



Clockwise from top left: Erin Wood at her Santa Fe tamale-making facility; Susan Feniger (left) and Mary Sue Milliken, of Los Angeles; Janine Jacobs hosts a cooking class to benefit a Seattle youth facility; Terry Wheatley, of Sutter Home Winery; Amy Scherber, of Amy's Bread, in New York City; New Orleans-based Susan Spicer.

When these star chefs and food entrepreneurs are not feeding customers, they're finding ways to donate their talents to a wide array of charitable groups. **more** talked to seven women who are as famous for supporting cherished causes as they are for creating fabulous food

# cooking for a cause

By Cheryl Alkon

## SAYING NO TO HUNGER

*Erin Wood, 40, made a bundle in the rising Eighties stock market, but burned out on the pressure and escaped from Palm Springs, California, to New Mexico to do nonprofit work. Today, she's the owner of Tamale Molly, a 20-employee business that sells gourmet tamales. She donates her annual profits—expected to reach \$200,000 in 2004—to hunger-relief programs. She and her boyfriend—Alex Sullivan, a licensed massage therapist—live in Santa Fe.*

**PANGS** “I dealt with hunger growing up, and I don't want anybody to experience that. My mother wanted to be a hippie and live off the land, so to

speak. From age three to eleven, I moved with her—to the Montana wilderness, to Big Sur—while she worked odd jobs, such as waitressing or teaching theater. Sometimes we'd skip a meal or eat mashed potatoes for a week. It was an adventure for her but very scary for me.”

**HOW THE OTHER HALF EATS** “My father was a Connecticut businessman who took me to great restaurants when I stayed with him.”

**MOMENT OF TRUTH** “I left the finance world at twenty-eight, because I felt I had no purpose. The life was completely money-driven. People talked about little more than their new cars and the money they made.”

**TURNING POINT** “I moved to New Mexico and worked at an environmental nonprofit called The Forest Trust, helping those who used to be dependent on the timber industry find other work. I also cooked for a Buddhist retreat center, which I enjoyed. Then, inspired by Newman's Own, I decided to put it all together: to start a food business and donate the profits.”

**WHY TAMALES?** “People love Southwestern foods, and no one was doing gourmet tamales then. I had made them for years. I had learned to make them from my mom, in fact.”

**SEPTEMBER 11 FALLOUT** “I ran Tamale Molly as a café for a year and a half. When tourism plummeted after the terrorist attacks, we closed the café and wholesaled to grocery stores, which really took off.”

**THE DOUGH** “I had used up my savings, so I borrowed money from my father and the bank to start Tamale Molly. He was confused at first. He'd worked his whole life to make money, now I was proposing to give away what I earned. I haven't even taken a salary yet, though someday I will. When he saw the response—from customers and from those we donate to—he became incredibly supportive. He's still our biggest backer.” ▶



**FAMILY TIES** "Alex and I take care of his six-year-old son part-time; I don't plan to have kids—I knew early on I didn't have the desire. My mom now manages a California bookstore, and my dad is semi-retired from his own investment company."

**BIGGEST SURPRISE** "I assumed customers know how to cook. We even have to explain that steaming a prepared tamale to heat it doesn't mean boiling it."

## COMMUNITY CONNECTION

*Amy Scherber, 43, went door-to-door as a teen in Minneapolis, collecting money for health charities. Today, she runs Amy's Bread, a chain of three bakeries in Manhattan. She also sells wholesale in New York City, where she lives with her husband, Troy Robne, an actor and the company's sales manager. Scherber attended culinary school, then worked as a cook before discovering a passion for breadmaking. She opened her first bakery in 1992. Last year, Scherber donated gift certificates, bread and time to*

*more than 100 anti-hunger, sustainable agriculture, health, arts and educational charities, including Volunteers of America, Chefs Collaborative, Earth Pledge and City Harvest.*

**POPULAR CAUSES** "I get up to four requests a week for help. I sort out what the group stands for and where my own interests lie. It's hard—you want to say yes to all of them."

**DOWN ON THE FARM** "Helping environmentally sound farmers stay in business is obvious for us."

**HONORABLE MENTION** "In 2001, the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce gave me their Small Business Growth Award for my charitable and business activities."

**ATTENDANCE REQUIRED** "I show up at every event I support—often there are a couple a month—and hand out bread and speak."

**CLOSE TO HOME** "We're not a big chain or in malls; we're a real neighborhood business, so we value the people who work and live nearby. They keep us alive; and they bring in their kids, who are our future. Troy and I hope to have our own children one day."

