A woman with blonde hair, wearing a black dress, stands in a kitchen. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the foreground, there are several bottles of beer and a stack of books. The background shows stainless steel kitchen appliances, including a refrigerator and an oven.

# Margaret McSweeney's Midlife Culinary Adventure

A conversation with the founder  
of Kitchen Chat about her life's  
greatest influence

Margaret McSweeney



Margaret McSweeney and Viking Brand Ambassador Jaime Laurita at the Viking Showroom, which Laurita helped to design.

WHEN YOU MEET MARGARET MCSWEENEY, you can't help but notice her Southern charm, and once you get to know her in person or on Kitchen Chat, her irresistible sense of humor. Born in New Orleans and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, the Barrington resident is on a self-proclaimed midlife culinary adventure as a way of learning about and honoring her late father, Dr. Claude H. Rhea, Jr. To understand, and even recreate, his joy of cooking and love of far-flung places and food, is the driving force behind her successful and growing adventure.

"I'm not even supposed to be here," McSweeney said. "My dad, at age 30, before I was born, was diagnosed with cancer. Being that this was before chemotherapy in the '50s, he was told by his doctor to get to the hospital in the morning for surgery, and to get his affairs in order," she said. This was at a time when her parents had just announced that they were going to become Baptist Missionaries, a huge life change for them.

### A Renaissance Man

McSweeney's father had a doctorate in education and music. "He was an incredible tenor with five albums recorded, one with a London orchestra," she said. "And while his talent was the level of a Pavarotti, he wanted to use his talent to honor God and share his faith and joy through his gift of music."

The talented school administrator and teacher eventually became the Dean of the Music School at Samford University, yet his dream was to be a college president. That dream came true at Palm Beach Atlantic College, now Palm Beach Atlantic University, for eight years before he passed. "Being the Renaissance man that he was, he even designed the campus with an eye to the surrounding beauty of the Palm Beaches," McSweeney said.

Having survived cancer, McSweeney says her dad was a living miracle. He survived the arduous surgery and later learned that the head of the foreign missionary board had created a world-wide prayer chain for him. The prayers and a full recovery left him with a sense of survivor's guilt. He wrote an autobiography to talk about his life and adventures. He expressed perpetual joy, and helped others especially with his encouragement.

### Giving Her Away

McSweeney had finished college and while working at Chase Bank in New York City, met her future husband, David McSweeney, a Barrington High School alumnus. They were engaged in August 1990. Before a trip to France, McSweeney's father asked her to fly down to West Palm Beach, Florida, so he could help her with the wedding. Over Labor Day weekend following the engagement, the wedding plans were pulled together.



A Kitchen Chat and cooking demonstration with Chef Gale Gand was hosted by Viking Ambassador Jaime Laurita. The guests were from 30 Seconds, which did a live broadcast of the event. From left: Margaret McSweeney, Elise All Schmitz, CEO of 30 Seconds, Chef Gale Gand, and Jaime Laurita.

Viking's Turbo Chef microwave convection oven cooks at high speeds and has extensive memory functions for standard and custom recipes.

“My mom had input, but it was my dad who was coordinating everything,” McSweeney said. “He planned the rehearsal dinner menu, the reception menu, chose the flowers, but the most precious thing was his final message to me, though I didn’t know it at the time. He chose the beautiful Bethesda-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church and said, ‘let’s do a run down the aisle’. So, he escorted me to the alter, kissed me on the cheek, and said ‘this is where I give you away with my blessing’. It was the second-to-last day I saw him.”

“My father always lifted people with his music and education,” McSweeney said. “His message of hope and faith was in the way he lived. Our final conversation was interesting. During that Labor Day wedding planning weekend, we were at a McDonald’s before my flight back, with dad and my grandmother who had received a letter. One of her friends had passed. While she stepped away to wipe some tears, my dad leaned over to me and told me that he was not afraid to die. He said he had a near-death experience, and I had to cut him off,” she said. “I didn’t want to hear about it.”

While traveling with a business colleague in France, McSweeney’s father made a stop on the way to the Charles de Gaulle Airport. “My dad stopped at the Notre Dame Cathedral to light a candle for someone as a prayer of forgiveness,” she said. “Someone had wronged him, but he wanted to make it right for himself. He also

prayed for blessings for this person. This was just months before my wedding to David. At the Paris airport, he died of a massive heart attack.”

### Food and Far-Flung Places

McSweeney’s mom, Carolyn, was an English teacher and Christian book author. That’s where McSweeney, an author herself, found her grammar and writing skills. But her mom wasn’t the family cook. “We had lots of frozen TV dinners when dad traveled!”

