

Cooking with
A Private Chef
New Orleans to Newport

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Insights and Cuisine from Chef Michael Saxer

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Favorite Recipes® Press

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents,

my late mother, Diane, and

my father, Richard, who adopted me,

showed me unconditional love,

and always placed my needs above their own.

Dad—

I love and respect you,

both as a father and as a man.

Mom—

I hope that in some distant future

we will somehow reconnect,

and when we finally do,

wherever that might happen to be,

it will be an honor to cook for you.

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In the cunning way our culture has, chefs have again come to occupy a privileged place. Undernourished in so many ways, we moderns respond to their promises of satisfying our restless appetites with palatable gratitude and sometimes stardom. Today cooking has drawn many of the best and brightest. Attracted to the kitchen much like the ballet or theater stage, it is a place where youthful creativity and energy can be harnessed to amazing results. Perhaps for a chef nowhere is this given more free play than in the private setting, as Chef Michael Saxer's book shows.

Introduction

*F*or much of human history cooks stayed fairly invisible, smudged out of view by charcoal dust and drudgery. If the Romans, who actually prized their slave cooks, took any kind of notice it was to place them as figures in satire. Not until the great culinary awakening in seventeenth-century France did we really see the chef as a celebrity. Then all chefs were “private” because the epoch of great restaurants was yet to come. Sensible patrons prized their cooks more than paramours. Fortunately, today few private chefs feel the fevered pressures of the famed and fated Vatel, private cook to the Prince de Condé. Tortured by the prospect of failure, he fell upon his sword before an elaborate Friday lunch. Saxer, no less serious, is more balanced about his craft. He has learned to feed the royal and raucous at the Coleman’s table with lighter touch—a lightness no doubt temperamental but also learned from his fun-loving patrons.

There must have been that pivotal moment when Stone Age hosts decided to add a touch of grace to their normally ho-hum roasts, and conscious hospitality was born. Eating in groups without growling is sometimes better done by other species but we humans are unique in the extraordinary variety of our diet and a certain tendency to impose rituals on food consumption. More than anything we are the only primates who believe conviviality ought to be part of dining.

The banquets known from earliest times were largely affairs of gods or heroes. It is uncertain who taught whom to feast, but certainly the gods set standards for excess that mortals eternally strive to imitate. For ancients a hospitable table became not just an aspiration but moral imperative, and one not always that convenient. As she waited long years for Odysseus to return, poor Penelope was nearly eaten out of house and home by unwanted guests she detested. Thankfully, modern hosts rarely face such bleak extended prospects.

It was Plutarch who insisted we do not sit at the table only to eat but rather to eat *together*, and for the classical world the ability to have a proper dinner party was one of the basic distinctions between the civilized and the savage. It meant self-control and etiquette in the face of savory victuals and intoxicating wine, and charm and wit between chews. “Talk! Talk!” Gigi’s great-aunt, Alicia, commanded as she was trying to masticate the ortolans. Good food is never quite enough; conviviality is what makes meals memorable and often tolerable.

Few young chefs could find a household better placed to display and refine their skills than James and Minnie Coleman’s. At their houses in New Orleans and Newport or their treasured “outposts” on the batture of the Mississippi River and Otter Rock Farm in Westport, Massachusetts, they have fed and entertained intimate friends and princesses, artists and ambassadors, social orphans, and jet setters.

Mrs. Coleman, the former Minnie Cushing of Newport and New York, twinkles with the old Yankee humor and modesty reminiscing on what formed her notions of good dinner parties. She grew up at The Ledges, a great house built by her forebearers, well before palaces of the Gilded Age sprouted along the Newport coast. Watching her mother and father, who always “dressed” for dinner, entertain friends including John Spencer, then Duke of Marlborough, she learned the importance of offering “the best of what you have.” Forget the pagoda-shaped silver epergnes whose tinkling bells signaled setting the table; it was the fresh products from the New England sea and the family’s adjacent farm, which had a “serious vegetable patch” and dovecote able to supply squab, that made the table sing. “I learned to hypnotize a lobster and pick out the fattest and the best, do you know how?” She laughs, still unwilling to share the secret, but one has the sense she has given Chef Saxer some useful tips.