**LEARNING CURVE** "We do fund-raisers for schools, and a lot of tours for school children. Kids like to feel the different ingredients for the breads and play with pieces of dough. Then they watch how the bread cooks and get to eat some. They love it."

**WORTHY EXPENSE** "To run the tours, the business has to hire a guide for four hours a week, which is a cost to us. However, the experience is so valuable for the people who visit, it's worth it."

**PIZZA DELIVERY** "Kids nowadays may not know where food comes from. We had one school group bake pizza with fresh vegetables, which were unfamiliar to a lot of them. When we sat down to eat together, they wanted to taste what they had cooked, but were scared to do so. In the end, they did eat their meals and were so thrilled and appreciative, they were screaming and hugging me. Sometimes, the kids get a bit unruly, but it's so cute. Then, they sent me thank-you notes on paper shaped like loaves of bread. That kind of thing is memorable, because it's so emotional."

**ALL TOGETHER NOW** "There are so many generous people in the food business, because our work is feeding people finding ways to make people happy through food. Working for charities and donating to them are natural extensions of that."

**GIVING BACK** "Volunteering makes my whole day feel valuable. It's good to get out of your work microcosm and meet people and see what kinds of problems you can solve."

**BOTTOM LINE** "Everyone gets excited about having something fun to eat."



Mary Sue Milliken (left) and Susan Feniger dish up meals for a Make A Wish Foundation event.



Terry Wheatley, center, hits the road for winery Sutter Home's breast-cancer awareness walks.

**"Volunteering is simply a given. You do as much as you can. If everybody did, it would be a better world."**

## A MOTHER'S LEGACY

*Janine Jacobs, 43, who recently left The Pampered Chef, a marketer of kitchen tools, to run her own events-planning business, knows that every cook needs the right equipment to succeed. She has run sales to raise \$15,000 for the kitchens at Pete Gross House, a residence for families of patients at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, in Seattle. She's also raised more than \$10,000 for the LAM Foundation, which seeks cures for lymph-angioliomyomatosis, a rare but fatal lung disease. Jacobs, her husband and three children live in Newcastle, Washington.*

**SHOULDER TO THE WHEEL** "I can't go out and find a cure for cancer, but I support those who can."

**LOW POINT** "My mother had breast cancer, and the week she died, my family was at her bedside. There was nowhere to go eat or to be together as a family."

**GIVING BACK** "With all the stress involved, feeding yourself is the last thing you need to worry about when you're with a sick loved one. Through two sales, we equipped all the Pete Gross kitchens."

**CLOSE TO THE HEART** "I support the LAM Foundation for selfish reasons—to keep my friend with the disease alive another day, another year."

**LET'S MAKE A DEAL** "The LAM Foundation held a charity auction for which one offering was me doing a gourmet dinner. At first, I was nervous: What if no one bid? But people paid up to sixteen hundred dollars for my cooking!"

**GREATEST MOMENT** "Collecting the money for the kitchens after my mother's death. When I received the last check, I looked up, crying, thinking of her, and said, 'I did it for you!'"

think to myself, 'My breasts will be gone.' But I now have peace of mind; for me and my family, it was definitely the right decision."

**NOT FOR WOMEN ONLY** "When our company decided to support breast-cancer awareness, we asked our male sales managers, 'How many of you have been affected by this disease? Has it touched your mother? Your sister? Your neighbor?' Every guy raised his hand."

**CONNECTING** "We've had over thirty thousand responses—letters and donations—to our campaign. Men request pins for their wives or mothers. Or daughters write in about their moms' cancer stories."

**BIGGEST WISH** "A cure in my daughter's lifetime. This is a cloud I wish young women didn't have to live under."

**WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT** "During our first year—2001—a woman read our information and went for her first mammogram. She learned she had breast cancer, received treatment and will probably live."

## OH, WHEN THE SAINTS...

*Susan Spicer, 50, has helped raise \$4.2 million in the 12 years she's been associated with Taste of the NFL, a charitable event that brings top chefs to the Super Bowl to cook and raise money for hunger relief. She's also been a major fund-raiser for Share Our Strength, another leading hunger-prevention organization. A partner in the well-known eateries Bayona and Herbsaint, she lives in New Orleans, where her boyfriend is also a chef.*

**ROOTS** "I grew up in this city, and want to make New Orleans a better place."

**LIFE LESSONS** "I've gotten smarter about what food to serve at events and how to prep it. Last year, I cooked eight hundred crêpes ahead of time and checked them as luggage when I flew to San Diego."

