

# JODY UNDER CONSTRUCTION

In this era of celebrity chefs and restaurant empires, culinary powerhouse Jody Adams has dodged the spotlight for decades.

But with a new Boston restaurant about to open, she's finally embracing her personal brand. The question is:

**WHAT TOOK HER SO LONG?**



BY ERIN BYERS MURRAY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHAD GRIFFITH







**Standing on a temporary stage set along the banks of the Charles River, Jody Adams is clutching a 10-inch knife. A few hundred local food geeks are gathered on this sticky June morning to watch one of the city's most acclaimed chefs teach Governor Deval Patrick how to cook a lobster. Adams flicks a strand of rust-colored hair off her face and, with a definitive *thwack*, separates the live animal's body from its tail.**

Next to her, Patrick shifts awkwardly on his feet. He's wearing a white chef's coat with "Rialto" embroidered on the lapel. Compared with Adams, who glides across the stage in her signature ensemble (flowing skirt, dangly earrings, no makeup), he's a stiff. He keeps picking up tools and eyeing them uncertainly, waiting for instruction. Finally, Adams hands him the knife.

"Careful," she mothers, gently laying a hand on his arm. "I don't want you to hurt yourself."

The governor raises an eyebrow at the audience, prompting a chuckle, and allows Adams to position the knife in his hand before pointing to the lobster's sweet

spot. *Thwack. Thwack!* Patrick blinks as he's showered in lobster juice.

The audience at the annual Let's Talk about Food festival, an outdoor event at the Museum of Science exploring the relationships among food, health, science, and cooking, is smaller than it should be for two such high-profile presenters. But Adams doesn't seem to notice. She keeps things rolling, coaxing the governor to grate garlic, whisk a vinaigrette, and finally plate the pan-roasted lobsters over a grilled corn salad. With nudges of encouragement ("You are *really* good at this"; "an expert chef..."), she soothes his apparent nerves, and by the time he's picked up a fork to taste their creation, Patrick actually seems to be enjoying himself.

That Jody Adams is perfectly at ease with the governor should come as no surprise. She is, after all, *Jody Adams*. The founding chef and owner of Rialto, the landmark Harvard Square restaurant, she was named best chef in the Northeast by the James Beard Foundation in 1997; has earned raves from *Food & Wine* magazine; appears at countless charity events; and even popped up last year on the Bravo reality show *Top Chef Masters*, in which renowned chefs from around the country compete in cooking challenges. (She made it to the top seven.)

