



WHAT'S COOKING WITH CHRIS WILLIS '89?

Q: CHRIS, YOU WERE AN END TO ENDER AT CHARLES RIVER AFTER CRS YOU WENT TO RIVERS AND THEN ON TO HOBART. HOW AND WHEN DID THE GOAL OF BEING A CHEF BEGIN?

A: Perhaps it all started at arts day in kindergarten. I recall experimenting with an assortment of basic ingredients that we had been given to “make our own concoctions.” The memory exists in my head as a sort of dream because it occurred so long ago yet the feeling of being handed this wonderful gift that was the opportunity to create something out of nothing remains a vivid picture in my mind. I can't honestly say that I realized then that I wanted to become a chef, but I'm quite sure this experience planted a seed in my head that the creative environment at CRS continued to nurture.

Q: WHY DOES COOKING INTEREST YOU?

A: The artistic part of my brain has always directed many of my decisions. I can't avoid the way I see things or hear things, which is often in a different way than those around me. Taste is another aspect of my life that tends to guide the way I live. I love to create and I love to taste. So when I discovered the professional kitchen, my interest in cooking grew into something that now dominates my life. Walking through the doors at Café Gray I am instantly swept off my feet by the rush of activity that confronts me. In the restaurant business we call it “organized chaos” and at Café Gray it is a buzz created by 25 cooks from a half dozen countries who are trying to accomplish hundreds of different tasks with a manic sense of urgency. The feeling that you're in an environment that is moving three times as fast as the outside world is intoxicating and inspiring to be around.

Q: HOW DO YOU TRAVEL WITH YOUR KNIVES ON TRAINS OR AIRPLANES?

A: My knives are extremely large and very sharp. Most professional cooks sharpen their knives every few days on Japanese finishing stones that they own. I sharpen mine every day which presents a problem when carrying them in public because they tend to pierce the nylon bag in which I transport them. The knives give me a sense of protection when I'm returning from work, walking through less-than-desirable parts of Brooklyn at 2 am, but the knives do present a problem when I'm on a train or airplane. I've never been stopped by a police officer or by a mugger, but I'd imagine either party would be surprised by the secrets that stay bound in my black canvas bag.

Q: RESTAURANTS WHERE YOU'VE WORKED?

A: I owe most of my knowledge of culinary technique to Jody Adams at Rialto restaurant in Cambridge. I've also spent considerable time at Clio in Boston, and March and Café Gray both in New York City.

Q: ANYONE YOU MEET AT CRS WHO SAYS THEY WANT TO BE A CHEF, YOUR ADVICE?

A: Start experimenting with food on your own as early in your adult or adolescent life as you can. Cooking is a trade that you learn through reading about the subject and then attempting to execute what you've read. Learn the basics through trial and error and don't become frustrated if things don't turn out exactly as you planned. Once you've learned the basic building blocks of classical cuisine the doors swing wide open and the fun begins. You can build on this foundation of knowledge with your own ideas and create a culinary vision that you can share with friends, family, and eventually the public. You must also find a good teacher and in my opinion are not found in a culinary school. Find a reputable restaurant that serves food you enjoy and apply for a position in the kitchen. You may find that you hate the working environment, in which case you will save your folks a lot of money that would have been spent on school tuition.

Q: BEST COOKBOOK?

A. *Cooking by Hand* written by Paul Bertoli.

Q: FAMOUS PEOPLE YOU'VE COOKED FOR?

Will Smith, his wife Jada Pinket and their two kids. Also Al Gore and Hillary Clinton

Q: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS OR INTERESTS?

CRS helped to deepen my understanding and appreciation of diversity. By realizing that everyone has something unique to contribute to the world around us than you can more clearly realize what your own contribution might be. Your contribution may be a talent or idea that runs a different course from those around you, but that makes it no less important. It took me awhile to be true to my own interest to become a professional chef, but the moment that I did, my life became filled with aspirations and dreams that reinvigorated my will to succeed.

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