

# On the Tightrope, Chef Plus Chef

By MELISSA CLARK

**I**N professional kitchens there is a long-standing rule: there can be only one head chef. In French, the word chef means chief. And having two seems as harmonious as having two kings (remember the War of the Roses: two kings, one crown, much bloodletting?).

Yet there are teams of executive chefs around the country who bravely go where others fear to tread: into small restaurant kitchens, full of sharp, heavy and hot objects that would make good projectiles.

These bravehearts include Mary Sue Mil-

liken and Susan Feniger, who seem more like sisters than co-workers, though they have worked together at Border Grill in Santa Monica, Calif., since they opened it in 1981. One of the first chef teams since the country's restaurant scene greatly expanded in the 70's, Ms. Milliken and Ms. Feniger typify the overworked, overachieving chef: from 1995 to 1999, they were the hosts of "Too Hot Tamales" and "Tamales World Tour," on the Food Network; they have opened five more restaurants and written five cookbooks.



Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

**MUTUAL RESPECT** Mary Sue Milliken, left, and Susan Feniger are co-chefs at Border Grill in Santa Monica, Calif.

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As the job description of executive chefs grows beyond the kitchen — building restaurant empires, being television hosts, writing cookbooks — chefs are finding that sharing the glory as well as the toil can be a beneficial exchange.

That is, for the right pair of chefs (micro-managers and control freaks need not apply). Co-chefing is not simply a matter of two people sharing brilliant culinary insights while stirring the same pot. It's a complicated balancing act based on mutual respect, compromise, a clear-eyed assessment of both parties' strengths and weaknesses and a whole lot of trust.

"We clicked ever since we first met, working in a Chicago restaurant in 1978," Ms. Milliken said of Ms. Feniger. "For some

reason my weaknesses and her strengths and vice versa were very compatible, and it felt natural to work as a team."

"She's persistent and positive and hopeful," Ms. Milliken said, "and I get discouraged and am skeptical and worry a lot. She helps get us through that way. But she's also pretty disorganized and scattered, and I'm a little better that way. I think neither of us separately would have built what we have together, nor even half of what we have."

Sometimes, they concede, they wonder if their co-chef relationship borders on co-dependence. After all, Ms. Milliken married Ms. Feniger's ex-boyfriend, and Ms. Feniger was in the delivery room when Ms. Milliken had her first child.

"No matter what happens, what tensions arise, we work it out," Ms. Milliken said. For them, working it out has meant couples therapy at times. Odd? "We are in California," Ms. Milliken said.

Sharing the kitchen duties at Blue Hill in Manhattan works well for Dan Barber, allowing him to divide his time between the restaurant, catering and planning other projects. But Alex Ureña, his co-chef when the restaurant opened, left after a year to become the executive chef of Marseille restaurant. Now Michael Anthony fills that slot.

"I learned a lot working with Alex," Mr. Barber said, "and I can now apply that to

working with Mike."

One key lesson was about communication: the more of it, the better. This means being open to criticism and suggestion, and taking the other chef's feelings and ego into account.

"I'm a little sensitive," Mr. Barber acknowledged. "If Mike's forgotten to tell me that he put yellow watermelon in the tomato coupe on my night off, and I come in the next day and find out from one of the cooks, it stings me. I think, 'What did he go and change it for?' But ultimately if it improves the dish, we both win."

But not everyone is enthusiastic about being a member of such a team. Pino Maffeo worked as Patricia Yeo's chef de cuisine at AZ. She promoted him to co-chef when she opened Pazo in Midtown a few months ago.

"The whole thing was her idea, and I go along to support her," Mr. Maffeo said, "but I don't like to put myself out front. At this point, I'm happy helping to propel someone else's career."

Ms. Yeo prefers to give credit where it is due, unlike many of her peers, who simply hire chefs de cuisine or sous-chefs to run their kitchens when they are not there.

"Anyone who thinks they can run more than one restaurant at a time is either