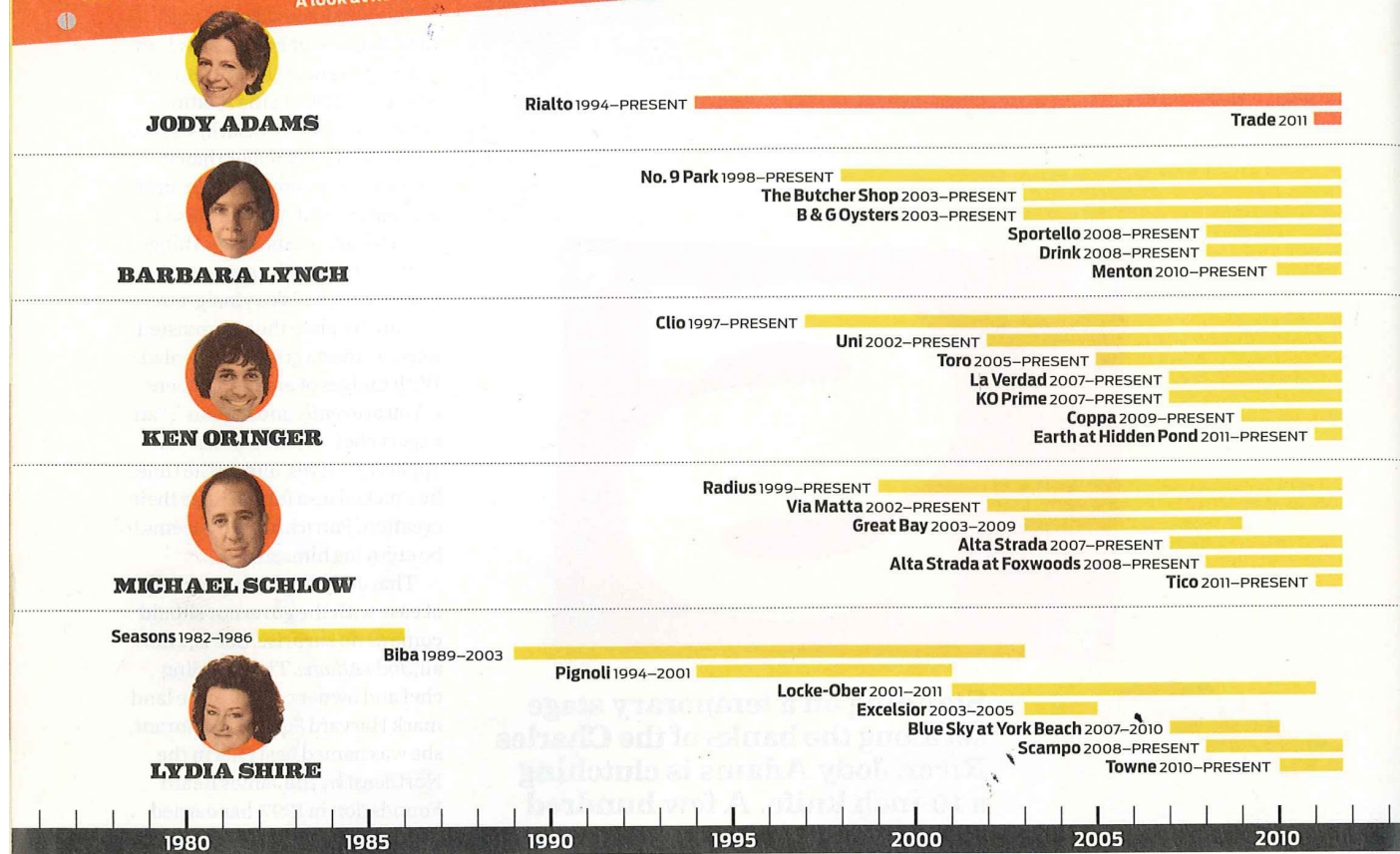
But let's be clear: Jody Adams does not want to be considered a "celebrity chef." Okay, she did agree to appear on that TV show. "There was the exposure, of course...." she explains, trailing off. But there was also the chance to raise money for the Boston-based nonprofit Partners in Health, which would get anything she won. "And," she offers as a kind of last defense, "my kids talked me into it."

But, it's worth asking, has Adams done herself any favors by resisting the spotlight in a city where hot young chefs come up the line in a flash, open new ventures with hardly a month's notice, experiment with pop-up restaurants, and



# EMPIRE-BUILDING

A look at how Boston's big-name chefs have branched out—or not—over the decades.



cook up brand identities as often as inspired new dishes? For 18 years, she's operated the same restaurant. There's been no licensing of her name to hot new projects. No cookware line. Just one restaurant, for nearly two decades.

That is, until now. Trade, her new Boston venture, is set to open this month. It marks the first time Adams, 54, has taken her own name for a real spin. Unlike Rialto, which she opened as part of a team of bold-facers and took over only later, Trade is, from the ground up, a Jody Adams joint. And whereas Rialto is hidden shyly away on the second floor of the Charles Hotel, Trade, set as it is on a bustling downtown corner, is a showoff.

Finally, it seems, one of this city's brightest culinary stars is about to take her next step in shaping our food scene. So why did she wait so long?

