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Foodies will eat up new cooking class at Nashville resort

Interview with Gaylord Opryland Executive Chef Michael Swann

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NASHVILLE

The new, stylish cooking classes at Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center seem a lot like cooking shows made popular by celebrity chefs on the Food Network - only they're conducted in a sunny atrium that picks up ambience from a nearby lush green garden.

But here's the biggest bonus: Some guests get to help the resort's master chefs - from food prep to finished product - and then everyone gets to enjoy the dish.

"Cooking Under Glass" is one of a host of the resort's new SummerFest activities that have to do with good food, and the class offers resort guests and day-trippers the opportunity to sample a specialty from one of its world-class restaurants, not to mention rubbing elbows with chefs who have trained all over the world.

'A little bit of North meets South'

After passing out a recipe, Executive Chef Michael Swann gets right to it.

He begins with an explanation of what he's included in the recipe, an original he created just for Gaylord Opryland, and how he made sure to include an ingredient that's indigenous to the South.

Throughout the class, Swann offers tips on preparation, explaining why his method is the most efficient way. And class participants can expect the same kind of expertise and helpfulness from each master chef who teaches - a different one each time.

Swann offers tidbits as he cooks.

"Cilantro is what when it's fresh?" he asks. "It's coriander."

He then comes out from behind the counter to give guests a close-up view of the scallops he's about to sear, explaining how to tell whether they're fresh before you buy.

When Swann begins cooking the scallops, flames lick the pan, and the aroma of fresh sizzling seafood fills the area.

He invites guests to approach the counter.

"Can you smell that?" he asks. "Come on up if you can't."

A chance to nosh

After creating and setting aside a restaurant presentation, assistants help Swann plate a sample for each guest.

The dish is delectable, and assistants are on hand to offer a flute of sparkling water garnished with a slice of lime and plump raspberries.

The chef dishes out humor, too.

While preparing another recipe, he adds some lemon zest, teasing an assistant, "Ashley says 'Don't zest me.' And Alex, I promise I won't zest you." Looking in the direction of the other assistant he quips "Montserrat, I can't make that promise."

Later on, the lights in the studio kitchen flicker on and off. "Uh-oh," he smiles. "We didn't pay the light bill."

And Swann relishes talking about the dish as much as guests enjoy eating it.

"See what I mean about that three-dimensional flavor?" he says, referring to ingredients he named off a while back during prep.

Swann then names the ingredients again to note which adds what flavor or particular zing.

He mentions his philosophy, which involves keeping it simple, with "four components on a plate and a sauce."

That's in keeping with the idea that an ingredient's original flavor is better left alone, he says, or at the very least enhanced and tampered with as little as possible.

Food for thought

With another recipe, he explains the nutritional value of using beets, which are "a great source of zinc and antioxidants," he says.

He goes on to show how to choose fresh Chilean sea bass in a recipe he created that he calls a "happy accident."

Chilean sea bass was once called "the mousse of fish" because it was used as a filler, he says, mainly because its high collagen and fat content make it a "moist, meaty product."

He goes to explain his choice of sauce, a chicken stock base that gives the dish an earthy flavor.

"Fish stock tends to make it too fishy."

Swann then shows how to tell when the fish has browned just right, along with an explanation of why this particular pan is a favorite because of its ability to evenly distribute heat.

And he also explains why he chooses certain items for certain recipes, including what flavor goes best with which type of meat.

After covering all the bases, the final step is presentation, which ensures the individual flavors stand out, hence creating what he calls a "flavor profile."

"We want to enhance the natural flavor, not mask it," Swann said later in a phone interview, going on to explain that in the Dark Ages, main ingredients included mutton, goat, venison and rabbit - all catalysts for developing sauces to mask their flavor.

But that's no longer necessary.

"We can buy designer ingredients now," he said. "Why would we want to cover them up?"

- Ellen Kimbro, 425-9687

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Seared Georges Bank diver scallops with watermelon salsa and blue ginger vinaigrette

Here's a sampling of what you might see prepared at 'Cooking Under Glass.' The recipe was created exclusively by Michael E. Swann, executive chef at Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center.

For the scallops: (Yield 4 4-ounce appetizer portions)

- Jumbo U-10 sea scallops (12 each)
- 2 T. olive oil
- salt and pepper
- Lemon juice of 1 fresh lemon

For the salsa:

- 1 cup watermelon, peeled, seeded and cut into small dice
- 1 each jalapeno chile, seeded and minced
- Juice of three fresh limes
- 2 T. grape seed oil
- 1/8 cup chopped cilantro
- 1 t. kosher salt
- 1 T. fresh ginger, minced

Mix together and let rest for one hour prior to serving.

For the blue ginger vinaigrette:

- 1/2 cup soy sauce
- 1 ounce sake
- 1 t. fresh ginger, minced
- 1 t. fresh garlic, minced
- 1 large shallot, minced

- 1 ounce rice wine vinegar
- 1 ounce sesame oil
- 1 ounce Daikon radish, shredded
- 1 T. sugar
- 1 T. crushed red pepper
- 1 T. kosher salt

Mix together and let sit overnight.

