a one-stop shopping personal chef, organizing rental equipment and servers as needed
- helping a potential client find another chef if she is not available

"I believe I've embraced the full spectrum of the food world available to personal chefs," Monica says. When her 5 x 4 business slowed down, she focused energies on these other services. This sustained her through some leaner times. She happily reports that the 5 x 4s are returning.

## ***Getting through tough days***

As with all personal chefs, there are tough days. Monica survives them and has never wanted to give up, getting through those times by putting one foot in front of the other – and making lots of lists!

She also has a special pick-me-up. After a tough day she enjoys champagne or a mo-gin-to (mojitos made with gin) which is her preferred drink. "It's very yummy – you should try it," she added knowingly.

## ***Monica's advice for personal chefs***

"If you want this to be your full-time job, then you really need to focus your energy to make it so. It doesn't happen without hard work. You need to work hard to get and keep clients happy for a long time."

"With each successful client, confidence builds – that confidence comes through and makes you more desirable as a personal chef. Believe firmly in your product and know that you are providing a worthwhile service."

She also got some great advice from a CBA instructor. "Vickie Kirlick said that when asked to do something we hadn't done before (cook an unusual dish, do a party, cook for special diets, etc.) we should say yes and then go figure it out."

## ***No regrets***

Obviously, Monica has no regrets about starting her personal chef business. She is driven by the desire to learn and sheer curiosity, not to mention an amazing amount of energy. She says she is much happier, though her life seems much crazier at times. "I will admit my past 9-to-5 routine occasionally sounds nice in the sense that I would not be responsible for everything, but then I come to my senses and realize how great personal chef work is."

## ***Balancing work and play***

When asked if she keeps her life in balance, she just laughed and said, "Ask those who know me – my life is pretty much at full-bore. My two speeds are on and off, over-scheduling (work, volunteering, and family) is my norm."

"Vacations in the last six years tend to be the 'I want to do nothing but sit on a beach and read book after book' type vs. the 'let's see all the sights in 12 countries in a week.'

Vacation is a necessity to Monica. Each year she generally takes one vacation with extended family, one with Mike, and one long weekend with her chef buddy. And also tries to squeeze in additional last-minute long weekends when the schedule allows.

Monica says that family is essential in her life. "It is the reason we moved back from St. Louis. I couldn't stand watching my first great niece grow up from a distance, only seeing her in six-month intervals. I live one block from my sister and brother-in-law. My nephew and his family live one block in the other direction. So we sit smack-dab in the center of family – on purpose... really!

"The mail slot at home will occasionally open and I'll hear a little voice say, 'Monica, why's this door locked?' and it will be one of the three 'greats' who live down the block (2 great nieces and a great nephew).



*The "greats": Dominic, Claudia, and Claire Giunta*

"Our house has been the scene of many parties such as birthdays, baptisms, Father's Days, Mother's Days, wedding showers, baby showers and always Christmas Eve. I've done the Christmas Eve family dinner for over 25 years. The tradition is that the menu is unusual and composed of recipes we've never had before. I love that."

## ***Conference? Yes!***

Monica considers the USPCA conferences a necessary business expense and she has attended all of them since joining the organization.

## ***Chapter involvement? Yes!***

Monica has been involved with the USPCA Capital Chefs since the beginning of her personal chef career. She was secretary of the chapter from 2006 to 2008, before becoming president in 2008.

She said the chapter had some tough times and no meetings were held for over a year. A handful of chefs pulled it back from the brink beginning in 2006 and in 2009 the chapter was named USPCA's Chapter of the Year.

Capital Chefs meet ten times a year – two are purely social (dinner out in summer; holiday party at Monica's house in January). The rest of the meetings are educationally-focused. They have taken field trips to places such as coffee roasters, a specialty vinegar producer, a beekeeper and a visit to a goat farm. Other educational opportunities have been speakers on topics such as nutrition, organic farming, and unusual oils.

The chapter has adopted SOS/Operation Frontline as its charity and several members are volunteer teachers for them.

