



BY PHIL PURCELL

CEO/President, Marine Industries Association of South Florida

Writer Liz Wegerer



DINING AT SEA

A PEEK INTO A CAREER AS A YACHT CHEF

When you think about Fort Lauderdale’s diverse culinary scene, iconic waterfront venues like The Wharf and Cap’s Place often come to mind. After all, dinner with a view of water is something Fort Lauderdale delivers in spades.

But beyond our region’s bricks-and-mortar waterfront dining venues and the chefs there that make the magic happen is another world of culinary greatness. One powered by a far less visible – yet equally skilled – collection of culinary pros.

Welcome to the world of yacht chefs.

Step into the galley of any large yacht and you’re immersed in a culinary experience unlike any other. Like their peers on land, the primary responsibility of yacht chefs is to ensure that guests enjoy a delicious and unforgettable dining experience.

However, unlike their landlubber counterparts, yacht chefs face a unique set of challenges that require them to be extra creative and tenacious. From provisioning their galleys in remote locations to serving guests multiple meals each day to keeping hungry crew well fed, yacht chefs have their plates heaping full.

Yet despite the hard-work and challenges, this is a marine industry career choice ripe with rewards that go beyond a great salary. The best part is you don’t need a formal culinary education to become a successful and sought-after yacht chef.

I recently spoke with two well-known yacht chefs about their paths into the industry, their biggest challenges at sea, and what they find most rewarding about their career choice. Their first-hand insights are invaluable for anyone considering culinary work on a big boat.

Laurie Carrico and Shawn Semmler have been cheffing on yachts for nearly 20 years each, yet the paths they took to their yacht chef careers are diverse. Before heeding the siren’s call of yacht life, Laurie had a successful career in the food and beverage industry, working in fine dining and running her own catering business. Shawn worked her way through art school waiting tables and helping in the kitchens of high-end restaurants, before moving on to creating art for yacht interiors and ultimately embracing life as a yacht chef.

Both Laurie and Shawn agree that guest satisfaction is one of the biggest rewards of their career choice. “When guests come and tell you that you made their vacation amazing, how can that not be a reward?” Shawn says. Laurie agrees, adding, “nurturing people through the culinary arts and showing your love through a plate is the ultimate reward.”

The fringe benefits that come from working on large yachts is another huge benefit of the job. Scuba diving in



Yacht chef Laurie Carrico



Yacht chef Shawn Semmler

Palau, helicopter tours above the Great Barrier Reef or around active volcanoes in Vanuatu, and hitching rides on private jets complete with champagne toasts are just a few memorable moments Shawn and Laurie have enjoyed because of their career choice.

Of course, being a yacht chef doesn’t come without a few downsides. Missing family and friends while on charter is a big one, along with skipping important holidays and events. Provisioning can also be a challenge, especially in remote locations.

Shawn recalls one experience in the south Pacific. “We came into the Solomon Islands and at the time we couldn’t import fresh produce, including herbs. Unfortunately for me, fresh herbs couldn’t be found locally, only this heavier spinach-like plant called slippery cabbage. So, I used it in food to look like fresh herbs and the dry version for flavor. No one ever knew and the guests were happy.”

Beyond creativity, what else does it take to make it as a yacht chef? According to Laurie it includes being impeccable with your word and always being accountable. “Being a flake in this industry goes around a lot more than being successful, so make sure you never screw over any captains or jobs,” she emphasizes.

Shawn adds that you’ll also need a lot of stamina to succeed as a yacht chef. In fact, she took time to answer my questions while on charter after finishing a 17-hour workday — with no breaks. She says that type of day isn’t the norm, but “12 hours is an easy day while in guest mode.”

She notes that taking care of the crew is also part of being a successful yacht chef. “Your crew will be there for you in your time of need if their bellies are happy and you’re not a psycho!” She recalls getting several jobs because the crew managed to get a poor-performing chef, who did not feed them, fired.

And if you happen to be a guest on a charter yacht and want to maximize your culinary experience? Be sure to give your chef as much information as possible ahead of time. The more the chef knows about your preferences, the more satisfying your experience will be.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MARINE MIA SF