Method of preparation : Season the scallops with lemon, salt and pepper. Sear the scallops for approximately 2 to 3 minutes on each side or until deep golden brown.

Place on top of salsa. Drizzle 2 tablespoons of the vinaigrette over the top. Enjoy with a glass of Pinot Noir or a buttery Chardonnay.

INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE CHEF MICHAEL E. SWANN

I spoke with award-winning Executive Chef Michael Swann, of Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center, about what makes the Nashville resort's food and beverage offerings special.

Swann, originally from Canada, teaches and leads 15 chefs and 160 other employees in the Banquet Operations section of the resort's food and beverage division.

Swann spoke about the training that he and the master chefs he employs have enjoyed, what's new and notable and also his philosophy on cooking.

One of the most fascinating things I saw at the resort was a couple of different types of food sculptures.

One is called pastiallage - a blend of lard, flour and cornstarch that becomes a delicate flower in the hands of pastry chef Jesus Ornelas. Once molded and shaped, each individual petal hardens and then is airbrushed with different shades of food coloring to add depth and whimsy, Ornelas told me. What comes out is a beautiful product, all edible.

The flowers sit on tiers made of poured sugar that look and feel like clear glass. Lighting atop a flower is a black pastiallage butterfly adorned with glittery dots. (You can see a picture of the pastiallage sculpture in the photo gallery that accompanies this story online.)

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Question: About those wonderful sculptures we saw during the cooking class. I wonder what the process is that goes into making a sculpture such as the guitar that held the truffles.

Answer: We put them together. There's a support mechanism on the back of the neck. It's actually sugar.

It's solid sugar. Everything on there is completely 100 percent edible. We cook it in a double boiler until we get it to the temperature where it reduces down to the boiling point. It's done in a double boiler so that it doesn't caramelize.

It becomes liquid, and then we pour it onto a tabletop and then cut it out using an Exacto knife. Then we pour it onto a 'siltplas.' It's a special type of moveable board ... like a flexible piece of plastic, and we're able to move it around and lift it up, able to slide a spatula under the sugar to move it around.

The sculpture is molded into the shape that we want, and then we slide it onto a marble slab.

Jesus Ornelas (who creates the sculptures) just joined our team two months ago. He has experience in Las Vegas at The Terrace and the MGM Grand Hotel. We just recently hired him. He was in his own business in a Beverly Hills, Calif., specialty shop catering for Hollywood and Beverly Hills.

Q: Is it the same process used to make the tiny clear bowls that held some of the desserts I saw?

A: Those are poured sugar. You take a lemon and cut the lemon in half. Then you take a honey dripper and stick that into the sugar and drizzle it over the top so it would create that lattice look. Turn it over and it actually becomes a vessel that you can put raspberries inside. We put melted dark chocolate into a very, very small pastry bag. And we injected the chocolate inside them.

Q: And I remember a berry that had something poured into it.

A: That's balsamic syrup, a reduction of balsamic vinegar ... It becomes almost sweeter because you're cooking off the acid, so the sugar content is more prevalent.

Q: And what exactly goes into the pastillage sculpture, such as the butterfly atop the flower?

A: Cream of tartar, hydrogenated starch, baking soda, flour and water.

Q: Where would a guest see this type of sculpture at Gaylord Opryland?

A: In a lot of the different events that we do, because a lot of times we create those sculptures as a natural, edible piece. Here's an example: We recently had a meeting for about 15 people in an executive suite. We used (part of a sculpture) as an actual food label. We might use it as a centerpiece on the table, highlighting specific quotes from either the CEO of that company or a theme of the actual event we have in house, a local society event or state and government association coming in to brainstorm on specific topics.

Q: And all of the truffles are made in house?

A: We have a commissary bakery that produces all of the major mise en place (a French term; in professional cooking, proper planning of equipment and ingredients for a food preparation and assembly station), sponge cake, specific recipes. We have four or five different varieties and build cakes in the pastry shop. It's not uncommon to prepare 10,000 desserts.

Q: The Beef Wellington Deconstructed was my favorite dish from the Old Hickory Steakhouse. I thought it was great how Senior Sous Chef Jeffrey Quasha presented the ingredients. Can you comment on why he created the recipe this way?

We wanted to do something different. Deconstruction is a trend that's been in place right now for probably about six months to a year. It's (most prevalent) in San Francisco and New York. 'Deconstructed' shows the actual cooking technique, and the customer has the ability to put it together, by blending flavors that are laid out on a deconstruction level to blend your favorite flavor profile. The process of "flavor building" is done by mixing your favorite ingredient with each bite.

Q: And there's a cart featuring artisanal cheese. That's at the Old Hickory Steakhouse?

A: That's a staple in every one of our hotels, a brand standard. Giorgi Dilemis, corporate director and vice president for food and beverage for Gaylord Hotels, has won countrywide notoriety because of the things that he does. He's absolutely incredible. With our group, we're extremely passionate about what we do.