**GOING, GOING, GONE!** "At a Share Our Strength auction one year, I bid three hundred dollars for an apron painted by one of our waiters. It had our Herbsaint logo and a beautiful window scene and is now framed in the restaurant."

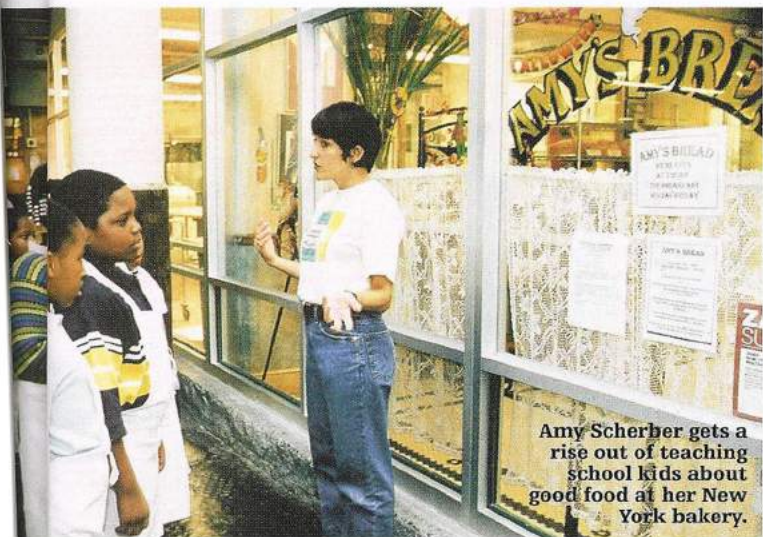
**FOOTBALL FAN** "I love the New Orleans Saints and am a season ticket holder, even though they lose year after miserable year. Since they never make it to the Super Bowl, I usually go home once the Taste event is over and watch the game on television."

**RUBBING SHOULDERS** "It's a chance for me to work with my peers. There's a lot of camaraderie. And I've met some of the Saints."

**RISING STARS** "Years ago, when I started doing Taste of the NFL, we'd stay in hotels outside town. Nowadays, the organization puts us up in nicer places near the game."

**WHAT'S NEXT?** "Spending more of my time on charitable projects, including perhaps overseeing a community garden or working on public school projects."

**GUIDING PRINCIPLE** "To me, volunteering is simply a given. You do as much as you can. If everybody did, it would be a better world." ▶



## IT'S PERSONAL

*For Terry Wheatley, 50, the senior VP of marketing for Sutter Home Winery, in Napa Valley, knowledge is power. With a family history of breast cancer—even her daughter, Katie, 20, has had to have biopsies—Wheatley decided three years ago to have a bilateral preventive mastectomy. She spearheads Sutter Home's breast-cancer awareness campaign, creating pink-ribbon pins, printing information on bottles and adding pink ribbons to some of their labels. Sutter Home sponsors fund-raising walks nationwide and has donated more than \$250,000 to City of Hope, a California research and treatment facility. Wheatley lives in Modesto, California, with her husband. Their two children are grown.*

**KNOW YOUR ENEMY** "My grandmother, who did not have annual checkups or mammograms, died of breast cancer that had spread to her lungs. Lack of awareness was what killed her."

**TOUGH DECISION** "After some suspicious biopsies—my breasts had so many tiny lumps, they looked like confetti on the screen—I wanted the operation. I did stop and

## DYNAMIC DUO

*Business partners and fast friends for 24 years, Mary Sue Milliken, 45, and Susan Feniger, 50, run three Latin-style Border Grill restaurants in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, as well as Ciudad in Los Angeles. They've also written five cookbooks and have hosted radio and television shows, including two on the Food Network. Last year, they raised more than \$1 million for research on scleroderma, an autoimmune disease, through their annual comedy night: Cool Comedy-Hot Cuisine. They've also raised \$250,000 for Share Our Strength. Milliken lives in West Los Angeles with her husband, Josh Schweitzer, and two sons; Feniger lives in Brentwood with her partner, Liz Lachman.*

**IN THE BEGINNING** *Milliken:* "In the Eighties, we were asked to cook for all sorts of fund-raisers." *Feniger:* "We were starting out, and it was hard to say no."

**SORTING IT OUT** *Feniger:* "Giving back to the community is integral for us, but we get thousands of requests, so now we're more selective. We've also asked our staff which causes they're excited about."

