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Carla Hall on Cronuts, Cheesecake and Introducing Her ‘Chicken Self’

The ‘Top Chef’ contestant and co-host of ‘The Chew’ prepares to open her first restaurant



‘I always felt like the smartest person in the room to say I didn’t want a restaurant,’ said Carla Hall, a ‘Top Chef’ contestant who now co-hosts ‘The Chew.’ ‘I realized what I didn’t want was a fine-dining restaurant. I could totally see myself having a joint, a space that felt like home, like my grandmother’s place for Sunday supper.’

PHOTO: CASSANDRA GIRALDO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By SOPHIA HOLLANDER
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Carla Hall endeared herself to reality-television viewers in 2008 with her sometimes-zany run on Bravo's "Top Chef."

Now she is attempting to win over diners in New York City. The 51-year-old former model, who also co-hosts the ABC talk show "The Chew," plans to open her first restaurant around Thanksgiving, following a new concession stand at Barclays Center and a bake shop opening in Gansevoort Market next month.

"I'm great! That's what I keep telling myself," Ms. Hall said during a

break from filming "The Chew." Her restaurant, Carla Hall's Southern Kitchen, which was partially funded through a Kickstarter campaign that drew \$264,703 from 1,550 people, will evoke her Nashville roots, she said.

"Chicken is the comfort food so for many different cuisines, and there are so many ways to express yourself with the bird," Ms. Hall added.

"It's like, 'Hi, meet my chicken self.' "

She spoke with the Journal about lining up for cronuts, eating in Red Hook and the food she wishes she could convince herself to love.

Edited excerpts follow.



Ms. Hall in Riverside Park.

PHOTO: CASSANDRA GIRALDO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

This is your first restaurant?

Yes, at 51. Can you believe it? I always felt like the smartest person in the room to say I didn't want a restaurant. I was kind of smug about it. I realized what I didn't want was a fine-dining restaurant. I could totally see myself having a joint, a space that felt like home, like my grandmother's place for Sunday supper.

What's the first food you remember eating in New York?

Junior's. The first thing that I remember, and this was years ago, my friends took me to Junior's. They know I love sweets, and I had the cheesecake with the strawberry sauce. This was way back like in the early '90s. I loved it. I wasn't even really cooking then. I remember every time I visited, I was like, "I want to go to Junior's!"

Now that you live here, where do you take out-of-town guests?

Before it moved, we went to Untitled. I would take people walking through Central Park and then I would go to [the Whitney] and then we went to Untitled. It's kind of a cool thing to walk through the park and go to the museum and get something to eat. I felt it was a very New York thing to do.

Now it would still be along those lines, in the Trump International: Jean Georges. But go sit at the bar. It's a fancy place, and I'm so thrifty. That's why you go at lunch.

What neighborhoods are you eating in these days?

Red Hook is doing it. You have Hometown Bar-B-Que, all these amazing restaurants down there. I just had a really proper egg cream, so good, at Farmacy.

Oh my gosh. I didn't get egg creams. There are lot of things that New Yorkers eat that I don't get. But they have these amazing egg creams. But there's no egg in it. I don't get it.

What other New York foods do you not get?

I understand the bagel and the lox and everything—it's just not my thing. The pizza thing. I get it. I totally get that. I had a pizza in Brooklyn, just this simple Brooklyn pizza. It was that moment that I was like "I get it."

I love hot dogs. Nathan's isn't my choice. The black-and-white cookie! OK, let's talk about the black-and-white cookie. Didn't get that. Is this a whoopie pie? Is it like half of a whoopee pie? It's not a cookie, it's like a cake. I don't understand what that is. But I did have a good one [at Leske's Bakery in Bay Ridge].

When was the last time you waited in line for food?

I went to Dominique Ansel. I waited in line to get my cronut. I got there about 10:30 a.m. It wasn't so bad.

The cronut is still a bit much for me, I have to admit. I mean, it might be one of those things that I don't get.

I ate part of one, and then I commenced to have the croissant with jam and butter and loved it. And the egg and cheese. The egg and cheese was delicious. Another thing I don't get! An egg and cheese sandwich. It's a New York thing that I feel like is out of proportion with the bread and the egg.

Where do you eat when you want to celebrate?

I would go to a restaurant where I know I love the food. Like I know I love the food at Gato. I love that restaurant. I feel embarrassed by mentioning it all the time. When I saw [owner and chef Bobby Flay] I said, "I love—" he said "I know, Carla." I didn't even get to finish.

I also went to Via Carota, which was delicious—that fried rabbit, oh so good. Do you know Jeepney? It's a Filipino restaurant, and on Wednesdays and Thursdays, two days a week, it's a "Kamayan" meal, where you eat with your hands. They have the table loaded with food, and it's just, literally, they put plastic down and these palm leaves, and they load the table with food. That's how I would love to celebrate. We'd just be talking and drinking and eating with our hands.

What food do you console yourself with?

I will go out and have ice cream. Honestly, I would go and get a hot dog and throw some chili on that bad boy and some cheese. It would be fat. It would be something really fatty. It would be like savory fat and sweet fat.

What's something you wish you loved?

Some sushi. I wish I loved it. It's such a delicacy, and everybody loves it, and I want to like it.

What's something you wish you hated?

I wish I didn't like lemon-meringue pie. Anything with lemon and lemon curd that I want to eat a lot of. I wish I did not like caramel. People who don't have a sweet tooth—I look at them longingly and say I wish that was me, because sugar is killing me.

What should everyone in New York try?

You have to get pizza. You have to get a bagel. You have to understand the difference of the New York bagels and bagels everywhere else. It's the water thing.

I think the quintessential New York things—those things are approachable. Anybody can come here and afford that.

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