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Chef's Corner: Aaron Million

Hometown: Washington, D.C.

Current Home: Richmond

Training and experience: "I trained on the job, at Max's and Mercury in South Beach, Florida, where I learned that great chefs could be American. I worked at the New Heights restaurant in Washington, D.C., at a really exciting time there. Then I completed the advanced placement program at NECI, which included an externship at Shelburne Farms. I cooked at the Windjammer in South Burlington before opening Restaurant Phoebe in September 2006."

Cooking philosophy: "We do modern American cuisine, based in Italian and French traditions. We're committed to using seasonal, Vermont products that are produced in sustainable ways."

What does sustainable mean at Restaurant Phoebe? "We're members of the Vermont Fresh Network, and our meats come from a New England cooperative of family farms, which ensures the animals are grass-fed, free-roaming, and humanely treated."

Favorite local ingredients: "There's so much to play with right now, and it's just going to get better. There are beautiful greens, baby beets and carrots, new potatoes, native asparagus ... the foragers are starting to come in with mushrooms, like chanterelles. And the tomatoes! I wait for good tomatoes because they're so bad the rest of the year."

Favorite kitchen tool: "Wooden spoons, and a hand-held immersion blender for sauces to order and soups, like sweet pea soup."

Favorite cookbook: "The Making of a Cook," by Madeleine Kamman. We had it at my house growing up and I perused it quite a bit. I read it all the way through when I was about 25."

Favorite food Web site: "www.ideasinfood.com. It's about the chemistry of food, and explores molecular gastronomy, the combination of food and science."

Guilty pleasure: "Hebrew National beef hot dogs, and gas station cheeseburgers."

Earliest food memory: "My dad's work took us to Italy every summer during my childhood. When I was about 8 or 9, I was at a restaurant with a large group of family and friends, and I ordered blood sausage. When it came I poked my fork in it, and blood spurted across the table and across the room. I thought that was pretty cool. And it tasted good."

Hardest kitchen skill to master: "Dicing an onion, no question about it. We work on it

indefinitely throughout our careers — how to get every square perfect. It's the first thing you learn, and the last thing you master."

Best part of the job: "The people I work with, and the excitement of being busy and the satisfaction and immediate gratification of serving customers. We have an open kitchen so we get to see that reaction right away."

If you could cook for anyone, who would it be, and what would you make? "Cookbook author Madeleine Kamman, who lived in Williston and Barre before moving to Florida. She has an amazing knowledge of food chemistry, of why things taste good together. I'd make a very simple fish dish with whatever looked good at the market that day, based in French cuisine with a little of my own spin."

Favorite places to eat locally? "Hen of the Wood in Waterbury, Starry Night in Ferrisburgh, Trattoria Delia and L'Amante in Burlington."

If you weren't a chef, what would you be? "A journalist of some sort, maybe a war correspondent."

Sweet Pea Soup

Chef Aaron shared his recipe for sweet pea soup, which uses one of his favorite tools, the immersion blender.

Ingredients

4-5 cups vegetable stock

2 cups fresh sweet peas

1 teaspoon sea salt

1-2 teaspoon butter

1 teaspoon lemon juice

In a sturdy pan, bring all the ingredients to a simmer.

Blend with the immersion blender until smooth.

Sylvia Fagin writes about local foods and food producers. Contact her at sylviafagin@yahoo.com.