It may seem easy to study style in such grand settings, but to dazzle and delight without dumbfounding is a personal, even artistic talent. The most splendidly set table she remembers was at Blenheim for a dinner dance honoring her school friend Serena Russell. The naughtiest moment may have been tempting Countess Syvie Szapary at her seventh birthday party to slide down the grand staircase of her family’s legendary Newport house, The Breakers. Only because they were unable to find a properly large silver tray was the escapade postponed. But the most profound lesson was learned when she was barely twenty. Invited to a formidable dinner party by a terrifying doyenne, whose task it was to choose that year’s debutantes, she felt “a little like Saint Lawrence—on the grill, don’t you see.” One was commanded to appear at seven-fifteen exactly, dinner was at seven-thirty exactly and there was a footman exactly behind each chair. Younger guests did not speak unless addressed. Then the soup was served. She noticed hers had a Japanese beetle floating in it, which struck her as uncontrollably funny. Everyone ended up laughing, except the hostess who turned purple. Minnie vowed then and there never to have “a table that had more rules than fun.” Anybody who has dined with Minnie comes prepared to break the rules with style and to expect a great deal of unpredictable fun.

She is perfectly matched with Jimmy, a native New Orleanian, who absorbed the sense of pomp and playfulness for which this city is renowned. Southern hospitality and Carnival rituals are civic as well as family traditions, and one always influences the other. His Princeton college days honed his skills at entertaining, but it was at Oxford that he found a perfect foil. Already a discriminating collector of antique silver and porcelain, he outfitted his rooms at University College for “serious” lunch parties. That college is one of the oldest at Oxford and laden with venerable traditions and a magnificent seventeenth-century dining hall. Here he staged a Mardi Gras lunch that survives in the legends of the institution. His father packed a plane with typical New Orleans fare, and Jimmy invaded the college kitchen where rarely a gentleman student had ever been seen. He enchanted the cook sufficiently to produce milk punches and grillades and grits for thirty friends. So bewitched by the confidence of this young American, the college steward pulled out the eighteenth-century plates and porcelain. News traveled fast and he was promptly asked to join the prestigious Bullingdon Club. At these stylishly ribald dinners, he confesses to have learned “rather too much about claret and enough about how to keep a table clever.” In its menu, décor, and decorum nothing can be too heavy, nothing too self-conscious, and absolutely nothing pretentious. These are lessons that have good stead in his thirty years as Honorary British Consul in New Orleans.

When they pick out the dinner parties that they hold most fondly, it is usually the intimate affairs of four to six people, but both agree that one of the most memorable was a party for twenty they gave not long after the hurricane had wrecked havoc on New Orleans. Anxious to help focus world attention on the city and to prove that commerce and culture was still vibrant, they entertained Prince Andrew and others prominent in recovery efforts. Their eighteenth-century French dining table was fully extended, the table set with old silver, and despite the challenges of finding what he needed, Chef Saxer produced a menu that amazed even the Colemans. The conversation was extraordinary, the mood ebullient, and the foreign visitors left certain that this city would and should survive. Jimmy and Minnie were thrilled that young Michael Saxer had proven that their confidence was well founded and that this partnership had reached that classical ideal where the convivial and the creative combined to achieve not just an ephemeral moment, but a satisfaction to the soul and palate.

Patrick J. Dunne

*F*irst and foremost, I would like to thank Minnie and Jimmy Coleman, Jr.—not only for the support and generosity needed to make this project possible, but for also being so very good to me in more ways than I can ever begin to mention. It has been a pleasure being your chef, and I am a better person because I have been fortunate enough to know you both.

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— S Y B A —

How to Use this Book

Contained within this book are directions for the preparation of numerous finished dishes—ranging all the way from starting courses to desserts. Some of these dishes contain several smaller recipes for individual components (vegetables, starches, proteins, sauces, etc...) that are then combined within each dish to achieve a balanced and complete final offering. This being said, there are several ways that these recipes and dishes might best be utilized. One could simply cook any dish as presented and enjoy it as a single course. The next step would then be to cook other dishes also and thus create your own multicourse meal—following whichever menu you decide upon and using your own choices of completed dishes. I typically cook three-course meals (with hors d'oeuvre if guests are attending) and have included examples of menus that I have previously used for such dinners (page 132). You may replicate these or just use them as a reference for how your own particular meals and menus might be designed.

Another option is to take the recipes for individual components (vegetables, starches, etc. . .) from dishes and enjoy them by themselves as side dishes. Each recipe, small or large, has been designed so that it can proudly stand alone. You may just happen to need a particular recipe for a specific ingredient (braised portobellos, grilled shrimp, whatever...), and this book serves that purpose because it happens to contain a great number of such smaller recipes—each clearly marked for reference and ease of use. I often look to cookbooks in this way when I'm searching for that one particular, yet still unknown, component that a near finished dish seems to be lacking. Feel free to take some of these smaller components and combine them in new and exciting ways in order to create your own signature dishes. In whichever manner you ultimately use the book remember this—the goal while cooking is to strive for balanced and complementary flavors when pairing different ingredients or recipes into completed dishes.