## A FEW WEEKS AFTER

sharing the stage with Governor Patrick, Adams, wearing a knee-length skirt and a sporty jacket, visits the still-raw space that will become Trade. The restaurant's name, chosen by Adams and her two partners, Sean Griffing and Eric Papachristos, comes from its location inside the former Russia Wharf Building, a historical goods-trading hub. It's set at the corner of Congress Street and Atlantic Avenue, with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the Greenway. The site is still a tangle of cables and lumber, with workers in hardhats scurrying about.

Adams is pointing out where the Wood Stone oven will go; she and the restaurant's chef de cuisine, Andrew Hebert, traveled to Washington State, where the oven company is based, to test it out a few weeks back. The oven will be the primary cooking source

for the many flatbreads and roasted entrées on the menu, which, along with everything else having to do with this place, Adams keeps describing as "simple."

"Think really simple," she says, referring to the clean lines and pops of color architect Maryann Thompson has planned for the design, which will preserve the building's original vaulted ceilings and steel beams. Simple, too, is the hot line in the kitchen, to include that wood oven, a couple of burners, and a grill—but also a flat, griddlelike cooktop called a *plancha* ("less pans to wash," notes Adams). And there'll be a simple, casual menu: small plates, flatbreads, salads, entrées. The flavors will be bold, she says, but not ambitious. "We want to make sure that everything we're putting on the plate is what we want it to be. And that we can meet the volume that walks through this door."

And if the crowds do pour in, the effect could be monumental. Trade occupies a coveted piece of real estate—a gateway to the Fort Point Channel neighborhood that's been up and coming for years, yet has remained disconnected from the rest of the city's dining scene. The opening of Trade, along with the neighboring steakhouse Smith & Wollensky, could take the hopeful vision of chefs Barbara Lynch and Joanne Chang, who have set up shop across the channel, to an entirely new level. Our downtown dining landscape, a sleeper compared with, say, the scene in the South End or Back Bay, might finally wake up.

## ADAMS DIDN'T FOLLOW

the usual culinary-school path to greatness. After studying at Brown, where she majored in anthropology, she worked with a writer and teacher named Nancy Verde Barr, whom the chef credits with teaching her the fundamentals of cooking. Barr also introduced Adams to Julia Child, who would become a major inspiration. When Adams moved to Boston to join her soon-to-be husband, Ken Rivard, Child gave her some simple advice: "Go work for Lydia."

At the time, Lydia Shire was one of a handful of chefs—and, really, the only woman—defining Boston cuisine. She worked at Seasons, in the Bostonian Hotel, along with Gordon Hamersley, who wound up granting an interview to Adams despite the fact that, to that point, she'd cooked only as a caterer. Hamersley wound up passing her over for someone with actual restaurant experience. Ten days later, though, disappointed in his first choice, he made Adams an offer.

"She burned fish, she burned meat, she bled all over the place," recalls Hamersley. But she learned quickly, and when Hamersley and his wife, Fiona, opened their eponymous bistro in the South End in 1987, Hamersley brought Adams with him. There, he says, she was "instrumental" in the creation of new recipes, many of which, like his well-known roast chicken, he still serves today.

Hamersley's was intense—shot-out-of-a-cannon intense—and Adams fit right in. When she sliced



## THREE'S A CHARM

From left, business partners Eric Papachristos, Jody Adams, and Sean Griffing.

her hand on a tin-can lid one hectic Saturday night, she ran to the emergency room and returned, heavily bandaged, to the line, shoving Hamersley off her station so that she could resume her shift. When a roast chicken wasn't done properly, she threw it across the kitchen in frustration. And when she gave birth to her son, Oliver, in 1989, she was back to work in just three weeks.

But being driven sometimes means having to make difficult personal choices. Adams was clocking almost 100 hours a week. She finally pulled

her boss aside. Hamersley says her request to scale back her hours was like "a bucket of water had been thrown over me. It made me realize these people have lives, too."

The battle for work-life balance has been a constant one, Adams admits. "Ken and I made this agreement that one parent would be at home," she explains. "I said, 'I don't want to be the parent at home.'" Though Rivard always worked (as a ghostwriter, he's published four books), he was the primary caregiver for their two kids, Roxanne, **CONTINUED ON PAGE 148**

Read more about legendary chef Jody Adams from those who know her best at [bostonmagazine.com/trade](http://bostonmagazine.com/trade).



