



**WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH FEATURE:  
JACQUELINE KLEIS  
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER,  
POLLO TROPICAL®**

Jacqueline Kleis has been commanding ingredients in the kitchen for more than 25 years. As Research and Development Manager for Pollo Tropical®, she creates and refines many of the great variety of menu items served at the 120 Pollo Tropical restaurants.

"I began my adventure in the kitchen when I was just 10 years old, but didn't think it was what I wanted to be when I grew up," said Kleis.

Today Kleis plays an influential part in the many new, fresh menu items that Pollo Tropical offers customers – including such flavors as the new handheld wraps and sandwiches like the Grilled Chicken Quesadilla Wrap and Grilled Chicken Chipotle Sandwich; salads such as the Shrimp Quesadilla Salad; soups, seasonal side dishes and more.

She is one of more than 1,500 women employed at Pollo Tropical.

Kleis is a native of Puerto Rico and a mother of four children. She says her path into the culinary profession came as a surprise. After her high school graduation she moved from Puerto Rico to the United States to attend Brown University in Rhode Island.

At Brown, Kleis majored in Applied Mathematics but changed her major to French and International Relations. During her junior year, she traveled to Leon, France to study at the Université de Leon II as an exchange student. That same year, she met a fellow student who changed her life.

"I cooked one night, and she loved it," Kleis said of her classmate. "She suggested that I intern with a chef, and I figured that since I was in France, it was the perfect place to give it a try."

That summer of 1983, Kleis got an internship with a well-known chef, Georges Blanc at his restaurant, *La Mère Blanc*.

"I was so intimidated and scared to make mistakes; it was such a male dominated profession, and I cooked for fun but never alongside professionals," she added.

After her internship, Kleis returned to the United States to finish her bachelor's degree at Brown University. By then, she had decided that she would strive to become a chef. She moved back to Puerto Rico to accept an internship at the *Caribe Hilton Hotel* in San Juan.



She missed France, and in 1986 she went back. She took a position as an intern at *Chez Pauline*. She continued to apply for positions and internships in various restaurants in France to gain more knowledge and skill of the culinary profession.

“I once applied for a job and was told that I wasn’t fit to cook in the professional world because I was a woman,” said Kleis. “It was a different time, and women were not seen as they are now.”

Afterwards, Kleis moved to Geneva, Switzerland to work at the five-star *Hotel Beau Rivage* with her mentor, Georges Blanc. She was one of two women among 25 chefs. She worked alongside Blanc for a year, also traveling to Puerto Rico and the South of France during the winters and summers to act as a private chef for the owners of Chanel.

“Looking back, I was very fortunate Georges was my mentor,” said Kleis. “He grew up with his mother in the kitchen and accepted women in his.”

Kleis interned in two other restaurants in France before moving back to Puerto Rico in 1990 and creating one of the most prestigious off-premise catering companies on the island.

“We catered for the Puerto Rican tourism company, Major League Baseball, several of the governors’ inauguration balls and the National Governor’s Association Convention,” she said.

In 2006, she developed a restaurant concept – *Urban Cuisine* – a fast casual restaurant that emphasized quality and freshness at affordable prices. Within 6 months of opening, the restaurant was chosen as Puerto Rico’s top 20 favorite restaurants in a public survey by a local newspaper. Two years later, Kleis and her husband decided to move to Miami, Florida. While in Miami, she appeared in various cooking segments for *Despierta America* before she was hired by Pollo Tropical.

“At that point in my career, I wanted a job that gave me a balanced life and put the skills I have to good use. Pollo Tropical has given me that opportunity,” said Kleis. “I am very fortunate to have found a home here, in their kitchens.”

Today, when she’s not cooking up recipes and new flavors for Pollo Tropical, Kleis spends time with her husband and four daughters. She is also writing a book about her experiences in the culinary profession.

“I think it’s important that a woman chooses a career she loves whether or not it’s considered a man’s profession. You have to pursue what you love because that’s how you are really going to do your best,” Kleis added.

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