These James Beard Semifinalist Chefs Put Personal Meanings to High Prestige.

By: Amanda Brecher

The 33rd annual James Beard awards have returned for another year of recognition. Just over a month ago, the James Beard Foundation (JBF) announced its Restaurant and Chef Award Semifinalists.

The [foundation](https://www.jamesbeard.org/about) aims to bolster change makers in the food industry celebrating “the people behind America’s food culture.”

This year, JBF named seven Boston Chefs in the category of Best Chef: Northeast Semifinalist, up from six in [2023](https://www.bostonmagazine.com/restaurants/2023/01/30/2023-james-beard-semifinalists-boston/). The list reads names labeled amongst the top in the city.

In fulfilling their [mission](https://www.jamesbeard.org/awards)– “to recognize exceptional talent and achievement in the culinary arts, hospitality, media, and broader food system, as well as a demonstrated commitment to racial and gender equity, community, sustainability, and a culture where all can thrive,” – the James Beard Foundation has named Patricia Estorino of Gustazo in Cambridge and John DaSilva of Chickadee in Seaport among the list of semifinalists for Best Chef: Northeast.

With the announcement of the finalists in this category fast approaching, DaSilva and Estorino reflect on their experience as chefs and contemplate what winning this award would be like.

The two chefs have been named James Beard semifinalists once before. Although they’re semifinalists in the same category, winning this award takes on different meanings for Estorino and DaSilva.

Estorino said she finds her status as semifinalist “invigorating” and “humbling,” but also can see the responsibility that comes with it.

“It’s the responsibility that comes with expectations,” Estorino explained. “It’s one thing to have guests come to our restaurant and say ‘Cuban food sounds good, let's go to this place’, versus ‘their chef won a James Beard award, let’s go here’. That’s a big difference. It definitely gives you a kind of reputation to uphold.”

Her apprehension is overshadowed nonetheless by her appreciation for her nomination.

“I would love to win,” Estorino said. “It’s been great. It’s been so wonderful for our teams to feel that recognition.”

DaSilva sees the award as a token of strength for his restaurant and his team– a monument to the battle they fought during the pandemic.

“The pandemic hits and suddenly the bank account just dwindles down to literally nothing and you’re asking the same bank who you still owe money to to extend your line of credit, taking on more debt because you still believe in it,” DaSilva said. “I think to go through all that to come out on the other side and continue to raise our standards… It's like a testament to me and Ted and to our team. To win, it would be fulfilling.”

Ted Kilpatrick is DaSilva’s counterpart at Chickadee, a longtime friend of his who he met during his time working at No.9 Park.

“I needed someone like him,” DaSilva gushed. “I think he just complements me perfectly.”

But most of all, to DaSilva, a James Beard Award would be a testament to his continued excellence in the restaurant industry.

“If you’re going to receive such an amazing award, I think you should be able to stand the test of time,” DaSilva explained. “It should be given to someone who has sustained excellence and success in cooking.”

Chickadee– his flagship culinary feat in Boston’s seaport– is a display of his sustained excellence, receiving raves from [press](https://www.chickadeerestaurant.com/press) since its opening.

After graduating from the New England Culinary Institute in 2004, DaSilva moved to Nantucket and began working at The Boarding House. He spent four years there learning about “Mediterranean food, seasonality, different ingredients and techniques,” before setting his sights away from what he dubbed the seasonal lifestyle.

DaSilva moved to Boston where he took a job at The Butcher Shop for a short time before dedicating five years to No. 9 Park.

“I got paid peanuts but at that point I was young and hungry and knew that if I kept my head down and busted my ass that I would rise quickly,” said DaSilva.

That’s just what he did. Within a year, he recalled, he became the Sous Chef, and then advanced to Executive Sous Chef a year after. In 2013, DaSilva debuted Spoke Wine Bar, his first independent venture.

“Finally, I had my own baby. It was small enough that I had control over everything, literally working out of a closet-sized kitchen.”

But even before his professional experience, food was embedded in DaSilva as a way of life in the way he was raised, he shared.

He grew up in a kitchen, born into a cooking culture ingrained in his bloodline. With a Sicilian grandmother and Portuguese grandfather, DaSilva said that at home, food was central to everything.

There was no shortage of fresh bread, always accompanied by perfectly tempered butter. However, to DaSilva, nothing compared to the abundance of Sicilian pastries that flooded his upbringing.

“We were just kind of being beaten over the head with it,” DaSilva said of the role his Sicilian heritage played not only in his love for cooking, but in his upbringing as a whole.

Patricia Estorino, on the other hand, took up cooking to reconnect with her Cuban roots and bring her native culture to Boston. Besides the time she spent in the kitchen with her family in Cuba, Estorino had no professional cooking experience before opening Gustazo in [Belmont](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/01/04/lifestyle/cuba-modern-graceful-is-plate-gustazo/) with Adolfo De La Vega. They moved their original location to Waltham in 2014 and opened a second location in Cambridge five years later.

“We obviously wanted to bring Cuban food to the Boston area, and tried to do it in a way that was meaningful to the current culinary scene,” Estorino said. “But it was never planned to be up for a James Beard Award.”

Before moving to Boston in [2001](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/west/2015/02/08/forget-winter-chill-gustazo-cuban-cafe/BN9rAmah2Ei0sAUqGFk6mL/story.html), Estorino was a dancer at the National Dance Company in Cuba. She explained how she doesn’t dance anymore and instead focuses her efforts towards her restaurant and her family.

Estorino describes opening Gustazo on a whim, the only experience with food derived from her family in Cuba. Even without culinary school and decades dedicated to the restaurant industry, Estorino gained her status in the field all the same.

DaSilva and Estorino sit on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their culinary history, but there are two common factors that blur what would otherwise be a vivid contrast between the chefs.

The first value is family.

“I have a 7-year-old daughter. So, any free time? It’s for her” Estorino said. DaSilva shared a similar philosophy.

DaSilva built his schedule at Chickadee to allow for time with his 7-year-old daughter Maple.

“Lately, time off for me has been ice skating with Maple. I go out every week with her and I'm trying to master things like skating backwards and the transitions and everything. I'm really enjoying that,” said DaSilva.

The second value their teams. Though, the way they talk about it– with immense gratitude and attribution – may qualify such a group to categorize itself under family as well.

“You really need the right team to execute your vision,” Estorino said. “I love to have employees that have worked with us for a long time, and it really makes a big difference when you build things for many years.”

“I think what makes [Chickadee] operate at its best is kind of its team. It’s really just about the team,” DaSilva explained.

Looking ahead, DaSilva hinted that a new venture lay on the horizon, noting that his partner, Ted Kilpatrick, was particularly passionate about opening a high-end cocktail bar.

“Without us growing, our team can’t grow. We want to grow for ourselves, but we also want to grow so that our team can flourish,” DaSilva said.

Estorino, however, is content with jumping between both locations of Gustazo, and said she hopes to continue to make Cuban cuisine a solid contender amongst its more popular counterparts in the industry. She explained her dedication to remaining true to the flavors and authenticity of Cuban dishes, while exploring new possibilities with traditional Cuban ingredients.

According to the [James Beard Foundation](https://www.jamesbeard.org/awards), finalists for the Restaurant and Chef James Beard awards will be announced on April 3, and the winners will be announced June 10.

“Priorities have changed and shifted along the way,” DaSilva said. “But I’ve never taken my eyes off the prize.”