And just one other thing—don't forget that cooking and eating is the stuff of love and enjoyment...allow yourself to have fun while doing both.



NEW ORLEANS

* denotes New Orleans recipes



NEWPORT

* denotes Newport recipes

Being a Private Chef



I love what I do...the way that I do it. I have found in food the medium in which to express myself creatively while simultaneously living a balanced lifestyle and earning a good living. Being a private chef, I get to work in more than one celebrated locale and to enjoy the additional benefits of experiencing different cultures, ingredients, kitchens, and seasons while keeping a consistent schedule with a single employer. As much as I can appreciate the multifaceted lifestyle afforded my atypical profession, it remains a field that both mystifies and intrigues those around me. It is one part of my goal in this book to engage and satisfy some of that curiosity. The other is to introduce readers to some of my favorite dishes.

Most personal and private chefs begin their culinary careers in the more traditional restaurant business, but they end up with quite different jobs. Being a private chef, as opposed to a personal chef, I work for only one family. Where personal chefs work for several families and drop off the pre-prepared food to homes for later use, I work for one couple and prepare all the meals in their kitchen. The location of that "kitchen" in my particular case could be any one of several home, vacation, or entertaining kitchens that the family maintains in the New Orleans, Louisiana, and Newport, Rhode Island, areas.

My living arrangements and schedule are as unusual as the job itself. Although some private chefs, particularly boat chefs, reside with their employers, I live away from the family estates in both New Orleans and Newport. Personal space, privacy, and delineated time off are crucial aspects of my ability to thrive in the job; flexibility is an essential part of my ability to succeed in it. I have heard horror stories about in-house chefs who have received phone calls at 2 a.m. requesting grilled cheese sandwiches for eight, but my housing situation makes such calls only a distant nightmare, not a reality. I am employed on a full-time basis, paid a salary, and typically cook a three-course dinner five nights per week. In New Orleans my days off are Sunday and Monday, but in Newport I relax on Monday and Tuesday. The summer weather in Newport is among the best to be experienced anywhere, so the family often uses their boat on Sundays. Consequently, it is not uncommon for me to prepare a casual boat picnic and a small Sunday dinner.

The number of people in attendance at more formal dinners is as varied as the food I prepare. I cook for as many or as few people as the Colemans choose to invite. At smaller dinners, I can usually handle serving and clean-up myself, so I do not need a lot of notice regarding the family's plans. Even for medium-sized dinners of five to ten settings, I only

need a single day's notice. That time allows me to plan an efficient menu and to hire someone to help set the table and serve the meal. In Newport my friend Julia Evans has always filled this position and helped in countless different ways. She has been like a muscular right hand, and I am grateful that she continues to work with me year after year.

I have almost total creative freedom when preparing these small and medium-sized dinners. During the course of a normal week, the family does not know what they are going to eat until it arrives at the table. I take great pleasure in keeping them guessing, and they enjoy the suspense and pleasant surprises. It is deeply satisfying for me to be trusted with a large amount of artistic freedom by people whose opinions I truly respect.

It is the large parties, however, that require the most effort and come together as a work of art. One of the things I sincerely enjoy about my job is the collaborative effort that goes into planning menus for the larger meals. The gentleman, yes he, will invariably take a more hands-on approach when planning the menu for larger parties. He takes various factors into consideration. Beyond maintaining a complementary flow of courses, other, less obvious issues are addressed. What the weather will be like helps shape the proportion of hot and cold dishes. The tastes of a specific guest may also drive the menu. Other times it is a particular dish or ingredient that fuels his decision-making process. In addition, the gentleman reads widely and wildly in the food genre. He often contributes recipes from articles and cookbooks that he would like to see brought into our repertoire. And sometimes he just wakes up with a craving for soft-shell crab, and all his guests get to enjoy one, too. The lady is also an indispensable member of this family's imaginative team. She is an aficionado of the rare. She is drawn to articles and recipes featuring interesting ingredients, such as small-batch smoked meats, artisanal cheeses, exotic spices, oils made from hand-picked olives, and so on. She will track down even the most uncommon items for all of us to try and for me to use creatively. A hyper-creative person herself, the lady respects the art of cooking. It is stimulating to discuss food with her and comforting to know that I have the benefit of her substantial knowledge and commitment to learn more each year. Both members of the family are certainly crucial to my perennial development as a chef.