While not a cook until recent times, McSweeney enjoyed watching her father in the kitchen, with fond memories of him making Eggs Benedict, and watching him make the hollandaise sauce. He had started a gourmet club in the ‘60s, hosting cooking events at their home. “He was a self-taught cook,” she said. “He began documenting his food interests while traveling by ship to Europe during World War II. He was a chaplain at the Nuremburg Trials. His picture in the Holocaust Museum.”

Letters from Paris and England to his wife showed that Claude was developing his palette and it continued to expand from there to far-flung places like Panama, where he met and dined with the Cuna Indians, which he wrote about in his book. “He was like an Anthony Bourdain who discovered foods and culture in large cities and small, remote villages,” McSweeney said.





*James Beard Award-winning Chef Gale Gand offered four new recipes and demonstrated their preparation at the Viking Showroom.*

### Eat, Talk, Write

“David does not cook,” McSweeney answered to the who-cooks-at-home question. “I did not cook a whole lot at home while raising the kids, as Dave’s mom lived with us. She too shared her joy through cooking food. Now, though, I’m cooking much more.”

“They say that what you were doing in third grade is what you should be doing in your life,” McSweeney said. “For me, it was eating, talking, and writing. I’ve written five books of inspirational nonfiction while raising a family, and I also had a column with Daily Herald for many years for Inverness. But, I wanted to start the Kitchen Chat podcasts to honor my father and to understand, as an adult, what his joy of cooking was all about. I also needed to get out of a sad place after writing my fifth book called “Aftermath: Growing in Grace”. I was grieving the loss of my brother, and it was tough to write—but important to write to get through the grief. I had also been diagnosed and treated with breast cancer, and I needed to find my happy place. That was Kitchen Chat.”

### Hugs from Heaven

With nearly 250 recorded Kitchen Chats with famous and talented chefs from all across the United States, the midlife culinary adventure took



*Chef Gale Gands James Beard awards.*

meaningful turns when McSweeney met Jaime Laurita at a WINGS charity event. The two drove together to a kitchen show at the McCormick Place when Laurita asked her where it was all going.

Earlier, McSweeney’s former neighbor, Jim German, mentioned that she might see another former neighbor at that show—Selim Bassoul, Chairman and CEO of the Middleby Corp., which owns the Viking brand, as well as others. They met Bassoul at the show and appreciated the depth of their



*Belinda Clarke and Elisa All Schmitz brought guests to the event.*




*Viking's vertical indoor garden units grow herbs and other small plants.*

conversation. McSweeney calls these moments “Hugs from Heaven”.

“It was great to reconnect with my former neighbor Margaret, and to meet Jaime, at the National Restaurant Association Show last year. Jaime is now the Brand Ambassador for Viking Range and he and Margaret co-host Kitchen Chat from our beautiful Viking-LaCornue Showroom in the Merchandise Mart,” said Bassoul. “I want to extend a personal invitation to everyone to visit the Showroom and experience the Viking Life for themselves.”

### **Pearls and Tattoos**

McSweeney is on an expanding and exciting journey, and she is taking everyone who enjoys Kitchen Chat along for the ride. It’s ironic that the gal who didn’t cook is now leading her followers to culinary destinations, helping educate the average cook with tips and ideas. She is the continuity between America’s most beloved chefs and people are taking notice. Today, she is a Brand Consultant with Viking, and Jaime Laurita—the company’s Brand Ambassador—is right by her side. “He’s the tattoos, and I’m the pearls—an unlikely but wonderful combination,” she says of her dear friend and professional accomplice.

Of all the possible culinary pairings in McSweeney’s world, it’s the one she learned from her father that is her universal language. It’s the pairing of love and food that works best. 



## Gale Gand's Bacon Wrapped Shrimp Stuffed Sweet Peppers

### INGREDIENTS

- 6 small sweet peppers (yellow, red, and orange)
- 12 U-15 shrimp, shelled and cleaned
- 6 bacon strips, cut in half
- 1 teaspoon rough chopped flat leaf parsley

### INSTRUCTIONS

Cut the stems off the sweet peppers and cut them in half length-wise and remove the seeds. Place an uncooked shrimp in the cavity of the pepper boat. Using  $\frac{1}{2}$  of a bacon strip, wrap the bacon around the shrimp. Use a toothpick to hold together. Grill the stuffed peppers on both sides or bake them at 425 degrees until the bacon and shrimp are cooked, about 15 minutes. Sprinkle with parsley and serve warm alone, or over polenta, grits, or pasta. Makes 12.

