

## Heather West



Chef Heather West was the winner of the second season of ‘Hell’s Kitchen,’ a reality TV cooking competition program with famed chef Gordon Ramsey. Chef Heather, 29, has recently returned to her native New York where she has become the Executive Chef at Monterey Restaurant in Long Beach, Long Island.

**TSA:** We’ve interviewed people in a wide range of professions, but you are our very first Chef. Tell us a little about your career and your new position as Executive Chef of Monterey Restaurant.

**Heather:** It’s an awesome job. I’m back in New York where I was born and raised. I found the job on Craigslist and got it over the phone. We closed down for three days and renovated the menu. The next menu will be all mine.

**TSA:** When did you know cooking was your passion?

**Heather:** I always baked with my mom and grandmother, not so much cooking and no eating fancy cuisines or fancy meals out, but we always baked and I loved doing it. I always worked in restaurants — bussing, waiting tables and then working the line — starting at 13. I always thought it was easy for me to do, but that it wasn’t a high quality job. This is before the Food Network started. It wasn’t a cool job then. I wanted to be an art teacher. Then my mom got sick with cancer and I started cooking for her to make her happy and I realized I was pretty good. Then I went to culinary school.

**TSA:** Does your TS have any impact on your work in a professional kitchen?

**Heather:** Because it’s stress-related; it’s sometimes hard. I don’t talk about it. It’s not that I’m ashamed of it; it’s more that people sometimes don’t understand when I’m stressed-out and tossing my neck back and forth. They’re asking, ‘Are you OK?’ The restaurant owners know and sometimes I take a couple of minutes and go into the walk-in to scream. Lack of sleep is really difficult and with the travel time I had in LA, lack of sleep was tough.

**TSA:** Did it hamper you during the “Hell’s Kitchen” competition? Did the other contestants react to your tics?

**Heather:** My tics are not very noticeable unless I have an episode. Normal tics look like I’m cracking my neck and I’m anxious with my leg jumping up and down. In “Hell’s Kitchen” no one really noticed; no one said anything.

The show didn’t show it because “Hell’s Kitchen” is about cooking and isn’t about anything else. I chose not to share it. It’s part of me, but there is so much more to me. It was hard for me to go out in public right after the show. People were noticing me and things got difficult. I remember going out to dinner with my parents and having to go out to the car to calm down. My parents were very worried. I felt like my back was up against the wall and it was very hard being in public.

**TSA:** When were you diagnosed with TS?

**Heather:** It started when I was 16, but it wasn’t until I was about

20 that a doctor said, ‘You have TS.’ I thought it was OCD and I was on tons of meds.

**TSA:** What was your life like growing up with TS?

**Heather:** I think there is so much more research now on everything. When I was growing up they didn’t know if I was anxious. It’s not that my parents didn’t look into it. I was in Special Ed all through school, got teased a lot and was put on medications that I felt didn’t help me. I was upset that if I made a move or cried, the question was, ‘Did you take your pills today?’ As if the pills were an automatic solution.

School was tough. I was different and I grew up in a small town. I was very loud sometimes and teachers didn’t understand at all. I would get up in the middle of class and a lot of teachers thought I was just being ‘difficult.’ I was held back a grade because I wasn’t ‘developing.’ My mom asked the teacher what was wrong and she said I was just being ‘difficult.’ My mom was so upset with that teacher she yanked me out.

Back then a lot of teachers weren’t educated about TS. There was my teacher in first grade. I was itching and scratching and asking to go to the nurse. All day I asked to see the nurse and she said I was just being annoying. I had the chicken pox. I can still see her face. ‘I guess you’re really sick.’ That was the first time I remember having an angry emotion with an adult. I hope she saw me on TV.

**TSA:** Does anyone else in your family have TS?

**Heather:** No, no one.

**TSA:** There are many cooking show fans among the *Inside TSA*

readers, any advice for young chefs in the TSA family?

**Heather:** I’ll pass on advice that was given to me — never go for the paycheck, go for the experience. That’s what led to my reputation and to “Hell’s Kitchen.” Just do it. Learn from everyone. Ask tons of questions. Even if you think you know, you don’t know. It’s not a profession where you can know everything so you have to keep on learning and learning. I learn something new every day.

You have to make sure that this is really what you want. It is a very difficult career. You give up a lot for it. I work about 14 hours a day. I love working long hours, getting the paycheck and knowing I deserve it, but you give up a lot. I’d like to have a family one day and I’ll have to not work as much. Now I give up holidays, weekends, and work very long hours. Your busy time is when everyone else comes home from work. Make sure it’s what you want.

Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t. That’s what drove me.

**TSA:** Any tips on stress reduction to share with adults and kids with TS?

**Heather:** Actually I sing a song in my head. It’s one of my favorites — the Gummy Bears song. I just repeat it over and over in my head and it calms me down. Singing in my head and imagining little bears help me. It takes me to a calm place. Breathing is best.

I sometimes clap out of nowhere and do something with my voice that sounds like I’m clearing my throat. When I clap, my friends clap with me. That relaxes me. ●