## JODY ADAMS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 103

now 15, and Oliver, 21. That meant Adams missed bedtime baths, story time, and tagging along on her daughter's first bra-shopping excursion. But, Rivard notes, that was their choice. "The responsibility of our family has always been in her hands," he says.

"It was not easy for me at all," says the working mom. "There were plenty of times when I was done, saying, 'I can't do this anymore. I want to be at home.' But I'd made my choice."

Shortly after Adams's son came along, both she and Hamersley recognized that it was time for a change. An executive chef position had opened up at Michela's, a restaurant owned by Michela Larson, and Hamersley encouraged her to apply. "I sort of threw her out of the kitchen," he says. "It wasn't so much that I wanted her to go, but it was time."

"I was perfectly happy," recalls Adams. "I was not looking to leave. In fact, when I gave my notice, I cried. But it was the right thing for me. It was a small restaurant. It was time for me to take the next step and leave, so that somebody else could come in."

Compared with the tiny South End kitchen she'd come from, Michela's was a beast: lunch and dinner service in the dining room, plus an all-day café, seven days a week. Adams was stepping into the shoes of a powerful predecessor, Todd English, and she fought to make the place her own.

"The first thing she said to me was, 'I'm really sorry, but I can't have a chicken on the menu,'" recalls Larson. Instead, Adams needed to create her own signature dish, one that wasn't linked to her past. So she developed a "drop-dead, absolutely delicious" crispy roast duck, says Larson, a dish that still appears on the Rialto menu today.

Adams continued to work hard, and it paid off. In 1994, an opportunity for partnership came along: The Charles Hotel was looking for a restaurant, and Larson was looking for a new project that would allow her to share ownership. With Christopher Myers and Karen Haskell, Larson and Adams opened Rialto, focusing on Mediterranean cuisine. It was the first time Adams had control over her own menu. Right out of the gate, Rialto received four stars from *Globe* restaurant critic Alison Arnett.

Still, it took a while for Adams to warm up to the spotlight. "She was shy about coming out to the dining room," Larson recalls. "She had to put on another face. At the beginning, it was like, 'Jody, you have to comb your hair.'"

"I didn't see myself as the world saw me," Adams says. "I saw myself as being the chef in the kitchen, always connected to the staff."

Thanks to Adams, Rialto began to produce some of the city's top cooking talent—a string of notable protégés who share Adams's no-nonsense work ethic. There was Joanne Chang, whom Adams hired with barely any experience in a restaurant kitchen. Despite lacking dessert skills herself, Adams helped turn Chang into one of the city's most respected pastry chefs. "She took the dishes that were spinning through my head and showed me how to make them great," says Chang, who went on to open Flour Bakery + Café and Myers + Chang.

Then there was a young guy named Dante de Magistris, who worked at Rialto early in his career and later was the chef at Blu inside the Sports Club/LA, which Adams and her partners ran for several years. De Magistris credits Adams for mentorship that went beyond the stove. "At the time, I was just thinking about food: where it was coming from, the history. She was trying to get me out of that, to think about the bigger picture and become a better manager," he says. De Magistris now owns Dante and Il Casale.

And there have been countless others: Chris Parsons, who would later helm Catch and Parsons Table; Tom Fosnot, who went on to run Rocca and now Gibbet Hill Grill; Nuno Alves, currently cooking at Tavolo; and a tenacious young toque named Carolyn Johnson, who today can be found at 80 Thoreau. More than any other restaurant at the time—or, for that matter, since—Rialto became *the* place for rising stars to cut their teeth.

But for Adams's partners, it wasn't enough that she was developing menus, educating a new generation, and leading her staff. Dick Friedman, owner of the Charles Hotel, wanted Adams to be the face of the restaurant. "In the early years, Jody was always just in the background," says Friedman, adding that he didn't "think it would be a detriment to her food if she were out promoting more."

