

## **May June Article Growing as a Chef**

### **A realization:**

It was a busy Saturday in 1988 and the late summer sun was working its magic. The park that lay near the front entrance of the newly built "Fish Market", a five restaurant- six nightclub complex, was full of families and couples enjoying the first ever Baltimore Crab Soup Cook off. Among the Chefs competing were two celebrity chefs from New Orleans and New York ready to deliver their versions of Crab Soup. The excitement was electric as twenty Chefs that had begun their day at 8:00 am were ready for the crowd that appeared at noon hungry for some of Baltimore's famous elixir, Maryland Crab Soup.

That afternoon I stood on the stage looking at this enormous crowd thinking I had arrived. My Golden Crab Bisque took first place in category and best of show. This capped off a season of four major culinary victories. I felt invincible. I felt unbeatable. I had nothing more to learn. How wrong I was.

After 30 years in the culinary business, I contrast that moment with my everyday realization and laugh. I laugh because every day the more I learn, the more I realize that I now very little. I realize I have so much more to learn about food, wine, service and people. There is so much more to explore in a creative manner and so much more growth ahead of me. I offer to you my thoughts on growth as a Chef.

### **Five Steps to Growing as a Chef:**

- 1) **Remember to stay grounded.** We should all believe that every person is an expert on their own tastes. It is not up to us to tell them what they should like, rather it is our duty and task to listen first and learn what they want. Only then can we create food they will enjoy with our own added touch.
- 2) **Master the Basics.** In cooking there are many techniques and methods to accomplish the same task, but there are specific techniques that can work for you. Classic European cooking skills can serve you very well as they have served many chefs over the ages. If you have never had classical training, I recommend a few courses to just give you the basics on sauces, knife skills and ingredient treatment. Now most chefs reading this will feel they know the basic mother sauces and knife skills, but how often are you using them in your day to day career? Challenge yourself to keep those talents alive by either taking a refresher course or by incorporating them into your menus.

Here are a couple of new catering menu items that use basic classic techniques, but are not the same old dishes as they were before.

Panzanella is a well known Italian salad that probably was an invention of necessity. Italian cooks waste nothing and this was a way to utilize stale bread and extra vegetables from the garden. The record of Panzanalla goes back centuries. In the 1500s, a poem by the famous artist, Bronzino, described this salad in one of his burlesque poems. Of course, the tomato was quite a few years from being introduced into the Italian kitchen, so the ingredients didn't include tomatoes.

The traditional recipe is simply a salad of vegetables and bread cubes tossed in vinaigrette. Our version is a large bread cube that has been hollowed out and filled with fresh greens, then served with a side of the tomato vinaigrette in a votive cup.

(insert bread salad picture)

Beurre Blanc is one of the most delicious and flexible sauces in the world. It also presents a serious problem for the caterer. To make enough Beurre Blanc for a large event, you would need much time and talent in the kitchen. Beurre Blanc is made by adding small amount of butter to a heated vinegar or wine base and slowly incorporating the butter so that it melts to a sauce consistency and does not separate. This is not a sauce that can be done a day in advance. As chefs with great respect for the classics, we actually use a Beurre Mantais to complete the same task. It is a Beurre Blanc with Heavy Cream added to stabilize the sauce. This allows us to make large quantities for events the day before. We simply slowly bring the sauce up to temperature when we are ready to serve. An important note: we still call it a Beurre Blanc for easy recognition by our clients.

I did say this was a very flexible sauce, because we can add any flavor we like to the sauce. We have made Green Olive Beurre Blanc, Chipotle Beurre Blanc, Candied Ginger Beurre Blanc, Roasted Beet Beurre Blanc and Roasted Garlic Beurre Blanc. The list is endless, but it shows how creative you can be with a classic.

(insert scallop with green olive Beurre blanc)

- 3) **Keep close to the stove.** Even though your job may be based in front of a computer placing orders, pricing vendors or scheduling staff; take the time to get in the kitchen. We all lead very busy lives and seem to have little time to do what needs to be accomplished while maintaining a balanced life. If the office has become your career, then cooking is an opportunity for you to balance your life. Remember when all you wanted to do was be in the kitchen creating? Make time to create new recipes at home with the family. Some of the world's greatest chefs cook at home and not at work. One of my favorite books is "Great Chefs at Home", which features chefs like Gordon Ramsey, Alaine Ducasse, Jamie Oliver (the naked chef) and Gary Rhodes. They find peace and solitude in their kitchens at home while honing their skills and releasing their creative juices.

For me it is a time to gather friends and family around the cooking island and create new ideas for my clients, while I connect with those close to me. How many other professionals can join together with others and share their work in such a pleasing fashion? I feel so lucky that I can share what I do with those I care about. They get to know me better and I get to make them happy.

- 4) **Read, Read, Read. Eat, Eat, Eat. Create, Create, Create.** You can never read enough or watch enough or taste enough. As a chef in order to grow you must get out of your kitchen and your domain. The great chef Escoffier spent hours at a single stove creating the ground work for today's culinarians. But that was then. This is 2007 and the world is moving so fast it is impossible to keep up. If you think you and your menus are stale, then go out to dinner and see what other chefs are doing. If you think that you don't have the time or the finances to go out, then spend some time reading what others are doing and go outside in your mind. If you think you are serving the most cutting edge meals in your market place, then I suggest you look behind you. There are chefs that are just working to knock you off and move ahead. Continue to push yourself and create the next new thing. If you think all that can be done with food has been done, remember that in 1900 there was a bill in the U.S. senate to abolish the patent office because "everything that could be invented had been invented". There are no limits to what we can do with food.

- 5) **Try new things - Always.** This step is just a continuation of the last step, but it is the most important step. When attempting new recipes, you must stay grounded in your efforts. Adding a little of this and a little of that is not nearly as successful as having a plan. There are certain rules to the taste and to the eye. There are combinations you must learn and understand. Use your basic training and techniques as a launching pad and then take off.

For example sweet and salty work together as evidenced in a dish we do called Salted Shrimp and over Brule Tomato. This dish was not created on a whim, rather it was premeditated to create flavor sensations that work. It was pre-designed to make the eye capture the colors.

The Shrimp is seasoned with coarse grain sea salt or Kosher salt and then grilled till almost cooked through. Italian Plum Tomatoes from a can are squeezed by hand to release the water and are then placed on a sheet pan. They are sprinkled with brown sugar and slow roasted in a 250 degree oven for 1.5 hours. They become concentrated and sweet, yet still have a very fleshy texture. Lastly we blend a fresh Goat Cheese with Burrata, a soft and creamy fresh mozzarella. This is the combination of acid (the Goat Cheese) and Creamy (the Mozzarella).

To finish the dish on the Tomato is placed on the plate, topped with a dallop of the cheese mixture and then topped with a heated shrimp. The combination that dances in your mouth is one of salty and sweet together with a finish of rich creamy "mouthfeel" on the finish. This was accomplished by having a plan, it was no accident.

(insert Tomato and Shrimp, Picture)

Growing as a Chef is a continual process with a great deal of rewards along the way. You have the opportunity to be an artist, a mentor and a mini celebrity as long as you continue to grow and never become complacent. There is no greater joy than watching someone eat a magical dish that you created. The look on their face will always be on your mind.