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CHEF CENTRAL

Starchefs.com is one of the oldest and best sites for those who follow the country's chef and restaurant scene, yet most of us have never heard of it. We talk to the site's leading lady — Antoinette Bruno — about its history and its third annual chef's

congress event, which welcomes a slew of the world's top chefs, drink-makers and foodies to the city next week.

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StarChefs.com is the site for top toques - and their most dedicated fans

BY RACHEL WHARTON

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Antoinette Bruno, CEO of StarChefs.com, built the once-modest site into an industry powerhouse.

When the heavy hitters of food media come to mind, you probably think Gourmet, Food & Wine or even Epicurious.com. But when chefs want to keep up with Joneses, they often wind up reading StarChefs.com.

Launched in the early-Internet era of 1995, StarChefs.com is still mostly unknown outside of the professional chef scene. But that's beginning to change, thanks in large part to CEO Antoinette Bruno.

Bruno — who has an MBA from Harvard, a post-graduate degree from the London School of Economics and a stint helping the British brand The Body Shop find marketing success in the States — took leadership of the struggling consumer food site in 1999, after meeting a founder in a mommy-and-me style class.

Bruno had been looking for a way to use her management and marketing skills and a love for food originally honed in her first career in high finance. At the age of 22, she took a job as a Wall Street power player — and one of five women at Solomon Brothers in the late 1980s. But beyond the great salary, she found that only part of the gig she liked was taking her clients out to Lutece and La Cote Basque, then the city's top French restaurants.

"The more I learned about fine dining, the more I was liking the entertaining side of my job more than the other stuff," says Bruno. "It would be great, she remembers thinking, "if I was making this money and was really happy."

The realization prompted her to leave for a stint cooking in France, first in a kitchen and then in classes at Ritz Escoffier in Paris. But after deciding that she wasn't really cut out to be a French chef — she couldn't lift 100 pound bags of potatoes and hated to ask for help — Bruno decided to hit business school, eventually ending up at the Body Shop, back on Wall Street and then at home with her first child.

She was looking for a way to combine her unique background — a mix of food, finance, management and marketing — when she stumbled across the founder of StarChefs.com, who was in desperate need of an infusion of cash and ideas.

"I raised the money in a month," says Bruno who also took a percentage ownership in the company, "she'd been trying to raise the money for four years."

And despite plenty of hairy months where Bruno and a few dedicated staffers didn't really get paychecks, Bruno's background, her decision to focus on industry readers and her Wall Street contacts (who trusted her judgment and kicked in to help) are now paying off.

In the past decade, StarChefs.com has gone from a struggling plain-Jane food site to the must-post place for food industry jobs to a multi-platform entity wooing those who really know restaurant management and food.