





# Tiffani Faison's INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS:

Great Food, Inclusive Culture and a Dash of Spitfire

By Adrienne Penta, CW&W Executive Director

**T**op Chef season one was a long time ago for Tiffani Faison. In the 13 years since becoming runner-up on the now hit series, she has become both a well-known culinary superstar and a talented entrepreneur. Chef Faison has learned to use her no-nonsense attitude and her competitive drive for good. In her four wildly-popular Boston restaurants – Sweet Cheeks BBQ, Tiger Mama, Fool’s Errand and, most recently, Orfano – she has been relentlessly focussed on restaurant culture, building inclusive spaces for both employees and patrons, while reliably doing the unexpected. We were fortunate to sit down with Chef Faison to discuss her journey from ice cream scooper to restaurateur and how she has learned to be kind to herself along the way.



During our conversation, Chef Faison shared how she cultivated her inclusive organizational culture.

**You've had an incredible career, and you've just launched your fourth restaurant. I wanted to take us back to the beginning of your journey. Would you tell us about the early days and what that looked like?**

I started working in restaurants when I was 14, in Santa Rosa, California. I went to a program about "How to Get a Job," and I ended up spending my summer making milkshakes and giant ice cream sundaes, having the time of my life. My arms smelled like sour milk all summer, and I left with \$30 every day. I thought I was loaded. I loved the pace of restaurants, I loved the chaos of it, I loved all the weirdness, and I loved the pressure that we were under when we were there. I was bit by the bug very early on. There were a lot of restaurants that I worked in, mostly front-of-the-house, in the Bay area.

Then I went through a bad break up, and I needed a place to go and a place to live. I applied to Club Med and was assigned to Copper Mountain, Colorado. I had a great time, but I had to get home so I went back to my job in San Francisco. My brother was in graduate school in Boston and two weeks later, I packed two duffel bags, moved to Boston and stayed on his couch. That was the beginning of Boston.

My first job was slinging drinks at Lucky's. Then I became a bar manager at the Ritz Carlton. When 9/11 happened, I thought "This is not what I want to do," but I wanted to stay in this industry. I left and went to Bonfire, a Todd English restaurant. I didn't know what a celebrity chef was or who Todd English was. I just knew that I wanted to bartend, hangout, get to know the city and not have much responsibility. I took a busser job and worked that for a couple of weeks, then became a runner and then an expeditor – the person that was in charge of getting the food from the kitchen to the right table at the right time.

I watched the kitchen – it felt like this sport that I was really drawn to. It was internally competitive and competitive as a team. I started to ask the chefs if I could learn a station and they laughed, hard. There were a bunch of 20-year-old young men in the kitchen who had gone to culinary school, and I had barely graduated from high school.

When I started cooking, I was terrible. I hated it. My chef coat felt like sand paper and I remember my chef saying at one point, "How do you not know how to cut an onion?" I don't enjoy being bad so I was either going to quit or I was going to get better. I felt like everyone in San Francisco was waiting for me to come home and say, "See, we told you." I made myself a deal that when I stopped hating Boston and I stopped hating cooking, I could go home.

**You've had the opportunity to work for many now famous chefs. In addition to cooking skills, what did you learn from them about leadership and how to run a kitchen?**

I learned about how to organizationally run kitchens as very tight ships. Kitchen structure comes from military brigades. There's no space to stop and talk about it and question. We have an obligation to get you your food on time. It's a very structured environment, and I'm not someone who thrives on structure. I've learned how to beat the clock because cooking is 100% about beating the clock.

I also learned what not to do. I started cooking in 2001, and it was still acceptable for people to scream at you, demean you, even throw things. I've had pans thrown at my head a couple of times – I'm quick, don't worry. I have a tattoo that covers a burn where a chef dumped an entire pan of grease on my arm, and I've had chefs staring at my chest in my chef coat two sizes too big. How women were treated, but also how everyone in kitchens was treated 20 years ago, is very different from how we treat people now. We talk a lot about learning from failure and resetting. It's important to recognize that when you're in a toxic environment, there's just as much to be learned.

**How are you intentionally creating culture in your organization now? How do you ensure that it is different from the industry you walked into?**

There are specific things that we're not going to do: we're not going to scream at each other and call each other names, we're not going to demean each other. I've worked so hard to get to a place in my career where I get to decide how I want my company to look and how I want it to feel for everyone that works in it. I'm not saying that we're perfect – the minute you think you're perfect, a train will hit you with all those things you realized you missed.

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**Many women founders do not have access to capital at the levels they need to start and fund their businesses. To start a restaurant, you need a lot of money, how did you raise the money?**

Initially, I had a partner. He did the funding, but the relationship turned out not to be great, and I ultimately bought him out. After the Sweet Cheeks raise, I had a little bit of a track record. When I was raising money for Tiger Mama, I reached out to people, and I felt like I was begging for money.