"The chapter is a great group of people who support each other, and enjoy each other's company. It's a terrific networking group as well. We share leads and occasionally share jobs," Monica explained with a smile.

# The Personal Side of Monica



**Family:** Married to Mike for 17 years. Family also includes a sister and brother-in-law, nephew, nieces, great nieces and great nephews who live nearby.

**Pets:** Anya, a celiac Siberian Husky, and Mac, an adopted pound puppy that is a Shepherd/Rottweiler mix.

**Hobbies:** Monica says that yoga is about as 'sporty' as she gets. She also enjoys reading, travel, crossword puzzles and eating cheese.

**Favorite cookbook:** Silver Palate – both the red and white ones.

**Favorite foodie magazine:** Culture – a magazine all about cheese

**Most indispensable tool or piece of equipment:** An 8-inch chef knife that she says 'does everything.'

**PC-mobile:** For Christmas 2006 Mike surprised Monica with what they consider their Craig's List best deal ever – a 2002 Mercedes C240. They added a personalized license plate – COOK4U.

**Hero:** Joan Long, owner of Patty Long Catering in St. Louis. "I worked for her when we lived there. Joan taught me much about the catering business but the big lesson I take from Joan is the value of hospitality. Everyone who's met Joan firmly believes they are her best friend. She makes everyone feel important and special. This is how I want my clients to feel. (And by the way, I'm her best friend.)"

**Who shaped the way she thinks about food:** Monica gives credit to her mother. "Mom always said I was her best eater – a dubious honor but clearly I always liked food."

**Important lesson while growing up:** Monica admits to setting her parent's kitchen on fire when they were out of town. She wrote, "I was trying to impress a boyfriend by making home-made French fries, trying to speed up the process by putting a lid on a huge pot of oil. I said to myself, OK, it's taking so long; I'll go change my clothes. Oh, I think I can smell the oil, it must be ready now. Oops, yes indeed, the flames are touching the ceiling and the lid IS on. The story goes on but has a happy ending – the 2nd degree burns left no scars and my folks got a new kitchen." Monica didn't elaborate about the boyfriend's response.

# Monica's Recipes

## Bison Stuffed Peppers

4 Servings

2 large red bell peppers  
1 Tb. olive oil  
1 medium onion, chopped  
1 pound ground bison  
1 Tb. smoked paprika  
1 tsp. Merquen (Chilean smoked chile)\*  
1 c. cheese, shredded (mozzarella, cheddar, or feta)  
1 c. peas, blanched if using fresh or frozen  
1 c. corn, fresh or frozen  
1/2 c. barbecue sauce (preferable one with chipotle) OPTIONAL

Cut peppers in half top to bottom, remove stem and seeds. Steam the peppers until slightly soft. (They will finish cooking when client heats dish for service.

In a large pan, saute onion for about 4-6 minutes until soft but do not brown. Add spices and toast lightly with the onions. Add bison and brown.

Remove from heat & add cheese, peas, corn and barbecue sauce if using.

Stuff peppers.

Cool, package.

\*Etnia brand – can be ordered online

**Reheating Instructions:**

Thaw in refrigerator 1-2 nights. Preheat oven to 350. Place uncovered container in hot oven and bake 20-25 minutes or until warmed through.



# Fish in Artichoke and Tomato Broth

4 servings

1 small onion, quartered and thinly sliced  
3 Tb. olive oil  
2 garlic cloves, chopped  
1/3 c. white wine  
9 oz. artichoke heart, frozen, thawed & drained OR canned but NOT marinated  
1-15 oz. can stewed tomatoes  
1/3 c. kalamata olives, chopped  
2/3 c. water  
1 1/4 tsp. salt  
1/2 tsp. black pepper  
4-6oz sea bass or other fresh white fleshed fish\*  
Zest of 1/2 orange, optional

## Directions:

Cook onion in 2 tablespoons oil in a 2-quart heavy saucepan over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until softened and golden, about 6 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring, 1 minute.

