

Michelle LaRae

The first woman to design In-N-Out Burger's annual T-shirt

BY ROBIN JONES ■ PHOTOGRAPH BY LORI ANDERSON

When In-N-Out Burger contacted Michelle LaRae out of the blue last year to ask if she'd be interested in painting the scene for the back of their 2009 T-shirt, she could hardly believe it.

A native Californian, she'd grown up with the burger chain and was a huge fan, and her husband had been collecting the T-shirts for years. She became the first woman to do the painting design, which debuted in late November 2008 and will be for sale until late November of this year.

Of course, LaRae's work extends beyond T-shirts; she took her first painting class when she was 7 and has been sketching and painting ever since. She's been studying professionally for the past 10 years, including a year with a master teacher, and she now exhibits her oil paintings of classic cars and landscapes in group shows around Southern California, including Laguna Beach's Art-A-Fair. Fans can also find her work at michellelarae.com.

Q: What's it like seeing people wearing the T-shirt you designed?

LaRae: It's surreal. I still can't believe people other than my family and friends have bought it. The other day, I saw a man in the shirt, and I told him I'd done the painting. He got all excited and asked me to sign it. It's almost like it hasn't happened. It's still me; I still have my ordinary life; I still eat at In-N-Out Burger.

Q: How did you come up with the T-shirt painting?

LaRae: The In-N-Out people wanted to do something to support the troops. They had a theme: Honored to serve

those who serve us. They wanted the flagpole with the sun shining on it, and they had picked the restaurant they wanted in the picture, the one in Woodland Hills. The era was post-World War II. My husband and I go to a lot of classic car shows and do swing dancing, so I tried to picture myself in the scene, what the culture of the time would be like.

Q: Tell me about the cars in the painting.

LaRae: There are six. In-N-Out requested the '41 Chevy and the Ford and Chevy trucks. Another is a Chevy Bel Air I saw at a car show and thought was just beautiful.



Then there's a '41 Plymouth—I fell in love with one at a car show and hope to have one just like it someday—and a '34 Plymouth, my husband's car, which we show at hot rod shows.

Q: What about the people?

LaRae: All four branches of the military are represented, in WWII-era uniforms. Esther Snyder, who founded In-N-Out Burger with her husband, was in the Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), and that's her near the picnic benches. Over by the '41 Chevy, there's a Marine. My grandfather was a Marine, and he was a war hero; he had a Bronze Star from WWII. I thought of him while I was painting that.

Q: How long have you been painting classic cars?

LaRae: For a couple of years, since I started going to car

shows. I saw the reflections, the highlights on the chrome, and I thought, *That would make a really good subject.* I'd been showing my work at exhibits, and once I started doing the cars, my paintings got really popular, so I continued. Before, I tended to do landscapes, and so I started to put cars in landscapes.

Q: What do you hope people get from your work?

LaRae: Just enjoyment. I paint whatever inspires me, and it's always aesthetically pleasing. Some people like to be controversial, some people like to be edgy, but that's not me. I just want my paintings to be pretty.

Q: What's your favorite thing to order at In-N-Out?

LaRae: A burger, protein-style [with lettuce in place of the bun]. They're really messy, but they're good. **W**