The family enjoys entertaining and revels in the minute details. One of the first considerations is the table itself. We have a dining table in New Orleans which extends to seat twenty-four or shrinks to seat as few as four. The table settings at these large parties are elaborate; it can take up to two hours to extend the table and set it. They





include fine linen placemats and napkins, napkin rings, individual menus, exceptional crystal glasses, silver utensils for each course, salt and pepper pots, candles, candelabra, hand-calligraphied place cards by the lady herself, and place card holders. The food itself is served on a wide array of exquisite china. Some of the pieces are hundreds of years old, and all of them have striking patterns. Then, if you can imagine it, there are the “specialty” items. If I happen to be serving fish, then each setting will include an antique fish knife, or if osso buco finds its way on the menu the settings will feature marrow spoons with which to scoop out the bone’s glorious center.

Hiring service people is obviously crucial to the success of one of these big events. Over the past few years the family has employed several different people to serve every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. I hire one server for every few people who will be attending a function. They work closely with a bartender or two to make sure the guests do not sit empty-handed. At these larger parties musicians also play an important role. We have hosted parties in which two separate groups play simultaneously at separate ends of the house. Florists further adorn the house and table. It is not uncommon to have five separate arrangements on the table when it is extended to seat twenty-four. Assistance in the kitchen at these big events is also invaluable. Larger parties may involve up to two full days of cooking. In addition to the people who will serve the food, I also hire an extra person to help prepare the food if the meals will serve more than twelve. The tasks are too many to manage alone, but the timing flows seamlessly when another is involved.

Finally, after the lights have been dimmed and the wine opened, it is time to welcome the family’s guests. Their visitors will typically arrive around eight o’clock and will enjoy cocktails and hors d’oeuvre for thirty minutes or so. At this point they are seated, the wine is poured, and the food is presented, one leisurely course at a time. Seamless timing, as I mentioned earlier, is essential to achieving a good “flow” during the meal. While the guests are enjoying their cocktails, I am getting the first course as close to being presented as possible, so the plates can be rapidly completed and delivered to the table once the couple announces the meal, sometimes with a wink and other times with the sounding of a Balinese gong. This can involve keeping dishes at proper temperatures until that time, or waiting until the very last seconds to complete finishing details. I do not dress salads until I know that everyone has been seated, avoiding the situation in which lingering diners might end up with sad, wilted leaves.

Once the first course goes out, I will almost immediately begin working on the second. I will again monitor the temperature of all my ingredients and usually wait until the previous course is being cleared and the next wine is being poured before applying the finishing touches to a dish. If I am preparing fish, for example, I will not begin to cook it until the last moment and then will quickly finish the plate with sauces and garnishes. It has taken me years to perfect this delicate balance, and it has only come with a lot of practice. If I move too quickly guests will be faced with the horror of cold food, and if I linger too long I might have to face famished diners sitting in front of empty plates.

With dessert the meal, but not the night, begins to wind down. The sweet course which always follows requires some attention, but the process is usually less complicated than the assembly of the entrée. After I have finished my presentation—scooping ice cream, saucing, garnishing, etc.—I will send out the plates. Often I will be asked to address the guests and answer questions about particular ingredients or dishes. This immediate feedback from diners helps fuel my quest for excellence in my job. The comments I receive from the family and guests help me to decide what aspects of my dinners, such as techniques or flavor combinations, I will incorporate into future meals and those I will discard. After a fleeting moment for reflection and relaxation, I will put away any extra food, clean the kitchen and stove, and carefully wash and store all the plates, glasses, and silverware. When someone is working with me they will assist with this precision washing. Although dinner is over, the guests may retire to another room for coffee or an after-dinner drink, and the party rolls on.

My job requires a lot of work and is well worth it. I could not be any prouder of the dinners we serve, because I know how complete the experience has been and how much care and attention have gone into creating it. A heart-warming part of the job is the wide swath of people for whom I get to cook. Although the gentleman’s job requires that he entertain high-profile guests such as heads-of-state and European royalty, and among their friends you will find an interesting coterie of artists and politicians alike, they put the same passion and attention to detail into a family birthday party as they do a dinner to honor public figures.

