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MOVER & SHAPER

Melia Marden

Meet your new mentor—and learn why she’s making strides in the world of wellness.

She’s a chef who prefers flavors to fads

Rather than plan a menu with each dish loaded with every trendy provision du jour, “I want my food to have as few ingredients as needed to be as good as it can be. I never want my food to be restaurant-y, I always want it to feel like it’s home-cooked,” says Marden, 34. Judging by the patrons who queue up to eat at The Smile, she’s got that down. She also has the rare ability to transform very healthy fare into delicious, crave-worthy comfort food.

She reinvents the familiar (these days that means quinoa)

Marden has a way of taking work-a-day, homely ingredients and giving them a whole new spin. Take quinoa. It’s on The Smile’s brunch, lunch, and dinner menus: She elevates the ancient grain with luscious poached eggs or silky fresh ricotta. She even gets excited about broccoli. “I’m really into steaming it and drizzling it with almond oil lately. It’s an easy, healthy, hearty thing to make that takes five minutes.”

She coaxes the biggest flavors from the simplest process

To make vegetables and fruits taste brighter, crunchier, and overall more delicious, Marden turns to her quick pickling technique, which she uses

on everything from apples to red onions to radishes. “I like really easy fresh pickles from a speedy overnight brine. I thinly slice something crispy, sprinkle it with salt, and let it sit. Then I mix distilled white vinegar with a little cane sugar, toss together, and serve.”

Her food is proof you don’t need a showpiece kitchen

From The Smile’s tiny 125-square-foot kitchen (an expansion from the original minuscule 75), she turns out dishes like trout with caramelized onions, braised leg of lamb, and harissa-honey roasted chicken. And while so many chefs (or, hell, even home cooks) are total gas-stove snobs, Marden manages all this with induction burners and small electric ovens. But, she insists, “you can do a lot with very little!”

She wants you to share

Marden is hardly one of those chefs with a no-cameras policy in their restaurants. She loves that Instagram is documenting cultural obsessions with various food trends in real time. “I like it that people are into their meals in an extreme way, and Instagram is an extension of that. It’s so nice to see people rejoicing about food—and pictures are such a nice thing to share.”

—Amy Zavatto



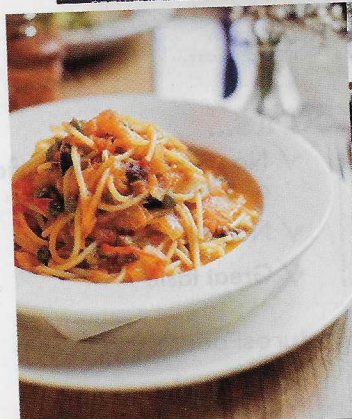
EXECUTIVE CHEF
at The Smile,
in New York City

AUTHOR
of *Modern
Mediterranean:
Easy, Flavorful
Home Cooking*



GRIN AND PREPARE IT

Above: Marden at the restaurant, in what she calls her “kitchen ninja” chef uniform. Left, and bottom right: The Smile’s cozy dining room and coffee bar are in an old row house in NoHo. Bottom left: Her spaghetti puttanesca.



Photographs by Heather Weston