



Chefs Rising

Chef Instructor Awards and Recognition

Charismatic Chefs...

at The 2007 ACF Northeast Regional Conference in Pittsburgh



Chefs Kirk T. Bachmann (R) and Heinz Lauer (L) pictured with Certified Master Chef Ferdinand Metz.

Sommelier Exam(ple) – A Midwestern Yankee in Dionysus’ Court

By Michael Willison, Chef Instructor – The Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago

The Court of Master Sommeliers sounds enough like a cloak-and-dagger society of druids and wizards to scare off most casual wine lovers; the exam process staves off the rest of the bleating masses. To become one of the lauded few can take upwards of several years and several tries. So it is, that only the most initiated and gifted members of the wine community even try to reach this level of regard.

The process is a series of four exams that are then broken up into three parts: a written test, a blind tasting, and a service performance assessment. The standards are rather high. I had thrown myself into the ring with the lions, and I felt I was the only gladiator without a sword. Then I remember that I had only my own expectations to exceed—as well as those of all of my students, colleagues, and employees at CHIC—and I begin to sense that I was, indeed, sufficiently armed.

As a long-time veteran of the restaurant industry I find it harder and harder to be embarrassed or overly self-conscious while going about my daily ablutions. I have been the source of surfeit dining-room calamities, ranging from the simplest spill of a sloshing cosmopolitan

to the utterly lampoonish tipping of objects—food, cleaning supplies, persons and various detritus that would make Rube Goldberg scratch his head for want of an explanation. I have had my graceful moments of élan and aplomb as well, but I most frequently enjoy a private chuckle when I am reminded of those events that caused the greatest amount of pandemonium. That is the glint in my eye.

When teaching at CHIC, I rely on these moments to bring a sense of understanding and shared experience to the classroom. It has always been my hope to involve students in the learning process as much as possible, and to that end I had foolishly told them about my attempt to pass this exam. While they would certainly share in my glories, should I pass, they would also no doubt feel the stings of an unfortunate result. I did not wish that this trip have any injurious effect on myself or anyone else, so I had been brimming with confidence to keep myself in fine fettle.

As the date of the Introductory Sommelier Exam approached, I had an unusual feeling. Was it fear? Anxiety? Nerves? Intimidation? Whatever it was, it had me all aflutter. I hadn’t been this jittery and sweaty and downright nervous since I stole my first kiss—with a graceless plunk of the nose against an eye socket and a sheepdog’s ransom of slobber.

This past winter I traveled to Charlotte, North Carolina to take the first of these exams named—innocuously enough, the Introductory Sommelier Exam. A full day of seminar, tasting and lecture is what we are greeted with. An 8 a.m. sniff and swish of hearty red wine shocks me into the day with its leather brambly fruit and cloying astringent tannin. I am most assuredly awake now. The rest of the 37 participants are lingering somewhere between being awake and asleep, waiting for the coffee to kick in or the sleep to be cast out. We soon find that this is not a time for idling. One of my colleagues is called on at once to address the Masters and class to identify several distinct features of the wine’s color, aroma, and flavor. He was not up to the task. As the rest of us shuffle our feet and shift in our desks, so that our gaze not meet any of our hosts, while a new victim is selected: Me. I rise from my seat and instantly feel as though my fly is down, or that I have a piece of spinach on my chin. My voice cracks as I offer a “Good morning” to the now-relieved room and our hosts. I am put through my paces like a runner does wind sprints:

“The color is garnet...no deep purple...no, wait...hmmm. The nose is showing blackberries, plum, violets...is that cranberry juice? Chewing gum? That’s not right...wait, is that right? This is hard. I smell Christmas trees. Okay, oak. No...spruce. Douglas fir? This isn’t getting me anywhere. Ugh! (It isn’t flawed, I think.) Okay...the

taste. I'm going to nail this! It tastes like...a fruit roll-up that has sat out in the sun too long. And pie! And an old gym locker! That can't be right. Purple crayon? (Am I sweating!) Cloves now...a real potpourri vibe, here."