Add wine and boil 1 minute. Add artichoke hearts, tomatoes (including juice), olives, water, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper and bring to a simmer, uncovered, stirring occasionally. Cool before continuing with recipe.

Pat fish dry and place in container. Cover with artichoke mixture. Top with orange zest if using.

May freeze at this point or leave for fresh service.

\*Can also substitute uncooked shrimp for the fish.

Recipe adapted from Gourmet Quick Kitchen column, March 2006

## Reheating Instructions:

Thaw in refrigerator 1-2 nights. Preheat oven to 400. When the oven is hot, place uncovered container in oven and roast until fish is just opaque and cooked through, 14-15 minutes. Remove from oven and let rest 5-10 minutes before serving.

\*ADJUST COOK TIME TO REFLECT THICKNESS OF FISH AND NUMBER OF PORTIONS.

# Apricot and Lamb Tagine

8 servings

2 c. onions, diced (about 1 large)  
1/2 c. orange juice  
1/2 c. beef broth  
1 Tb. lemon zest  
2 Tb. honey  
1 Tb. lemon juice  
2 tsp. garlic, minced  
2 Tb. ginger root, fresh, minced  
1 1/2 tsp. salt  
1 tsp. coriander, ground  
1/2 tsp. cumin, ground  
1/4 tsp. black pepper  
2 1/2 lbs. leg of lamb, boneless, trimmed and cut into bite-sized pieces  
2 cinnamon sticks, 3" each  
6 oz. dried apricots, halved

## Directions:

Combine all ingredients in an pressure cooker. Bring to pressure and cook for 25 minutes. Release pressure naturally.

Remove & discard cinnamon sticks. Place tagine in containers and cool before storing in freezer or refrigerator.

Serve atop whole wheat couscous flecked with parsley, lemon zest and a drizzle of olive oil.

Adapted from a recipe in Cooking Light, March 2006 – original recipe was cooked for 8 hours in a slow cooker.

## Reheating Instructions:

Thaw in refrigerator 1-2 nights. Reheat on stovetop in a pot over VERY LOW heat, stirring frequently. OR Heat in microwave on 50% power for 3 minutes. Stir to redistribute heat and, if necessary, continue to heat at 50% power for additional 3-4 minutes, checking at 30-second intervals.

# Smoked Gouda Grits

Servings: 4

1/2 c. grits, stoneground, unbleached  
2 c. water  
1 tsp. salt  
1 pint half and half  
1/2 lbs. smoked gouda, diced or grated

## Directions:

Combine grits, water, and salt in a medium sized, heavy saucepan.

Bring to a boil and reduce heat to low. Simmer the grits, stirring frequently, until they begin to thicken.

Stir in half-and-half and smoked Gouda. Continue to simmer until thick (30 minutes or so), stirring frequently. When finished, remove from heat, salt and pepper to taste. Let rest for at least an hour before if serving straight away. Let cool and package if freezing.

## NOTES:

The smoked cheese is the key to the flavor of this dish. Yancey's Fancy smoked gouda (Costco sells it) works nicely.

I've served this topped with either roasted hot pepper-jelly glazed salmon or seared chipotle shrimp:

**SALMON:** Sprinkle with salt and coat with hot pepper jelly (I make my own, but you can use store-bought). Roast in preheated 400 degrees oven for 15-20 minutes.

**SHRIMP:** Mix salt and ground chipotle chile together. Sprinkle over peeled shrimp. Sear in hot skillet coated with 1-2 Tb of neutral flavored oil for about 2-3 minutes or until shrimp is just cooked through.

## Reheating Instructions:

Thaw in refrigerator 1-2 nights. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Remove plastic lid and cover with foil. When oven is hot, bake dish for 20-25 minutes, stirring at least once to distribute the heat, or until warmed through.

Adapted from: Flavor Magazine, October 15, 2009;  
recipe provided to magazine by Thornton River Grille, Sperryville, VA