

## **A Chef's Tour of the South of France**

There have been many books written about time spent in Europe. There was “A year in Provence”, “Under the Tuscan Sun” and “Cooking and Traveling in the South of France”. So with those inspirational novels under my belt, I felt it was time to head out on an adventure myself to bring some new ideas to you from across the Ocean that can be used in your catered events.

At the end of April, I led a group of self proclaimed wine and food enthusiasts (clients and friends) through the South of France and topped it off with a weekend in Paris (the proverbial cherry on the sundae). You see, the trip was designed to open the eyes of our group to the ways of a culture that respected food and dining so much that it became its virtual reputation. If you are born in France, you are brought up to revere the experience of the culinary arts, to eat only fresh foods, to know how to cook and to understand the difference between good quality and bad.

Accompanied by French Born Chef John Walsh, I was confident that I would discover the secrets I needed to report back to you on these culinary gems I would encounter. So off we went on our journey with the hopes of discovering new and exciting dishes. Our first stop was near Nice, where we stayed in a small town called Saint Paul de Vence. The premier restaurant there is called La Columbe d'Or, which means The Golden Column. So with all the anticipation of a kid at Christmas, we sat down for our first meal. The meal was every bit as good as promised with friendly country service in a setting of art work by such greats as Picasso and Cezanne, who when living would pay for dinner and overnight stays with artwork. But the stand out dish that we felt would be best for catering was the very first dish. A perfectly crusted Mediterranean Sea Bass accented by a rich and creamy Lemon Beurre Blanc grabbed our attention. We determined that the crisp crust would be easy to duplicate in any catering setting and the loaf like design would be great for volume preparation. (Recipe to follow)

Our second gastronomic experience of note came outside of a little town called Le Baux. This medieval fortress town was carved out of and into a hill of Bauxite making it look like a giant soap carving done by the hands of a giant Rodin like sculpture. The 11th century town housed a small resort called Oustau de Baumaniere. This night was a real treat for us as we were given the pleasure of touring the wine cellar of more than 10,000 bottles with one First Growth Bordeaux dating back to 1870. The standout course this evening was again the first course, but this time it was what is often called the Amuse Bouche, which is very prevalent in all of France. This literally means to amuse or entertain the mouth. When it is presented, it is not expected or listed on the menu; it is simply presented as “a gift from the Chef”. Now how would this work for your guests at an event? How do you think a regular client that sits down knowing the menu and first receives an unexpected “gift from the chef” would react?

The creamy smooth little votive cup filled with Salmon Mousse and topped with an elegant Sea foam immediately brought back memories of time spent on the beach in my youth. The foam, which as we are all seeing is becoming a very popular addition to fine dining these days, can be amazing in a catering setting.

(Recipe to follow)

A subsequent day took us to a small Bistro outside the city of Le Baux to a famous place called Bistro du Paradoux. This little rustic country Bistro is known for its soulful cooking and we were not disappointed. I have to mention the Fois Gras Raviolis, swimming in an elegant Beurre Blanc, just to remind myself that I actually ate this dish and survived without a cholesterol melt down. But the standout dish was a Leg of Spring Lamb raised on the property and served with a crispy skin surrounding the most elegant and tender slice of lamb I had ever tasted. Ten years ago in our city, it was almost impossible to sell clients lamb, now it is as popular as chicken on our seated dinner menus. The leg is a cost effective and when properly handled can be most delicious.

There were so many other amazing dinner and tastes to come, from the great wines of the region to the dinners and lunches all over places like Aix en Provence, Chateauneuf du Pape, Avignon, Gigondas and Beaugues de Venise. But the real discovery that I made in France was that every menu was very similar. We ate perfectly cooked Asparagus at least five times. We ate amazingly delicious Ratatouille three times, our taste buds were enthralled by tender sweet Lamb Four times and the most sublime salty and sweet Oyster were everywhere. Menu duplication is something I try very hard to avoid, but the technical perfection that these foods were subjected to made each and every duplication a first time experience.

So in a nutshell what I learned from this trip was that you and your chef will please if you cook with excellent ingredients, use good technique without too much fuss and put your heart and soul into cooking. Too often in the catering world we are just trying to produce. Take a step back and look at your menus. Simplify them if there are too many items. Sell and serve the ones you do best. Be proud of your dishes. You will see the success come from that. Until next time, cook with passion and love.

## **Mediterranean Sea Bass in Double Crust Pastry**

Makes 1 roll to serve eight portions- can be scaled up proportionally

### Pastry

*2 cups of flour*

*1 teaspoon of salt*

*Milk*

*2/3 cup of shortening*

*2 beaten eggs*

*Mix flour and shortening, cut in shortening until about size of peas. Add 1 egg, then just enough milk to form a stiff dough. Roll, cut into 16" by 12" rectangular. Fold dough and chill for 30 minutes. Reserve one egg to brush over roll when completed.*

### Sea Bass

*1 pound Sea bass Filets*

*2 sprigs fresh Tarragon*

*8 Fresh Basil Leaves*

*3 tablespoons Butter*

*Sea salt*

*White Pepper*

*Melt butter in sauté' pan. Add Fish Filets and season with salt and white pepper. Sauté for just about 3 minutes, to firm up the fish. Cool fish in butter.*

### Assembly

*Lay out dough rectangular. Place fish and all congealed butter into the center on the rectangular. Lay Basil and Tarragon Leaves on top of fish. Wrap in pastry to form a roll. Wrap tightly, compressing filets inside to be firm and tight with no air wholes. Brush with egg and score top slightly. Bake just before serving. 350 degrees for about 20 minutes. Let cool on rack for 5 minutes and slice 1 3/4" pieces to order.*

### Lemon Beurre Blanc:

Make 1.5 quarts

*3 pound butter- cut into 2 inch cubes and kept very cold*

*Three lemons*

*Water*

*Sea Salt and white pepper*

*1 cup heavy cream*

*In a sauce pan, place 2 tablespoons of water and the juice of one lemon. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and slowly add butter whisking until it begins to emulsify. Continue to add the butter keeping an eye that the heat is constant and the butter does not get too hot and separates. When all the butter is added, add the juice of the two more lemons and add the cup of heavy cream. Season sauce with salt and white pepper.*

*This sauce can be chilled for up to 5 days and slowly reheated in site. Be careful not to let boil or it will separate. If separation occurs, it can be saved by adding more heavy cream.*

### **Smoked Salmon Parfait with Sea Foam**

Makes 50 servings

#### Salmon Parfait

*2 pounds Cold Smoked Norwegian Salmon  
3 teaspoons capers  
2 cups heavy cream  
1 cup Sour Cream  
2 tablespoons of rice wine vinegar  
50 Votive Cups*

*In a food processor blend capers, vinegar and salmon to a puree. Add sour cream and blend till very smooth. Whip cream till firm in a separate mixer. Fold the cream and salmon mixture together. Place mixture into pastry bag with large open tip. Fill Votive cups 2/3 of the way up and set in fridge.*

#### Sea Foam

*18 fluid ounces Clam Juice  
3 grams Lecithin*

*Place the juice and the lecithin in a stainless steel bowl and whip with a hand mixer until foamy. Place a dollop onto each salmon parfait.*