Larson urged her to offer cooking classes for restaurant patrons, something Adams did reluctantly at first but quickly embraced.

Outside the restaurant, Adams's name was growing. *Food & Wine* called her one of the nation's best new chefs in 1993, and 1997 brought the prestigious James Beard Award. By the time Adams put out her cookbook, *In the Hands of a Chef*—coauthored by her husband—in 2002, she and Rialto were synonymous with fine dining in Boston. A collection of important regulars started filling the place, and became friends. People like Paul Farmer and Ophelia Dahl from Partners in Health, one of three non-profits she supports. (The Greater Boston Food Bank and Share Our Strength are the other two—Strength cofounder Billy Shore even held his wedding reception at Rialto.) Jack Connors, the former head of the Hill Holliday advertising agency who is now a philanthropic powerhouse, was a prominent fan. "I'm crazy about her," says Connors, who handed Adams what might have been her most prestigious cooking opportunity to date this past spring: He invited her to prepare the menu for a \$35,800-a-couple fundraiser for President Obama. The big shots came at first for the food; they returned to catch some face time with the rising star who was now walking the dining room with ease.

But just as she began to grow comfortable with this new, more public role, the Rialto partnership started to shift. Myers moved on, leaving the trio of Larson, Haskell, and Adams to open other projects (Red Clay in Chestnut Hill, Blu at the Sports Club/LA, and Noir, a bar inside the Charles Hotel), all of which had Adams focused solely on food and kitchen management. By 2006, when Rialto's contract with the hotel was coming to an end, Adams was "bursting at the seams" to learn new skills.

For Larson, the frustration emanating from her chef was palpable. "She didn't want any more voices in the mix," Larson explains. After 16 years, the pair decided it was time to split. Adams took full custody of Rialto, while Larson and Haskell moved on to other ventures.

Adams shut Rialto down for five weeks, then reopened in February 2007, ushering in a new era. The redesign was a truer reflection of its sole owner: lighter, softer, more approachable. And Adams was the decision-maker.

"It wasn't just about the food or the customers," says Adams. "It was about the budget, about, 'Do the chairs fit around the table? Do the uniforms work?' Every piece of that restaurant came from my

CONTINUED ON PAGE 150

## JODY ADAMS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 149

head." The menu was overhauled, too. Instead of an overarching Mediterranean influence, Adams became hyperfocused on regional Italian cuisine, with a menu that covered a new area of the country every month. And instead of spending all of her time concentrating on what came out of the kitchen, she had to build a staff that could execute her vision, beginning with her rising chef de cuisine, Carolyn Johnson.

"It was nerve-racking," says Johnson. "We were going for a four-course menu with a pasta course in the middle, which no one in Boston was doing then. We had no idea how diners would respond." For Adams, the reinvention transformed her as much as it did the restaurant. "I was terrified that people would discover that I didn't know what I was doing," she admits. "I didn't have enough confidence. But once I opened these new doors to Rialto and people came in, it was like something had been peeled off of me."

**JODY ADAMS ISN'T** exactly basking in free time. On a recent Monday, she's zipping around a farm party hosted by the local food publication *Edible Boston*. Tuesday, she's up early for a bike ride (she's training for the 192-mile Pan-Mass Challenge), then sits in a two-hour meeting before hitting the kitchen with her cooks to prep a dish for that night's Taste of Cambridge fundraising event. Wednesday there's another bike ride, another round of meetings, and then she's glad-handing local press and posing for photos during a reception celebrating the summer opening of the Rialto terrace. ("But I'm not wearing any makeup!" she protests.) On Thursday's agenda: a Guerilla Grilling expedition—a name she's given to the regular farm and purveyor visits she makes with her entire kitchen staff. On these trips, the crew loads up a car with pantry items, visits an organic farm, a poultry processor, or a chocolate maker, and, after a tour or a hands-on lesson, whips up a feast for the host's staff. On a rare Friday morning at home, Adams speedily chops garlic while working on a recipe for the food blog that she and Rivard launched in June. The Garum Factory, named for an ancient fermented condiment, is an online repository of recipes, stories, and food photography. By noon, she's out the door

CONTINUED ON PAGE 152

## JODY ADAMS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 150

to visit the new Trade space, and finally it's back to Rialto for a 10-hour shift.

