

## From “Bright Lights of the Second City: 50 Prominent Chicagoans on Living with Passion and Purpose”



Photo by Stephen Hamilton

### Gale Gand

#### Award-Winning Pastry Chef

Taking the cake with her *joie de vivre*, she cherry-picks culinary challenges that engage her creative entrepreneurship.

*Gale Gand, as the saying goes, is small but mighty. Petite she may be – all of five feet tall – but the Deerfield native is every inch the powerhouse. (“I make sure I never come off as little.”) The former host of the Food Network’s “Sweet Dreams,” Gand was a partner in Trio, the groundbreaking Evanston restaurant that she created in 1994 with former husband and culinary colleague Rick Tramonto, along with another partner. (Note: Trio closed in 2006.) In 1999, Gand and Tramonto teamed up with Rich Melman to debut the four-star, five-diamond Tru, which remains one of the country’s culinary gems as well as a crown jewel of the restaurant behemoth that is Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises. The author of eight cookbooks, Gand’s equals among pastry chefs are very few. The late Chicago Sun-Times restaurant critic Pat Bruno extolled her as “one of the best pastry chefs in the world.”*

*Gand has rewarded many a sweet tooth with her handiworks – from toasted coconut risotto with pecans to a famed “Chockablock” chocolate cake with warm caramel – in locales including Chicago, New York City, London, and Paris. Playful, passionate, and down to earth, she’s equally at ease fashioning caramel apple pie pops during a TV appearance or teaching master classes at Elava Farm in north suburban Lake Forest. Gand has cooked toque to toque with Julia Child and judged fledgling pastry chefs on TV’s “Top Chef: Just Desserts.” She graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology with a BFA in metalsmithing. Later, she explored the culinary arena through studies at La Varenne in Paris.*

I am who I am because of both of my parents. My mother, Myrna, with her Jewish Hungarian roots, baked wonderfully. She made these incredible lattice-topped cherry pies. I loved cooking with her, but because of my dyslexia, I couldn’t exactly follow the recipes. She’d say, with enthusiasm, “Oh, look, honey, you invented something new!” Mom possessed an open mind, a playful nature, and a lack of boundaries – just like me [laughs].

My father, Bob, was a white-collar guy with a traditional sales job who was also a natural entrepreneur. When I was six, he started a music school in our home, and it just kept growing. He came home one day when I was ten years old and announced, “Honey, I quit my job today.” The music store he built in Deerfield, The Village Music Store, still operates after fifty years. My dad taught me so many lessons about discipline, creativity, self-confidence, and the courage required to change course and start something unexpected. Our family possesses a gift we describe as the Gand success gene. Somehow, things always work out for us. I’ve learned not to question it; instead, I just let go and trust. I’m rather fearless.

Needing to earn money in college, I worked as a server at a vegetarian restaurant. When one of the line cooks didn’t show up one night, the owner asked me if I knew how to cook. When I said “No,” she threw me an apron with the reply, “Well, you do now!” After five seconds of abject terror, I was overcome with a strange sense of calm. It was as if I was speaking a language that I didn’t remember learning. At night’s end, I was elated. I knew I’d discovered my future career. Because I’d learned from my father that it was fine to diverge from my original plan – to be an artist – I moved forward quickly.

When I’m cooking, I feel like I’m dancing. I love the combination of the skills and feelings it encompasses. I enjoy the physicality of it all. Cooking is an art form that nourishes others and embraces all the senses, while providing entertainment and the opportunity to perform.

My mentors were few, but I do recall when Julia Child asked me, “Dearie, where were you trained?” When I confided that I was self-taught, she advised, “Don’t ever tell anyone that you were self-taught; rather, say you learned ‘in the field.’” When Julia then asked my former husband, Rick Tramonto, where *he’d* attended culinary school, he replied that he, too, was self-taught. Julia whacked him in the arm and said, “What did I just say about that?” [laughs].

Early work experiences helped prepare me for success. I filed my first income tax at age seven or eight, based on the money I earned playing music with my dad and modeling. As a teenager, I was hired to set diamonds in a Highland Park jewelry store. Many chefs fail because they don’t understand the business part of running a restaurant. Some chefs don’t even know how to read a profit and loss statement. Fortunately, I developed key financial skills at an early age by working as a bookkeeper in my father’s music store. I also benefit from adopting a wait-and-see attitude. I learned this philosophy from my mom: “It will all work out in the end; it always does, and worrying doesn’t help, so don’t do it.”

I never take no for an answer. My husband, Jimmy, jokes that I think the rules don’t apply to me – as in “No parking here . . . except for Gale Gand.” That may be true, but I don’t take advantage of the gift that is my good fortune.

*Gale Gand was interviewed in the kitchen at Elava Farm in Lake Forest on October 18, 2012. Her birthday is November 21, 1956.*

### Favorites

#### BOOK

*At Home: A Short History of Private Life* by Bill Bryson.  
A recent favorite, the book “takes us on a room-by-room tour through his own house, using each room as a jumping off point into the vast history of the domestic artifacts we take for granted,” according to the author’s website.

#### MOVIE

*Shakespeare in Love* (1998), directed by John Madden.  
It pushed me to pursue something better for myself in my personal life.

#### PLACE

The South of France. I love its cultural attitudes and its love of food and life itself.

#### QUOTATION

“I shall have poetry in my life. And adventure. And love, love, above all . . . unbiddable, ungovernable, like a riot in the heart and nothing to be done.”  
— TOM STOPPARD, PLAYWRIGHT, “SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE”

“And love, love, above all...”