Richard Peterson is the fromager. As Giorgi puts it, Richard Peterson is the most passionate individual he has ever met, and there's something to be learned by Richard Peterson for all of us.

Q: So it's called employing the services of a fromager?

A: Yes, and he pairs wines with either courses or the cheese.

Q: Speaking of wine, I've learned that at the upcoming wine bar, a guest will be able to try a two-ounce sample of any wine served. Will a customer be looking at a wine list or be looking at an assortment of wines and choose from that assortment?

A: They'll see labels of wines on tap and a menu. It's cruvinet (pronounced kroo-vin-ay, a wine preserving and dispensing system). The bottles are tapped, and it's a corkage and you can pour off a glass of wine through any of those bottles. A wine sommelier would make recommendations.

That's going to be a hot concept. There are these wine bars all over the U.S. right now that are following those same basic concepts. It's called a wine flight. You may try five or six different flavor profiles of different wines.

Cruvinet has been around for a while, but it's becoming mainstream again because so many people are interested in food and wine.

I'm in the process of becoming a Level 1 sommelier, the first level. There are four levels. With a chef, you would want to be a Level 1. There's so much involved in being a Level 2 that it will take so much time away from what you're doing. It's six months' worth of training.

You're learning about the total image of food and wine to bring it together - all the characters that went into it to the individual who grew the grapes - there's a story that goes behind it. Was it aged in French oak, American oak ...

(Swann mentions the team from Gaylord made a trip to Eugene, Ore., and Seattle and upstate Washington to learn about wines being produced there in a winemaker's course. It was a competition with four different teams, and they were given five different varietals to build the best cabernet sauvignon. "Some of the most delicate wines I've tasted in my career have come from Oregon and Washington state," he said. "Oregon, the funny thing about Oregon and Seattle is that they're starting to become great wine makers." Swann says he won a special bottle of award-winning riesling.)

Giorgi is putting together the second annual food and wine beverage trip to Italy ... If you take the best in the business and go to the best areas of the country, you're going to create the best for your customer. We feel we do have the best in the industry. That's what makes us different as a group. It's important to us as well to say 'us.' We gather the best of the best, and with that philosophy, as a group we're going to come up with the best possible ideas.

(Swann mentions Wolfgang Ebenbichler, recently hired as vice president of food and beverage at the resort. "For me it's very different to find somebody that is as passionate about food and beverage. I told Arthur Keith (senior vice president and general manager) it was like looking in a mirror with a European accent ... The last place he came from, he was a chef. The best way I can put it is that Wolfgang gets it.")

Q: You mentioned in the cooking class that you try to include ingredients indigenous to the South when they're seasonal in some recipes.

A: You want southern flavor, but at the same time, many of our customers here aren't from the South. One of the neatest things that we can do as a group is to try to use as many indigenous products as we can from the area ... We're reaching out to vendors in the South.

Q: Have there been times - perhaps when the President of the United States was staying at the resort - that you really had to rush to find something that you knew would appeal to a guest?

A: Yes. He liked a product called dinosaur plums. We found out from his press secretary ... They're available in July and August, and we were able to get our hands on the first pick of the litter.

The neat thing about our business: Cooking to us isn't a way of living, it's a way of life. It's the neatest business to be in because you can share it with any culture. Everybody appreciates great food.

In our kitchen alone we have about 35 different cultures, from Ireland to Cambodia to Vietnam to Egypt, all over the Middle East. We just took on 27 new Korean students. They joined us in two separate waves.

We recruited them in Seoul, Korea, in the last part of January. I had a liaison that I met with in the states in November. He put me in contact some of the people who worked in Korea in an international recruiting company. (Swann says they chose culinary school graduates and had them make a Western dish, any dish of their choice, present it to him and explain it in English.)

Q: I'd like to name off each master chef at the resort and find out what first comes to mind, in a few words:

A: Jeffrey Quasha, Chef de Cuisine, Old Hickory Steakhouse: Synergy, artist.

Maurizio Bussolino, Executive Chef, Ristorante Volare: Spice and charisma.

Brian Owenby, Chef de Cuisine, Cascades Seafood Restaurant: culinary education; well-educated, fascinated with all new concepts, cutting edge. He worked at Brennan's in New Orleans .

Q: And you?

A: Inspiration and creativity. The energy level is what you've got to remember. It's really about inspiration. What lights the fire for you? To me it's to try to figure out the best ingredients for the best dish. Somebody asked me what's my favorite food, and I said "good." It's a matter of cooking it in a manner that's actually true-to-life. We say we're going to grill it , let's grill it.

Q: I remember you mentioning in the cooking class that you don't want to tamper much with an ingredient's flavor in a recipe.

A: Enhance the natural flavor, not mask it. We can buy designer ingredients now. Why would we want to cover them up? In the Dark Ages, cooks used mutton, goat, venison and rabbit. They developed all those sauces to mask the flavors of those peasant items. Now we want to enhance it with something that's going to pair well.
