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ONE CHEF'S WINDING ROAD TO KITCHEN SUCCESS

Audi WEL fellow Sandra Cordero's global journey to become a chef

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Photo: Kristin Mansky

The James Beard Foundation is committed to supporting women in the food and beverage industry, from chefs and restaurateurs to entrepreneurs dreaming up new ways to make our food system more diverse, delicious, and sustainable. Our [Women's Leadership Programs](#) (WLP) presented by Audi, provide training at multiple stages of an individual's career, from pitching your brand to developing a perspective and policy on human resources. As part of the Foundation's commitment to advancing women in the industry, we're sharing stories from female James Beard Award winners, women's leadership program alumni, and thought leaders pushing for change. Below, Rachel Tepper Paley explores the journey of Audi WEL fellow Sandra Cordero, from her formative summers in Spain to a globetrotting modeling career to achieving her lifelong dream of owning her own restaurant.

Tucked away in Spain's northwesternmost corner, the Galician countryside is a lush meeting of pasture and sea. It's a beautiful setting to spend one's childhood summers, but that's not what Sandra Cordero remembers most about those months visiting her father's relatives. Lodged deepest in her memory is the food.

"It's all very simple," explained Cordero, the Amsterdam-born chef and owner of Los Angeles's Spanish-inflected Gasolina Cafe. "My uncle would get these crabs. [They] are just boiled, or thrown on the plancha with a little olive oil and salt and pepper. It's a no-fuss cuisine." She loved, too, the large format Galician empanadas—the pie-like precursor to all Latin America's handheld empanadas—and *pulpo a la gallega*, the famous Galician-style octopus tapa that's simmered for an hour and sliced into tender medallions.

It was a rich culinary world that would go on to define her career in the United States more than a decade later. But first, it helped Cordero define herself in urban Amsterdam, where she grew up with her Dutch mother. **"From a very young age, I'd throw parties," she said. "In Holland, there's not a lot of food at parties...we would do full spreads, like tortillas and other Spanish foods. People thought I was a bit over the top sometimes."**

Realizing that she loved to entertain, Cordero worked as a server in her late teens and dreamt of opening a cafe. She even went so far as to study for the city's required licensing exam. But a chance encounter with a modeling scout temporarily put those plans on hold.

"I got discovered working in a pizzeria," Cordero recalled. She had no previous interest in fashion, nor did she consider herself a great beauty. "I was a skinny, awkward girl." But the chance to travel the world intrigued her, and she took the plunge. At 18, Cordero found herself on a plane to Tokyo. "I had never had Japanese food in my life," she said. "One of the first nights, I went to one of those conveyor belt sushi places. I had my mind blown."

Seven years of modeling followed, a career that took Cordero around the world. There were photo shoots in Milan, Paris, and Sydney. She jetted to countries in Africa and Asia. She ate everywhere, learning as much as she could about the foods and culinary traditions of each destination.

But the job ultimately wasn't a fit. "It's not a great industry for a woman," Cordero admitted. "You go on auditions every day, and you get rejected all the time. You're pretty much told all the time what's not good enough about you."

Cordero ended up in New York City, where she returned to her first love: the restaurant industry. Soon a consulting opportunity took her to Los Angeles, where she helped launch a Japanese-style maid cafe and art space. The experience was educational, yet it made Cordero long to fulfill her teenage dream of running her own restaurant.

Cordero enrolled at the now-defunct Epicurean School of Culinary Arts in West Hollywood, and upon graduating began working under 20-some different chefs at the now-closed Test Kitchen, a shape-shifting concept that saw the chef and menu change every two to three days.

But when Cordero learned that she and her husband were expecting their first child, things changed. **"The minute that you start showing, you enter the kitchen and people really get freaked out," she said. Most of her coworkers were kind, but they treated her noticeably differently. "It's like, 'I'm not**

sick! I'm pregnant."

Cordero decided it was time to make her own rules. She struck out on her own for the first time with a catering business, and slowly it grew. So did her daughter. "When she was two-and-a-half, I was like, 'OK! She's going to start preschool. Now I can open a place.'"

Enter Gasolina, Cordero's acclaimed breakfast and lunch spot specializing in Spanish fare. In many ways, it's a clear descendent of those generous party spreads Cordero once made for friends. Homey and welcoming, the restaurant's menu is designed for lingering and sharing. Tapas abound: there's garlicky *pan con tomate y jamon*; crispy *patatas bravas* drizzled with creamy aioli; hearty *tortilla Española*; and much more. The restaurant was a hit, and a second Gasolina Cafe location soon followed. Not long after, Cordero opened Pancake, an ode to Holland's delicate crepe-like *pannekoek*.

But no success story is a straight line. In 2018 Cordero was forced to close both Pancake and the second Gasolina location. Yet, there were also some bright spots, including being accepted into the James Beard Foundation's Women Entrepreneurial Leadership Program and named an Audi Fellow.

"I got in right when we closed the doors [to our restaurants]," Cordero recalled. "But it was perfect timing, too, because I was feeling pretty down. I just felt like I had failed. This program really relit a fire under my butt."

Cordero hopes that 2019 will be a year of rebuilding. Now armed with growth strategies gleaned from the program, as well as the collective wisdom of its 20 participants, she's confident about the future.

"Gasolina does really well. We're successful. It's been a really good story, you know? We were able to create that neighborhood cafe," Cordero said. Now, it's about figuring out how to recreate that feeling in another location, while still staying true to her original vision. "It's like creating a small empire," she said. "It's exciting."

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Rachel Tepper Paley is a writer and editor based in New York City. Her work has appeared in food and travel publications including Bon Appétit, Bloomberg Pursuits, Eater, Travel + Leisure, Conde Nast Traveler, and more. Follow her on Instagram at [@the_pumpnickel](https://www.instagram.com/the_pumpnickel).

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