

Ron Olivier | Healthy Eating Recipes Expert | Behind the Burner

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What were your favorite foods growing up?

I loved broccoli so much that I would pick it up by the stalk with my hands and eat the florets, like holding a lollipop. My mom would tell me that if I was going to eat like an animal I must go outside. So I would serve myself a few more stalks, pick up my plate and go out to the to eat it to my heart's content. The funny thing is that I would sit right outside of the sliding glass door where the family could see me!! My brother and sister spent the rest of their dinner trying not to laugh.

When did you decide you wanted to be a chef?

I decided to be a chef one night when I was 13 years old. I had asked my mom to invite her Asian friends to dinner. I cooked them a 7 course Asian-inspired menu by myself. I was in the kitchen 24 hours straight. I cooked, cleaned and served without help. I did not join them at the table during dinner, instead, in between courses I went outside to take in the fresh night air and savor the accomplishment. I imagined that my house was a restaurant and I was taking a break out back like the chefs I occasionally saw around town do. At that time I knew it is what I wanted to pursue.

Where and when did your career in food begin?

After working my way up through one fast food and several family restaurants, I started my contemporary cooking at The Peabody Hotel in Orlando, Florida. I worked in almost every kitchen there: from pastries to charcuterie/garde manger to the Signature restaurant Dux where I was Sous Chef then returned a couple years after leaving for the West Coast to become their head Chef.

Who/what has shaped your cooking the most over the years?

While I was Sous Chef at Dux, the Chef Michael McSweeney introduced me to the concept of using Global Inspiration and ethnic cooking techniques in a fine dining forum. Previous to that I had loved to use those concepts at home but Michael's forward thinking and cooking style opened up a whole new world of creative fine dining to me.

How would you describe your cuisine?

I don't have a particular style. I think a chef must embrace inspiration from as many sources as possible. The idea of serving a ripe persimmon, unadulterated, with a little sprinkle of spice, like ras el hanout is just as exciting as manipulating the fruit into some over-the-top exotic preparation. Both ideas have their unique space and time in which they would serve the customer best. The most important factor in cuisine is balance. As long as everything is in balance, it is all fair game to me. I will say though - Food that is vibrant and food that is earthy, both reflections of nature, are common themes in my kitchen.

What is your favorite secret ingredient?

Achiote powder is one of my favorite spices in my arsenal at home. It is intriguing because a lot of people eat this spice every day without knowing it. It is widely used industrially to color cheddar cheese and butter. But this spice from the Yucatan peninsula is an awesome culinary spice that is easy to use and versatile. I love to rub it onto chicken or steaks with some oil, sea salt and a squeeze of lime before grilling. You can do the same

with corn on the cob, and it is great to sprinkle on sauteed vegetables for a rich color and tangy earthy flavor.

What is the one rule or value you try to instill in all of your staff?

A lot of kids that embark on a culinary career somehow get the perception that cooking is mysterious or magical. This tends to confuse them because they stop listening to their instincts and start trying to figure things out as if cooking were a puzzle. I tell them that when they are unsure of what to do, to just imagine that they are at home cooking for themselves and it will suddenly become clear. This has proved to be great advice. In other words, "don't over analyze the process" is one of the most important rules of being creative.

What qualities do you look for when hiring cooks for your restaurant?

Ironically, the qualities that I look for in hiring a new cook for one of the top restaurant's have nothing to do with cooking knowledge. Knowledge can be taught so it is not so important that they bring that with them. What I want them to bring is passion, initiative, positive attitude, teamwork, and perseverance, followed by speed and organization and a serious disposition. If you have those things you will quickly become a star in my kitchen.

What is your beverage of choice?

Life is too short to have just one beverage of choice, so I will just tell you my current fascination is with Sherry wine. It is diverse and versatile, romantic and historically intriguing. I challenge anyone to watch the movie Carmen and not pour themselves a glass of Sherry afterwards.

What are some recent dining and culinary trends you have been observing?

Molecular Gastronomy, or employing scientific techniques in novel ways in the kitchen. It seems to me that chefs who practice Molecular Gastronomy are striving to reach a level of cooking that transcends what we know of as cuisine today. I think it is important to be evolutionary in one's pursuit of culinary art, however, being that food is a product of the earth, a cook should be guided by enlightenment more than by technology. In the kitchen, enlightenment is the ability to see things clearly and to know what is truly important in the grand scheme of life and food. If you live close to the land, and hold good food values in your heart, your tendency in the kitchen will be to isolate and exaggerate those things that are naturally beautiful. Molecular chefs are manipulating food in extreme ways and giving the pretext that they just want to change the way people see food, but actually they are changing the food itself. This is a novelty that has its place and time for entertainment value. As a community, our goal for the future should be to integrate agriculture into residential areas and to be self reliant by planting gardens and to share our abundance with others and to take care of the earth as much as it takes care of us. As chefs, we should be inspired by naturally occurring goodness and use that goodness to nurture the community with tasty cuisine. I think the molecular gastronomy trend will continue to grow and parts of it may become commonplace, but as a movement, it will not sustain itself in the long term. Good food values, those that are guided by earth's natural processes will remain prevalent.

When you are not eating at your own restaurant, where are you eating?

I love to discover neighborhood ethnic restaurants that proudly cook the authentic dishes of their home country. In San Diego there is a place called Musita that serves the native cuisine of Eritrea, the country just North of Ethiopia. The owner is almost always there and will enlighten you with elaborate explanations of the dishes and the spice mixtures used in them. Another place called Q'uevo serves the food and drink of Peru.

Which foreign country inspires your style most?

Turkey... because Ottoman cuisine has had a Renaissance recently in the country, most notably in Istanbul. This cuisine has the most intriguing balance between complexity of preparation, social dining values, and local sourcing of products.

What was the most spectacular meal you have ever had?

In Istanbul I was taken to an eatery that serves authentic Ottoman cuisine, employing ancient recipes. For an example, dessert was young soft-shell walnuts and baby eggplant cooked in a similar way to the corn that is prepared in Mexico for tortillas, but with a syrup as well. The result is an amazing texture and color, like black shells. You could not tell by looking at them which was the walnut and which was the eggplant.

What is your best cooking tip for a home enthusiast?

Keep it simple, don't overcrowd the pan, dry the surface of your proteins with a paper towel before cooking, and start off with a cocktail.

What do you eat when you are home?

I try to only cook what my kids will eat, so usually foie gras and caviar. I also have a rule in my house, we can only have hamburgers if we bake our own buns.