I had built a network in the city by doing a ton of community-facing work, whether it was the LGBTQIA community,

veteran services, addiction recovery – things that matter to me – but I still had to go out and find more people. When some inevitably said no, they said, “You're a fine dining chef, how are you going to do barbeque?” Then when we were raising money for Tiger Mama, the question was, “You're a barbeque chef, how are you going to do Asian fine dining?”

I found mentors, people who were comfortable raising money, and listened when they said, “You're not asking for their money, you're making them money.” I didn't have enough confidence to know that was true. If someone said no, I started saying, “I totally



Orfano restaurant in Boston, MA.



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get it. Can you give me five names of people that you know that might be interested?" I just kept asking and expanding the network. That was deeply uncomfortable, so out of body, and I did not want to do it.

It's very hard to ask for money. I didn't grow up with people around me that had a lot of resources. When people say "I don't come from money," it means more than that – it means I don't have access. We paid our investors in Sweet Cheeks back in 30 months, we paid Tiger Mama back in three years to the day, and we are on track to do the same thing with Orfano. I can speak to all the finances in my restaurants and understand to the penny how we operate.

### **Orfano is a little bit different compared to what you've done in the past, how did you come up with the concept?**

Orfano is really fun. I grew up in the language of Latin, French, mostly Italian and Mediterranean food – so going to barbeque and then Asian from there felt a little bit like I was missing my left arm, like there was a piece of me that was dying to come out.

My wife and I went to dinner about four years ago for our anniversary at Babbo in New York City. They knew who I was. I had done events with Mario Batali. We got a terrible table, we were invisible, we were treated like we weren't going to buy the big steaks and the big wines. It was a room filled with Wall Street suits. There were all guys around us. They were getting the red carpet rolled out for them, and we were not, even though we had said, "This is our anniversary." I just thought, "This could be done so much better."

I started to think about all the rooms I've sat in, steakhouses or old-school Italian joints, that were built for big bank accounts and for men. Those things intertwined. Not women with big bank accounts, men with big bank accounts. There are a hundred little cues when you walk in, like the hunting guy with his dogs, bad flowers, big furniture and really dark rooms.

I knew we could build an incredible restaurant with great old-school Italian food, but seen through a different lens. I wanted

a room that was like a boy's club but for women, for people of color and for people that have been othered. That's not to exclude all the straight white men – you'll love it! But when you walk into the room, it's Lady Gaga serving spaghetti and Anna Pellegrino, the matriarch of Rao's in New York City. The room is purple instead of red, and our ancestors are in frames along the walls.

I wanted a room where everyone was equal, where people felt like they were seen and they felt like they had a room that was built for them.

Orfano means "orphan" in Italian, which is to say no mother. When I say that I'm going to open an Italian restaurant, people ask, "What kind of Italian? Is it Ligurian, is it from Sicily?" I didn't want any of that. I wanted no rules. I wanted it to look, feel and taste Italian, but be able to use all the tools in my arsenal of cooking techniques and the international gamut that runs. I wanted to make the best possible foods of a certain ilk – new-school Italian-American.

### **Women control 51% of wealth in the United States, so I think you're on to something.<sup>1</sup> You are beloved in Boston, which was not your persona on Top Chef. You've talked about how Top Chef was a learning experience for you and a moment that you've reflected on. What did you take away from that?**

I learned a lot. I went on a ten-year apology tour because I was so afraid of people thinking I was this intolerable person. I had grown up in professional kitchens where there was no lovey-dovey culture. I was a product of those kitchens. I found myself on this show that had some home cooks, lovely nutritionists, and I was yelling, "Move faster." I've been able to accept responsibility and own the things I did at 28 that were not

awesome and not flattering. Candidly, some of them were out of line and mean.

I've also been able to be kinder to myself about where I was at that point in my life, being a 28-year-old spitfire that was all career, all tunnel vision. I've learned to be honest with myself, asking, "Am I the person that I report to be? Am I behaving and kind in that way? Have I done something that is inconsistent with that? Do I need to apologize?"

I've also just gotten better at saying, "I don't care what you think of me." But I do, all women care. I've gotten to a point where, I think Brené Brown says, "If you're in the cheap seats, I don't care." If you have something to say about me or my life, my career, my relationships or my trajectory, and you are not out there trying to do something for yourself or fighting for someone else, save it.

*Top Chef* will continue to unfold for me for a really long time. The exposure has been incredible. It has allowed me to continue to keep my businesses in the public eye by being on television. Surprisingly enough, I'm a regular guest on *Chopped*, they keep inviting me back, and they think I'm lovely. It's not like I grew and changed into someone who is perfect. There's still me, that fiery, spitfire of a person that is still aggressive, wants lots of things in my life and wants to push like crazy. That's still all here. I just understand that none of that is worth anything without being kind and seeing people in front of you for who they are, in the same way that you want to be seen for who you are. It doesn't matter how hard you push if you can't do it in a way that brings people with you, forming a team that holds you up as much as you hold them up. 🍷



Watch Tiffani Faison on [bbh.com](https://www.bbh.com).

<sup>1</sup>[wealthtrack.com](https://wealthtrack.com)



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