

Kathryn Rem: SSU grad cooks up a successful career

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Time magazine has described the James Beard Foundation Awards as “the Oscars of the food world.”

Each year, they are awarded to chefs, restaurateurs, critics, restaurant designers, rising stars . . . and cookbook authors like former Springfield resident Cheryl Alters Jamison. A graduate of Sangamon State University, she has not one, but four of the coveted awards.

“Cooking has been my personal passion,” said Jamison, a native of Galesburg who has written 12 cookbooks with her husband, Bill.

The couple’s first Beard award came in 1995 for “Smoke & Spice,” followed by “The Border Cookbook” in 1996, “American Home Cooking” in 2000 and “The Big Book of Outdoor Cooking & Entertaining” in 2007. Also nominated as an award finalist was 2003’s “A Real American Breakfast.”

Their awards, which look similar to Olympic bronze medallions, hang on a nail in their Santa Fe, N.M., kitchen.

Cheryl Jamison earned a bachelor’s degree in education from Illinois State University with the idea that she would teach art. But she realized her talents and interests were in arts management instead.

“I heard about a new program at Sangamon State University (now the University of Illinois at Springfield). I applied and got an M.A. in community arts management in 1977,” she said.

Jamison drifted westward and met her husband, a former professor of American history at Southwest Texas State University, 25 years ago. They started exploring the world and writing travel guides for Houghton Mifflin’s Best Places to Stay series.

“In 1990, my husband and I were doing travel books and they all had a great deal to do with food. We thought it might be an interesting and fun project to do a cookbook.”

Rancho de Chimayo, a well-known New Mexico eatery, approached the couple about putting together a book commemorating the restaurant’s 25th anniversary. The result was “The Rancho de Chimayo Cookbook.”

“We intended for that to be the final hurrah in the food writing field,” said Jamison. But 11 cookbooks followed. One of their specialties is barbecuing, grilling and smoke cooking. Besides the award-winning “Smoke & Spice,” their other books in that field are “Good Times, Good Grilling” and “Born to Grill.”

The couple’s latest book is “Around the World in 80 Dinners: The Ultimate Culinary Adventure,” a food-and-travel hybrid written as a culinary adventure travel narrative.

Jamison was in Springfield last Friday to address the annual meeting of Friends of Brookens Library at UIS.

“We wanted someone who had an association with UIS and we thought it would be fun to learn about her travel books and cookbooks,” said university librarian Jane Treadwell. “She is immensely fun and outgoing and interested in you and what’s going on around her.” Dishes made from the recipes in the couple’s books were served at the meeting, held at a member’s home.

In 2007, Jamison received the annual University of Illinois Distinguished Alumni award.

She gets back to Springfield occasionally, where she makes a point to visit her aunt and uncle, Peg and Donnie Alters, and cousins Gaye Alters Fisher and Jill Alters.

“They are always nice enough to do some cooking, things like chicken and noodles. We used to go hunting for morels in the spring.” When Jamison is in town, she likes to eat horseshoes at D’Arcy’s Pint and chili at Joe Rogers’ Chili Parlor.

With Bill Jamison getting close to retirement age, Cheryl, 56, has started a few new ventures for herself. She’s jumped into exterior-design consulting, which involves outdoor cooking spaces and backyard food.”

She also has a contract with the New Mexico tourism department to serve as culinary liaison, part of an effort to attract tourists through the state’s rich culinary heritage, one threaded with Native American, Mexican and Spanish influences.

Jamison’s volunteer work has included serving as board president for both the Friends of the Santa Fe Farmers Market and the local chapter of Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

“I’m doing just a lot of fun things,” she said, “that I’ve been lucky enough to stumble into.”

Note: In response to a reader’s question about last week’s column, the United States Department of Agriculture allows states to include roadside stands and community-supported agriculture programs in the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which provides discount coupons for fresh produce.

Although some states do allow these two types of venues to accept the coupons, Illinois does not.

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