



Renee Cherkezian

Title: **Co-Founder and Director of Product and Health Science**

Company: **EPICURED®**

Location: **New York, NY, USA**

Affiliation: **Camp Nubar and NY Summer Internship Program**



Cherkezian displays her product at the EPICURED® office in SoHo, Manhattan.

Gourmet MEDICINE WOMAN

How Renee Cherkezian carved out an industry niche with meals that heal

When Renee Cherkezian co-founded EPICURED®, she combined her calling as a clinical nurse with her passion for the culinary arts. Driven by her intention to help others, she set out to master the healing power of food, only with two added ingredients: taste and convenience.

Today Cherkezian is considered a pioneer in the fast-growing ready-to-eat meal delivery industry, having founded the first low FODMAP* company in the United States to offer cuisine, prepared by Michelin chefs, specifically for people with digestive diseases, such as IBS, Crohn's, and Colitis.

Cherkezian's philosophy that food is medicine for both the body and the soul is rooted in her upbringing. "Both of my parents are Armenian and food was the center of our home life," she says. "Observing my grandmother and mother in the kitchen, I came to understand that food was their way of perpetuating our Armenian heritage. And it wasn't just about their wonderful, freshly prepared dishes. It was also about our lineage, feeling the presence of our ancestors through authentic Armenian recipes handed down across many generations."

There was great appreciation for the integrity of good food in the Cherkezian household. "Cooking with my mother and grandmother had an emotional dimension to it: there was great significance to the respect and love we put into every dish we prepared," she reflected.

Food also played a part in Cherkezian's Camp Nubar experience. "There were campers from all over the world, as well as the friends I grew up with in the local Armenian community," she notes. "What brought us together was not just the Armenian language, but also sharing cultural habits that revolve around food and the specialty dishes common to us all. That was another form of bonding."

In contrast, for the 20 to 30 percent of the U.S. population who struggle with digestive illnesses, food can feel like the enemy, provoking fear and anxiety. "Imagine having to be afraid of eating or going out, not knowing if you'll have to go home early or spend the rest of the day in

pain or discomfort. You become isolated," explains Cherkezian.

She aims to bridge that isolation by making it easier for people on restricted diets, and those they break bread with, to enjoy appetizing, nourishing foods that help them feel better and lead a more normal life. The fully-prepared entrees include such mouth-watering choices as grilled chicken bruschetta and truffled mac and cheese. With options for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks, every item is free of hormones, antibiotics, and gluten while also avoiding ingredients high in natural sugars, which can be difficult to digest. As Cherkezian puts it, "EPICURED is a healthcare company that uses food as medicine."

Growing up in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, she attended Georgetown University, School of Nursing. While practicing her



profession, she helped a friend who was battling cancer. His treatment included a restricted diet. "I saw how challenging it was to prepare nutritious meals that tasted good," she says. "As I helped him overcome this dilemma, I realized the healing power of food." This inspired her to make a larger social impact to help others who were suffering with chronic issues on restrictive diets to live a higher quality of life. She was determined to not just treat patients in the hospital, but many working individuals who struggle with dietary issues on a daily basis. This became the impetus behind EPICURED.

The first step was honing her culinary skills, training at the prestigious Manhattan restaurant David Burke Townhouse. She

then decided to move to Paris to study at the Sorbonne University, learning the French language and culture while earning a certificate of excellence at the Ritz Escoffier. Her culinary experiences exposed her to new and creative ways of looking at food and exploring how she can merge her two passions of food and medicine together. "Going to Paris gave me insight and training, all with the idea in the back of my head of starting a business one day," Cherkezian admitted.

As Cherkezian describes it, "At that point, I wasn't sure how to marry the cooking and the medicine, and I didn't want to compromise either one. The question was how can I optimize both of these skillsets and achieve a greater good by healing people?"

The answer was the company, which she co-founded in 2015 with her friend and former Georgetown classmate, Richard Bennett. EPICURED currently serves thousands of customers across the Northeast corridor from Boston to Washington, D.C.

"Everything we do is evidence-based," said Cherkezian. The science side of the meals includes multiple analyses of recipes by both a registered dietitian and the organization's medical board, as well as strict measurement of all ingredients to the gram, in addition to rigorous testing. The gourmet artistry comes from a talented team of chefs and kitchen staff who work within the nutritional guidelines to develop meals that are as delicious as they are healthy.

As the company's Director of Product and Health Science, Cherkezian wears her two hats—nurse and chef—at all times. And the challenges are complex. "According to low-FODMAP dietary guidelines, you can't use garlic or onions," she explains. "So how do you make tasty Bolognese sauce? We developed a garlic oil and an onion oil that recreate the essence of those flavors while avoiding the carbohydrates. And we repeat that process for hundreds of dishes, looking at what people can and cannot eat, and then finding creative solutions to replicate flavors and textures via different ingredients and cooking methodologies."

Mount Sinai Health System, a leader in gastroenterology care, is partnering with EPICURED. Mount Sinai doctors and dietitians "prescribe" EPICURED's gourmet-quality food, formally weaving the meal delivery service into patient treatment plans.

"Following the right diet for those with



Sesame Crusted Salmon



gastrointestinal symptoms can be hard to follow,” says Bruce Sands, MD, Chief of Gastroenterology at Mount Sinai Health System. “Having a service like EPICURED is a great way for patients to stick to that diet, since it is both convenient and tasty.”

“We like to say that our meals are so appealing, you don’t even know they’re

success are the individual outcomes. “We hear from people who say, ‘Finally I’m eating without pain. I’m able to go to work.’ One of our customers wanted to run a half-marathon, but her electrolytes were off. She couldn’t even complete a mile. She feared having to give up being a vegetarian to be healthy. About a month

EPICURED’s meals have even garnered the attention of many A-list celebrities such as Blake Lively.

chronic conditions, such as inflammatory diseases, diabetes, and congestive heart failure.

From a personal standpoint, one of her dreams is to share the EPICURED mission with the people of Armenia. “Armenia is full of amazing produce and fruit and other types of food, but malnourishment and health care are real issues in certain communities,” she says. “My goal is to deliver education that shows Armenians how to use their foods as a form of medicine to better their health.”

No matter what the future holds, Cherkezian’s path forward reflects back on her childhood. “Ever since I was a child, I loved helping people.” Now Renee Cherkezian gets to live that life of service to others every day—one EPICURED meal delivery at a time. 🌱

*FODMAPs are a group of small chain carbohydrates that are commonly malabsorbed in the small intestines and can trigger gas, bloating, cramping diarrhea and/or constipation in people who are sensitive to them. The Low FODMAP Diet, now being widely recommended by dietitians and GIs, cuts these hard-to-digest carbohydrates found in literally hundreds of everyday foods.

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good for you,” says Cherkezian. With a retention rate of near 70 percent, customer satisfaction is high. “Almost 40 percent of our customers are not on restricted diets. They choose to eat our food simply because it’s delicious and they know it’s honest and pure. They can trust it.”

The best measure of Cherkezian’s

into eating our vegetarian meals, she was able to complete a half-marathon and her labs were back to normal. She came in to see us and she was crying from joy.”

What lies ahead for Cherkezian? She and her partners are looking into expanding the company’s delivery area and introducing meal plans for other