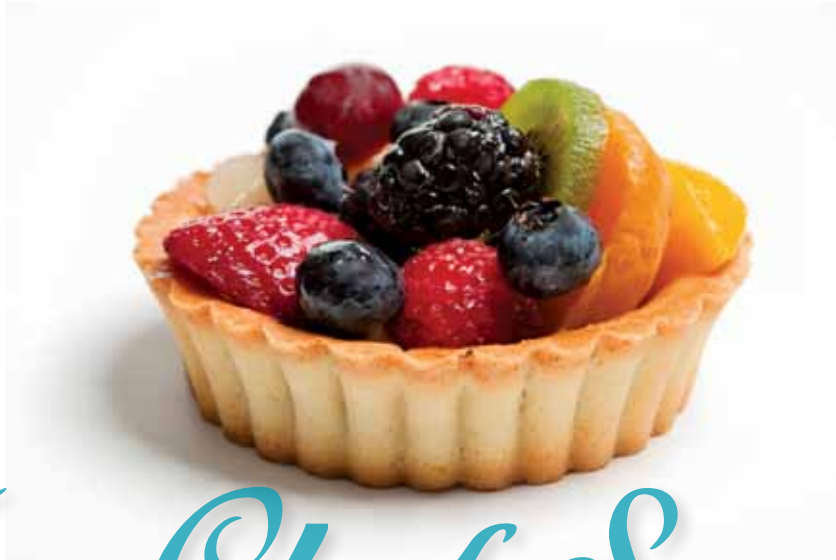


“I want people to crave the dessert I make, to think about it long after they’ve finished it.”

- Amanda Rockman

A graduate of Taylor High School, Amanda Rockman competed on five episodes of Top Chef: Just Desserts and also serves as executive pastry chef at The Bristol in Chicago



Top Chef Success

**Pastry chef and Katy native Amanda Rockman bakes up a storm on Bravo's hit show
Top Chef: Just Desserts**

*Written by Jody Lane
Photography Courtesy of Bravo Photo*

Never underestimate the power of a home-cooked meal when it comes to fueling not only the bodies of children, but also their hopes and dreams. Take Amanda Rockman, for instance, a Katy native who's now executive pastry chef at one of Chicago's top restaurants and a recent competitor on season two of Bravo's TV show *Top Chef: Just Desserts*. She credits her mother's creative flair in the kitchen with igniting her passion for cooking and baking.

"She is a perfectionist and an artist, but also very technical," says Rockman. "We never had anything out of a can, and she was always trying something new. Asparagus with balsamic - what 7-year-old has that? I thought it was normal to have a mother who cooked this way. Some of my favorite times were spent with my mom in the kitchen, while she was preparing dinner."

Up for a Culinary Challenge

That propensity for hanging out in kitchens and Rockman's love for everything "food" - the chemistry, the preparing, the plating, and especially the desserts - never went away. Earlier this year, Rockman was selected as one of 14 chefs for Season 2 of Bravo's TV show *Top Chef: Just Desserts*. She decided to go on the show, precisely because the idea of doing so seemed like a challenge way out of her comfort zone. "I wondered, 'Would my grandmother want to talk to me? Will I embarrass my parents?'" shares Rockman. "I'd spent all this time building a reputation. What if I was edited poorly and

lost what I'd built? Was it a chance I should take?"

On the show, Rockman weathered stress-tempered Quick-fire Challenges, whipping out elegant desserts like chocolate sponge cake with pickled cherries and pistachios. She gracefully navigated team-based elimination challenges, creating fairytale showpiece desserts and edible treats for Willy Wonka's Imagination Room.

In the fifth episode, her funnel cake with sorbet and pineapple jam, served to a waterpark crowd, fell short of the judges' expectations. Rockman packed her tools and said her goodbyes with a sense of humor still intact. "Death by funnel cakes and short shorts," she quipped, paying tribute to both her final dessert and choice of clothing for that hot day. "I believe that in life, you should push the limits to see what you're made of," says Rockman. "I'm proud of my reactions in the show. I stayed calm - just wish I could have made it further."

The Path to Pastries

Before garnering national recognition for her baking prowess, Rockman knew she loved spending time in the kitchen, but wasn't studying her passion in college. More and more, though, she found herself escaping her studies at Emerson College in Boston to work for free in an upscale restaurant. "I didn't know anything and I wanted to learn everything,"

During her time on Top Chef, Rockman whipped up many elegant desserts during Quickfire Challenges and team-based elimination challenges

Amanda's FAVES

Comfort Food

Pizza or a hamburger

Mother's Recipes

Tuna casserole
Black bottom cupcakes

Must-Have Ingredients

Almond flour
72% chocolate
Mascarpone
Vanilla bean
Salt

Original Creations

Basque cake
Macaron

Celebrity Chef's Cookbook

The Last Course:
The Desserts of Gramercy Tavern
by Claudia Fleming

she shares. And when the head pastry chef wondered why she was there all the time, she had an answer ready: "Because I want to learn from the best," she recalls.

Rockman applied and was accepted to both the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, NY and Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Her dad's gift of an impeccably timed, weeklong boot camp on savory pastries at CIA helped her make her decision. "I never left," she shares.

Making a Name for Herself

Rockman graduated with an Associate in Occupational Studies in baking and pastry arts from CIA and snagged a coveted internship with San Francisco's Emily Luchetti. This experience helped her win a job at Chicago's TRU restaurant. After establishing her reputation at stints with notable eateries, such as Austin's FINO and ASTI Trattoria and Chicago's L20 and Peninsula hotel, she joined The Bristol, where she has complete control over the dessert menu.

"Desserts are determined daily by whatever season decides to show up," Rockman jokes. "Yesterday, it was winter; today it's fall, and that changes the mood of the food served. I shop for ingredients at the market and do all the preparation and plating, start to finish.

"I want people to crave the dessert I make, to think about it long after they've finished it," she adds. "I want someone to

lick the plate. If not, then I'm asking, 'What did I do wrong?' I don't want you to walk away with the effect of a sugar grenade. I want you to come back for more, to come back because of me."

Rockman is also busy planning and re-planning the pastry operations for Balena, a new restaurant which recently launched in December, creating recipes she classifies as "inspired Italian." Her creations include gelato and affogato fused with pastry in imaginative combinations, such as cinnamon sugar donuts with vanilla gelato and a fresh shot of espresso, and classic tiramisu dressed with roasted pear.

A Bright Baking Future

After getting a taste of culinary success and a solid start, Rockman's baking future looks brighter than ever. In January 2011, she received Chicago's Jean Banchet Rising Pastry Chef Award. The pastry chef lifestyle of working 15-hour days and holidays hasn't dimmed her culinary enthusiasm.

"I love what I do, and I do the best I can with what I have available," says Rockman. "I have every intention of being in this profession for a long time." One can imagine the twinkle in her eyes as she adds, "You can be your own judge of whether my funnel cake is good or not!" **KM**

JODY LANE enjoys writing and spending time with family and friends. She admires people who dream big.