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**Cary
Wheaton**

Acumen And Heart
At Billings Forge

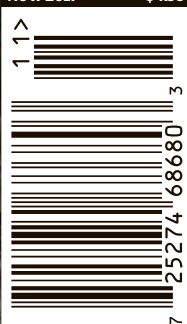
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PROFILE

CARY WHEATON

Activism And Acumen At Heart Of Billings Forge Leader's Success

By MATT ORMSETH

When a Connecticut charity asked Cary Wheaton to move to Hartford and open a restaurant in a former wrench factory, she gave them a year. It's been 11.

Wheaton is the executive director of Billings Forge Community Works, a sprawling network of eateries, gardens, markets and training programs that help Hartford residents with barriers to employment gain job skills and work experience.

When she was approached in 2006 by the Melville Charitable Trust to design a restaurant that could drive economic growth in a neglected stretch of Hartford, Wheaton had already worked in, managed or owned seven restaurants in the Boston area. She had a house, a young daughter and co-ownership of a restaurant in Cambridge, a fine-dining spot with a kid-friendly twist.

But this, she sensed, could be her life's work: the chance to marry the activism of her post-college years with decades of restaurant experience.

"I thought, 'I have a non-profit side of my brain. And I have a restaurant, entrepreneurial side of my brain,'" she recalled. "'So maybe I can bring these two together.'"

Prior to coming to Hartford, Wheaton had overseen a shared-use kitchen incubator in an old Jamaica Plain brewery. The 4,000-square-foot space was open 24 hours a day to



PATRICK RAYCRAFT

Tamarra Carson spruces up the plants on a Friday afternoon at The Kitchen at Billings Forge on Broad Street in Hartford, where she works as a chef.

aspiring chefs and restaurateurs who couldn't afford the overhead on a kitchen of their own; they'd cook in the old brewery, and either deliver or sell their food from trucks and carts.

"We had everything from pastry-makers to pickle guys to caterers — all sorts of folks," she said. "And the idea was they'd have a safe place to make their food. You'd incubate them up and out."

The Boston Globe wrote a story on the shared-use kitchen, which crossed the desk of the Melville Charitable Trust's then-president. The trust had bought a cluster of brick buildings in Hartford that once housed Billings & Spencer Co., toolmakers who'd stood alongside Colt, Pope and Underwood as the city's industrial giants. Wheaton said she'd find them someone with a vision for a bold, socially conscious eatery in Billings Forge.

She tried, and failed, for months.

"People were frightened by the neighborhood — this is a pretty low-income neighborhood — and those who were not frightened by the neighborhood were not anybody that was going to be an add-on to the community," she said, adding that one man pitched her a strip club.

And so she opened Firebox herself, a farm-to-table restaurant in a brick Billings Forge building on Broad Street. Firebox, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, employs 40 to 45 people at a time, she said, about half of whom live in Hartford.

"We really wanted to employ as many people from the community as we could," she said. "We didn't just open a restaurant and hire everybody from West Hartford and Avon."

The line between revitalization and gentrification is a thin one, at times nonexistent. Wheaton said

C A F F E

she's always tried to lift up, and never price out, local residents, but admits Firebox is "at a price point that is by and large outside the range of folks who live in this community."

"It's always a challenge and a struggle," she said. "But we also knew that we would need something pretty special to entice people to come into the community, and hopefully invest in the community."

Aimee Hendrigan, vice president of programs at Melville Charitable Trust, said Wheaton's business acumen has kept Billings Forge solvent, but credits her heart with making it the catapult into employment and growth that it is today.

"She knows how to look at the bottom line, and at the double bottom line — which is social good

and social justice," Hendrigan said.

Once Firebox got going, Wheaton wanted to increase access to healthy and fresh food in the area surrounding the restaurant — "there isn't really a supermarket here; people buy their food at corner markets and bodegas" — and so Billings Forge started a year-round farmers' market.

Billings Forge also opened two cafes, one next to Firebox and another at the Hartford Public Library downtown. The cafes offer job training for people with barriers to employment — the homeless, people just out of jail, kids who didn't finish school.

Though Wheaton is a restaurateur by trade, Billings Forge's socially conscious modus operandi harks back to her post-college years when she worked with tenant unions in Cambridge in the late '70s and early '80s. As an activist for the anti-poverty program VISTA, Wheaton fought to keep apartments rent-controlled in Cambridge's Summerville neighborhood. In the end, her efforts and Summerville's longtime residents were swept away in an influx of new money.

"When you talk about gentrification, [Summerville] is the center of gentrification in Cambridge," she said. She went on to work for Boston's public schools, and decided she'd go back

Cary Wheaton leverages programs at The Kitchen to equip local residents with culinary experience and job skills.

MONICA JORGE



to school and become a child psychologist.

That decision, strangely enough, was what pitched her into the restaurant world. At 26, she felt too old to hit her parents up for tuition money, and she started waitressing at a Tex Mex restaurant near Tufts University to save up for school. But in the meantime, she fell in love with the culinary world.

"I loved the fact that it was energetic, that every day was a new day," she said. "I loved putting on a show, that it required you to multitask."

After three months, she was "promoted" to assistant manager.

"I was green enough not to know that 'assistant manager' is basically the job you give to the stupid young girl who's going to work four times as much as she does as a waitress and make half as much money," she said, laughing.

But two months later, she was promoted again — this time to bonafide manager. That was when

she wondered: Why not open a restaurant of my own? She had a chef — her best friend's brother had just graduated from culinary school.

The two opened East Coast Grill a few weeks later. The place served Southern barbecue and grilled food, with an open kitchen and wood-fired grill. Six days after it opened, a Boston Globe critic gave it five stars.

"On Wednesday night we did 28 covers. The paper came out Thursday, and Thursday night we did 228 covers," Wheaton said. "We were working literally all the time."

Wheaton and her partner later opened a take-out barbecue spot and a fine-dining restaurant, and started a hot sauce and spice rub company. For 12 years, she juggled her culinary portfolio. "And then I said, 'A family life would be nice. Or any life besides this,'" she recalled. And so she adopted a 4-month-old daughter, and took a break from the culinary world.

She grew restless, though — "I'm not the stay-at-home type" — and opened

another restaurant with her sister. She managed the place for 10 years until the Melville Trust asked her to come to Hartford.

Wheaton grew up in northern New Jersey, and always cut through Hartford on her way to Boston. "I don't think I've ever stopped here," she said. "I think I might've gone to the Mark Twain House when I was in fourth grade. But I never thought there was any *reason* to stop here."

Eleven years later, though, she believes this place — Hartford, home — is on the up and up, buoyed by its people. Her employees at Firebox and the Kitchen are driven, industrious and quick to learn, she said. Eighty-five percent of them find jobs after cycling through Billings Forge's training programs.

"Our job, my job, is to reach out to people where they are, and to provide them with tools to succeed — and not to tell people what to do," she said. "I give them a tool or teach them a skill, and just get out of the way."



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