Given her already-packed schedule, it's understandable that Adams would be reluctant to open a new business. Adding to the trepidation is the fact that any chef with more than one venture—Ken Oringer (Clio, Uni, Toro, Coppa), Michael Schlow (Radius, Via Matta, Tico)—will have his or her critics. The kind ones will question how you can devote your time to multiple ventures and still maintain the quality; the cruel ones fling the s-word (sellout). But if any chef in town has a proven ability to multitask, it's Adams. So why, when it comes to building her own brand, has she remained more tortoise than hare?

"I'm approached [about starting new restaurants] all the time," she says. "I've looked at tons of properties around Boston in the last four years on my own."

Interestingly, the one idea that finally took was pitched to her by two men nearly 20 years her junior: Sean Griffing, most recently the general manager of Rialto, and Eric Papachristos, a former analyst with an MBA and the offspring of restaurateurs. "Eric and I were always talking about the next restaurant we were going to open," says Griffing. Given that he was already working at Rialto, he says, it was a natural progression to join forces with Adams.

It didn't take long for Adams to sign on. "Sean and I had talked for years, on and off, about the possibility of working together," she says. "When we looked at what we all brought to the table, it was all so different, but it really makes a whole. They have new, fresh energy and perspective."

Once the trio decided to partner up, they scouted spaces as a team. "We were all over the place—Kendall, Central, Seaport, downtown," Griffing recalls. They eventually settled on the Russia Wharf building because of its architecture and locale. "The visibility is just spectacular," says Adams.

Over and over, Adams maintains that her intention is not to run the show, nor to take full credit for it. "Restaurants don't exist just because of the chef," she says. "They're not successful just because of a chef. There's a whole lot of people [and] pieces of the puzzle that are extremely important, and to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 154

## JODY ADAMS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 152

assume that you're the be-all, end-all is, you know, not me."

But there's no question what the public will take away: This is a Jody Adams project. When news broke that there were restaurants going into the building, which is now called Atlantic Wharf, the developers announced that a "celebrity chef" would be involved. And like the redo of Rialto, Trade's design reflects that chef: light, airy, and energetic. The chef de cuisine, Andrew Hebert, worked at Rialto for almost seven years, so he understands Adams's cooking style and can translate her menu precisely. She, of course, insists the menu will be as much his as hers, but its focus on healthful, approachable dishes is signature Adams.

And just as she's launched the careers of so many at Rialto, she plans to use Trade as a proving ground for the next generation of chefs. Two prep-cook positions will be reserved for high school students enrolled in Future Chefs, the school-to-career program founded by Toni Elka, so that Adams can, as always, be a mentor.

The entire space, in other words, will be an extension of Jody Adams.

### FLOATING THROUGH

the Rialto dining room on a recent summer night, Adams approaches a table of strangers. One guest tries to order dessert from her. "Your server will come over and take that," Adams replies.

The woman stammers, then a flash of recognition. "Wait—are you her? Are you....*Jody Adams*?" she squeals, eyes wide.

Adams responds by pointing to the name on her jacket. "That's what they tell me," the chef says, smiling. She takes another minute to ask about the meal before ducking back into the kitchen and calling it a night. There is a cooking class the next day—a biking trip to the market followed by lunch at the restaurant for 20 students. After that, she'll have a rare day off before returning Monday morning to jump in again at 100 miles per hour.

Back at the table, the women are beaming. "That was Jody *Adams*!" one chirps. A real live celebrity chef. **E**

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

How Jody Adams reinvented Rialto

JULY 2007 > BOSTONMAGAZINE.COM/RIALTO