**PERSONAL CHOICE** *Feniger:* "A close friend was diagnosed with scleroderma and started a research foundation, for which I became a board member."

**BASIC RIGHTS** *Milliken:* "I heard Alice Waters talk at the founding of the Chefs Collaborative. She said that in a country like the United States, every person should have enough food to eat. Hunger relief is a natural for chefs."

**"You can work occasionally for charitable causes, but then you get addicted to them—and you're a lifer."**

**JOINING FORCES** *Milliken:* "We present major comedians, like Ellen DeGeneres, Robin Williams and Lily Tomlin, at our comedy night." *Feniger:* "They're asked to do so many events, so to have them is amazing."

**TAKING CHARGE** *Feniger:* "Showing up and cooking is easy. But you graduate to overseeing things, which is the hard part."

**LEARNING CURVE** *Feniger:* "We've gotten good at getting food and money donations." *Milliken:* "But I still find it very difficult to ask other people for money."

**SCRAPING BOTTOM** *Milliken:* "At one Cool Comedy event, the waiters used an eight-ounce ladle instead of a six-ounce one, and we ran out of mushroom soup. We had another one hundred people to serve, so we puréed chicken stock, mushrooms, salt and pepper and sent it out. It tasted great."

**ALL IN ALL** *Milliken:* "You can work occasionally for charitable causes, but then you get addicted to them—and you're a lifer." ■

*Cheryl Alkon, research editor for Boston magazine, has written for Ladies' Home Journal, Cosmopolitan and The New York Times.*

### BRAZILIAN SEAFOOD STEW

*Adapted from a recipe in "Cooking with Two Hot Tamales" (William Morrow, 1997), by Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger; this dish, called Moqueco, derives its unusual flavor and attractive yellow color*

*from Brazilian dende oil. The oil is available in Latin American markets; if you can't find it, substitute peanut oil.*

Serves 8

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
  - 1 medium onion, diced
  - 3 bell peppers (one each green, red and yellow), cored, seeded and diced
  - 1 plum tomato, seeded and diced
  - 1 teaspoon salt
  - 1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
  - 1 serrano or jalapeño chile, stemmed, seeded and minced
  - 3 8-ounce bottles clam juice
  - 1 14-ounce can coconut milk
  - 6 green onions, trimmed and finely sliced
  - $\frac{3}{4}$  pound each sea scallops, halved; monkfish or cod fillets, cut into 1-inch cubes; and medium shrimp, shelled and deveined
  - 1 lime, juiced; or use 2 tablespoons lime juice
  - 2 tablespoons dende oil
  - $\frac{1}{3}$  cup loosely packed cilantro leaves, chopped
  - 2 limes, sectioned, membranes removed and diced
  - $\frac{1}{3}$  cup toasted coconut strips, optional (see recipe below)
- 1 In a large, heavy soup pot or Dutch oven over medium heat, warm the oil. Add the onion and bell peppers, and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened (about 5 minutes).
  - 2 Stir in the tomato, salt, pepper, chile, clam juice and coconut milk. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low, and simmer, stirring from time to time, until the peppers are tender (10–15 minutes).
  - 3 Add the green onions and the fish. Cover, and simmer until the fish is just cooked through (5–7 minutes), stirring twice. Add the lime juice, dende oil and cilantro, and simmer for 2 minutes longer.
  - 4 Ladle stew into bowls, and garnish with lime chunks and toasted coconut strips.

### CHILE-TOASTED COCONUT STRIPS

Makes 4 cups

- 1 fresh coconut
  - 1 tablespoon chile powder
  - 1 teaspoon coarse salt
  - 1 lime, juiced; or use 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 1 Heat the oven to 325°.
  - 2 With an ice pick or nail, poke holes in the three soft areas at the top of the coconut. Drain the milk, and reserve for another use. Place the coconut on a sheet pan, and bake until the shell starts to crack (about 15 minutes). Reduce the heat to 300°.
  - 3 Take the coconut from the oven. With a hammer, crack the shell. Remove and discard it, leaving the brown skin on the meat.
  - 4 Using a vegetable peeler, cut the coconut meat into thin strips. In a bowl, toss strips with remaining ingredients.
  - 5 Arrange strips in a single layer on a baking sheet. Toast in the oven until golden (about 10 minutes), stirring frequently.
  - 6 Let cool before garnishing stew. Store the extra strips in an air-tight container. ▶