

Liisa Sullivan
Chef Spotlight: October
Liisa.Sullivan@verizon.net
9/19/08

Nashville Chef Focuses on Mediterranean Fusion

Always an innovator in the Nashville fine-dining scene, ZOLA's chef/owner Debra Paquette, takes diners on a magical culinary journey around the Mediterranean. Spanish, Italian and French cuisine are the main influences on the menu, but they also serve Moroccan and Greek food.

"I love southern cuisine, but have enjoyed bringing new tastes to the palettes of 'Nashvillians,'" Debra says.

Debra, a Fort Lauderdale, FL native, graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY, in 1978. She also holds a B.S. in Hospitality Management from Florida International University and was the first woman in the state of Tennessee to qualify as a Certified Executive Chef.

During the course of her 26-year Nashville culinary career, she has been named "Nashville's Best Chef" 14 times. Her restaurant, has also been voted "Nashville's Most Romantic Restaurant" three years in a row, and was recently featured in Gourmet Magazine's Annual Restaurant Issue as one of the top 60 restaurants in the U.S.

Debra has been nominated nine times by her peers, for the prestigious "Ivy Awards" as one of the top 70 restaurants across America. She has also been featured in Bon Appetit and Southern Living magazines and on Discovery Channel's series "Great Chefs of the South." In July 2007, CITY Magazine named ZOLA one of the "Best 100 Restaurants in America."

Many of the chefs in Nashville, who now own their own restaurants, have worked for Debra at one time or another. They fondly refer to her as "Momma." Her phone rings often and those at the other end are typically seeking advice or a word of encouragement. She also donates time and support to a number of charities in Nashville, and nationally. She is a long-time volunteer for Share Our Strengths, the nation's leading fundraiser to prevent childhood hunger.

A Chat with Debra Paquette

Who is your culinary hero? I adore Spanish cuisine, especially the Catalan region. I got started when reading "Catalan Cuisine," by Coleman Andrews, now the editor of Saveur. I would love to pick his brain. Most of my "heroes" are writers because it is my way to learn about so many countries. I have to say Harold McGee has done wonders for furthering the knowledge of so many chefs as well; maybe the three of us could have lunch!

What are your favorite cooking techniques? Not burning myself! Braising is a fabulous treat to the senses. Discovering braising methods for various products is a must for all chefs and, oh, those flavors! I am also a big fan of porcini dust. The simple art of the sauté pan with a porcini seared fish or filet makes the taste buds dance.

If you could sit down and eat and talk with anyone about food who would it be? Paula Wolfert. Her books have been an inspiration and an education. (Can I make that lunch for four?)

What three ingredients could you not live without? Salt, summer tomatoes, and Hellman's mayo! (Can I add cayenne too?)

What are some of the most popular menu items? We have a paella that has an umbilical cord to the menu. We have had it on there for the life of Zola's. Also, if our Beet and Heat salad were to be removed, we would lose customers. We always have a pork dish on the menu and I usually introduce the flavors of Morocco or Turkey because they do pork justice. And, even though salmon is not my favorite, it is popular with customers. I typically prepare it with a pistachio crust, date nut phyllo-roll, ginger goat cheese and roasted golden beets.

What would you order as a last meal? Slow-cooked pork ribs, a huge salad with tomatoes, parmesan cheese, onion, cauliflower, capers, romaine, arugula, canned LeSeurre peas, mushroom confit, good oil and vinegar, and maybe a touch of mayo! I would start the event with fresh grapefruit juice and vodka and drink a good red with the entrée. For dessert - probably a whole pint of Haagen Daaz coffee ice cream (or a bag of Peanut M & Ms)

What is the most valuable tool in the kitchen for you? I love my wooden spoons, and giant beurre mixer.

What do you consider your greatest culinary achievement? I was chosen by the National Pork Board to represent them for 2008. I was floored and honored. (Frankly, every day I am above ground is a culinary achievement!)

Do you buy local when possible? What are your thoughts on the farm to table movement and sustainable agriculture? I have been using local food for a long time. I have always believed in the macrobiotic mantra – eat the foods within your area for optimal health and supporting the community. I think a lot of the older chefs have followed this philosophy for years. We now have organizations that have highly promoted the act of sustainable products and farm to table and as always, it is great to educate our public and support our local farmers. Our oceans, which are not always at our back door, are where we need to try and promote sustainability the most.

RECIPE

Smoked Carrot Phyllo Cigars

2 carrots

1/4c. sugar

1t. ground cumin

1/2t cinnamon

1t. cardamom

1t. salt

1t. black pepper

pinch cayenne

zest and juice of 1 orange

1/2 stick butter

Method: Smoke carrots with woodchips of your preference. If not fully cooked, finish in oven till soft (not mushy). Place warm carrots in food processor with all ingredients until smooth. Taste and re-season if needed.

2 oz. (each) Pistachios and almonds
4 oz .walnuts
2 T melted butter
2t cinnamon
zest of 1 orange and 1 lemon and juice of the orange
½ t. salt
1 t. black pepper
pinch cayenne
1/4 c. sugar (add more for sweeter)

Toast nuts in at 325 for about 15 minutes. Cool. Pulse in Cuisinart till nuts come together to hold shape. Lay out phyllo dough. Use four, ½-sheets per cigar. Melt 2 oz butter. Turn phyllo with shorter side top and bottom. Brush each sheet lightly. Press a light 3 x 4 area of nuts on bottom half of phyllo and a 1 x 3 carrot mix on bottom part of nuts. Roll firmly, encasing carrot in the nuts, and be sure to fold ends in. Bake at 400 for 15 minutes.

Serve with pomegranate yogurt. (Strain 16 oz. plain yogurt for 2 days, add 1/4c. pomegranate molasses and 1 T honey with a pinch of cayenne.) Goes well with Moroccan-seasoned pork, chicken, or salmon