My mouth is going dry as I formulate my initial conclusion about the wine. Thousands of glasses of wine are racing through my head as I reach into the deepest archives of my experience, some more memorable than others, some that I would rather forget, and one or two that I would just as soon not talk about. But what is it? I throw all caution to the wind:

"My initial conclusion is that this is a wine from the New World. I expect that it is between three and five years old. I would guess that this is produced from Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Mourvedre, or Carignan...possibly a blend of them all. California. Sonoma. My final conclusion is that this is a 2002 Zinfandel from the Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma, California."

Silence. My heart feels like it is going to pop out of my chest and Riverdance across the room. It would be a welcome break from the eerie calm. Finally, one of the Master Sommeliers clears his throat, he offers, "Pretty good. It's a 2003 Zinfandel from Dry Creek." He manages a smile as he gestures for me to sit down. I am stunned. The woman next to me actually slugs me in the shoulder with a, "Lucky." I am inclined to agree with her. It sure feels great to be right however, if only for a fleeting, ephemeral moment. The next exam looms large this spring in Chicago

When not fretting over the minutiae of wine's vast universe of experience, Michael Willison shares his love of wine & food as an instructor at The Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, and is currently buried under a mountain of wine reference books in preparation for the second Sommelier exam. ■

Cooking From the Heart

By Michael Lyons, Chef/Owner, Accessible Gourmet, Pittsburgh Culinary Institute Graduate

I could tell from the extensive scarring on her neck that she had undergone serious surgery, most likely due to a type of esophageal cancer. I smiled kindly at her, with a friendly sense of recognition. She smiled back knowingly, as well. You see, I was the only one in the room wearing Chef Whites, and this was her second time through my hot foods buffet line. Then she said to me, almost in a whisper, the words that have driven me to this day.

"Chef, I know I can't taste many things anymore, but I can tell you that this has to be the best food I have ever tasted. Thank you."

The pleasure and honor was all mine, I told her. That day I had volunteered to cook a special multi-course meal for a group of people undergoing cancer therapy. I wasn't sure what to expect, although I knew, even then, that I was cooking for a higher cause.

From my research of patients undergoing cancer treatments and their important dietary requirements, I am familiar with the type of foods cancer patients really need. Foods that would not only provide comfort but could actually increase the odds that their treatments would be successful. Combined with my intensive education at the Pennsylvania Culinary Institute, I was able to find new ways to effectively combine foods and cooking techniques that could deliver the best

sustenance for these cancer patients to help them fight for their lives. For example, the most common dietary issue for cancer patients is that they struggle to maintain their body weight. Their nurses typically tell them to eat lots of protein and high calories. Now, admittedly, these cancer patients already have a lot on their mind without also having to think of menus and how to cook for themselves. It is within this "gap" that I found my calling.

I contacted a local cancer community center in Beachwood, Ohio, and described a new program that I wanted to offer them, at no cost. I wanted to create a culinary program, free to all guests, that focused on healthy foods and cooking, particularly for those undergoing cancer treatments. Each program would involve my describing the foods that were critical for them, then cooking and serving the foods to all guests. I would even get volunteers from the audience to join me in the cooking process so that all could see first hand how easy it was to prepare healthy foods. Most importantly, by demonstrating this I was also giving them a sense of control and empowerment that they may have felt taken away from them by their cancers. After three years, and several hundred students, I continue teaching these classes, and have watched as my efforts have cascaded into other related cooking endeavors in the Cleveland area.

Currently I teach similar cooking classes at three major hospitals with Oncology (cancer) departments each year. I also appeared on two television cooking shows sponsored by the American Heart Association to demonstrate the importance of healthy cooking and eating for women in their fight against heart disease. In addition, I have personally raised over \$10,000 annually for local and national charities through my culinary efforts. But my latest endeavor might prove to be the most important so far.

I have started a culinary program at a local school to help teach kids the importance of healthy cooking and eating. I have learned that while it was valuable to teach the importance of good eating to adults undergoing cancer therapy, it was even more critical to have these lessons of good health already ingrained in people at a much earlier age. If I could teach kids these valuable lessons, I would not only be helping them to enjoy healthier lives now but perhaps arming them against future illnesses, such as heart disease and cancer.

I can't tell you how much work it takes to reach out to all the many people who really could benefit from healthier cooking and eating. Unfortunately, most kids' diets aren't the best and cancer among adults isn't declining. But I fully intend to keep leveraging the valuable lessons I learned at culinary school, with ongoing research, to do the most I can with my skills.

And that is to cook from the heart. ■

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