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Grilling the Chef

Aaron Millon, Restaurant Phoebe, Montpelier

By Suzanne Podhaizer [07.09.08]

In the U.S., “Hold the anchovies!” is a familiar cry. But when the thin, salty fish turn up in Restaurant Phoebe [1]’s fried artichokes with arugula and anchovy salad, drizzled with lemon-parsley dressing, diners often change their minds.

Most people want them “on the side” or reject them altogether, Chef-Owner Aaron Millon dishes. “The staffers will tell them to try a bite with all of the components.”

The result: big smiles. “It’s a classic Italian dish that has worked for hundreds of years,” Millon says. The salad “transforms an anchovy into a condiment.”

Although he taught himself to cook as a youngster, Millon who lived in Washington, D.C., for his “formative years” got his professional start during college. While studying creative writing and history at the University of Miami, he made basic bar food and a few Cuban specialties at a local nightclub. “I took to it instantly,” he recalls.

Later Florida gigs included one at the posh restaurant Mercury. “It really exposed me to the finest of fine cuisine,” says Millon. “There was caviar everywhere. We had prawns flown in from Ireland.”

He takes a different approach to seafood sourcing at Restaurant Phoebe. “Sustainability is important to us here,” he says, noting Black River has been a reliable local purveyor; he also buys from Ecofish, an online, environmentally friendly seafood company.

Most of the other ingredients at Phoebe come from a long list of local farms, from Misty Knoll [2] lemon-roasted chicken. During the summer I’ll probably make a couple slabs of ribs. I don’t ever order those when I’m out, so that’s something I like to do at home.

SD: What foods do you think of as pantry staples?

AM: Dried pasta of any kind, salt and pepper, bay leaves, thyme; some good jarred or canned whole plum tomatoes that either you did yourself or good high-quality ones you buy; good dried mushrooms; yeast and flour so you can make bread; and either homemade stock or broth.

SD: Imagine you have an all-expenses-paid trip to any country you want to eat in. Where do you go?

AM: It would be a toss-up between playing it safe and having the best of a couple different regions in Italy, or going for the exotic, like Singapore, or a Japanese food “bender.”

But I'd probably play it safe and do central Italy from the west coast to the east coast and down a little bit.

SD: You can cook for anybody, alive or dead. Whom do you choose?

AM: I'd like to cook for Madeleine Kamman again. She wandered into The Daily Bread in Richmond once, when I was braising off rabbits. I cooked lunch for her once with some other chefs at her house in Barre, right before she moved down to Florida. And then she came in here two or three times. Having a dinner party for friends and family and Madeleine: That would be my idea of a good time.

SD: Any disaster stories?

AM: I think when people do special orders from restaurants, whether they're doing it because they're actually interested in food or to show off, they don't actually think about how [much] things cost. They say cost is no object.

In one instance, I made a dish for somebody that involved three pheasants, truffles and a lobe of foie gras. The food cost alone was \$200, and when I marked it up to the appropriate margin it was \$600. But hey, that's what they ordered.

There was sticker shock, and they didn't want to pay. Finally I said, "Pay me my cost and don't ask me to do that again." It's money. It's very awkward.

SD: Is there a quirky piece of equipment you can't live without?

AM: It's probably not that quirky, but a good wooden spoon is always in my little tool kit. And I do like the good powerful hand blenders; those make life a lot easier. We make sauces with it; we definitely force some emulsifications that wouldn't hold otherwise.

SD: Which two cookbooks should every home cook own?

AM: Madeleine Kamman's *The Making of a Cook* and probably Jacques Pepin's *Complete Techniques*, which is getting outdated but is still a great reference book. Every chef should have *Becoming a Chef*, by [Andrew] Dornenburg and [Karen] Page, and should also have their *Culinary Artistry* close by. It's kind of about the process: Once you have basic tools and skills, how do you take it a step farther and learn about flavors and what they do when they're combined? How do you develop that skill?

SD: If you had your own culinary TV show, what would it be about?

AM: It would be a lot like the shows that are on: travel, street food, you know. The things that people get by on day after day on the way to work and on the way home from work.

SD: If you weren't a chef, what would your job be?

AM: I'd probably be a traveling journalist, like a war correspondent or something.

SD: What's your favorite thing about cooking in Vermont right now?

AM: Definitely the enthusiasm for the great things that are produced in Vermont: meats, cheeses, produce, that whole vibe. It's nice to be a part of it and kind of live by it.

And, I would say, the reasonable hours. That's a very logistical one, but it is one.

SD: Name a local restaurant that you patronize.

AM: Definitely Starry Night [Cafe] [3], Hen of the Wood [4], Trattoria Delia [5] and L'Amante [6]. Those are the four that I eat at.

SD: What is something that every restaurant patron should know, but doesn't?

AM: That waiters really do live off their tips. It's not like a bonus: That's actually their wage.

SD: Can you tell me a fact about you that might surprise people?

AM: Probably that I'm a pretty big animal lover. Because I'm a big fan of meat and offal, I think that sometimes surprises people.

SD: Besides hot dogs, do you have a favorite guilty pleasure?

AM: I wouldn't say fast food like McDonald's, but definitely greasy spoons. That would probably be my secret.

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[1] http://www.7nvt.com/7n/listing.htm?establishment_id=752

[2] <http://www.mistyknollfarms.com/>

[3] http://www.7nvt.com/7n/listing.htm?establishment_id=208

[4] http://www.7nvt.com/7n/listing.htm?establishment_id=587

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