THE TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Beyond the organic, intuitive sense of what makes a delightful meal, precision and planning are central to my work; shopping is one area in which planning is most important. Shopping is, in fact, one of the most critical components of being a private chef, and it is here that one finds a major difference between the job I have and that of a restaurant chef. In restaurants, purchases for the next day’s service are generally made at the end of a long day of cooking. The chef will weigh out what food has remained unused versus what he feels he will need for the next shift, and he will then place tomorrow’s food order accordingly. This order will inevitably include food for both specials and regular menu items, but there is no guarantee that the order will arrive before the time of service. It is altogether common for food orders to be late, wrong, or lost altogether, adding to the often stressful environment of a chaotic full-time kitchen.

Working as a private chef, deliveries are rarely made to the property due to practical and personal considerations. The limiting factor is that my lists, even for the larger dinner parties, would be too short to justify the delivery cost. The liberating factor is that I am no longer forced to rely on capricious delivery companies, but am able to control the process of shopping myself. Because I usually decide what dishes I will prepare on the day of the meal itself, daily shopping is key. I go shopping every workday in as many as four places, including farmers’ markets and stores. This allows me to gather ingredients as close to mealtime as possible, ensuring the freshest quality.



Although so much shopping may seem like a harrowing task to the average person, I really have the whole process down to a science. Working with lists is essential for efficient “auto-pilot” shopping. I generally sit down before I go and decide what I am going to cook. The skeleton of the list may come from a recipe in my memory or from an interesting magazine or cookbook. Other times it comes from pure, spur-of-the-moment inspiration.

In addition to framing the list around the evening’s dinner, I also shop to keep the entire kitchen stocked with food and supplies for the following day. I keep the refrigerator filled with tasty breads, cheeses, condiments and eggs, as well as other things they like to have on hand when I am not around such as fresh-squeezed juices, tea sandwiches, bananas, grapes, blueberries, avocados, tomatoes, grilled vegetables, roasted or steamed proteins, and freshly baked cookies. I also stock the pantry with cereals, crackers, nuts, pasta, spices, oils, vinegars, and the like; the storeroom with everything from dog food to trash bags; and the bar with liquor, mixers, and wine. On Saturdays I have to shop for even more food to tide them over during my two days off. This means buying extra ingredients in order to prepare a selection of different proteins, soups, rice salads, side dishes, vegetables, fruits, and sweets. The key is to keep the selection inviting and varied while neither making too much nor too little.

Having to manage such a wide array of shopping goals, it helps me to think about specific markets and their unique layouts—meat department, dairy, deli, etc.—as I make the lists. Therefore, once I am inside my list follows the layout of the store, significantly cutting down on wasteful wandering time. In addition, I always carry a pen with me so I can physically scratch off each item, and therefore rarely forget anything. Having my pen and list handy also allows me to jot down any ideas for future meals. Even though I am very focused on my list and the task at hand, I am almost inevitably distracted by the various colors, flavors, and textures that a good market provides.

Even the best constructed lists are powerless to improve cart shortages, crowded aisles, insufficient parking, long lines, and rush-hour traffic. Shopping at peak hours is undesirable when it comes to efficiency, but since most shoppers are not free to shop in the middle of the day like I am, there are other tricks that can help save some time. Although an adventurous cook, the novice shopper may approach tasks without forethought. I order ahead. If my list includes an ingredient for which I will have to wait in line, for example if I need half a pound of thinly sliced prosciutto from the deli, I call the store a half hour before I arrive, ask to be connected to the deli, and give them the order and the pick-up time. This simple step just saved me ten minutes.

If for some reason I do not have time to order ahead, all is not lost. Upon arrival at the store on a day when I am shopping for a time-intensive item like prosciutto, I will head straight for the deli to order the thinly sliced meat. I make sure to tell them that I’ll be back for my food, but I am then free to finish the rest of my list without waiting. At the end of my trip I simply head back to the counter before checking out and manage to save at least some precious time.

While saving time is central to my shopping plan, saving on the cost of ingredients is not. There is an early nineteenth-century adage that says, “There’s no getting blood out of a turnip.” It vividly expresses the futility of unrealistic expectations and is particularly applicable to the world of cooking. You cannot create a good meal using poor-quality ingredients. If you were unlucky enough to purchase a cut-rate piece of fish, then there is no amount of technique, tampering, or wishing that is going to make it taste any better. People who know good food will immediately be able to detect that “something is fishy,” if by sense of smell alone.

I cannot overstress the importance of avoiding inferior products. Completed dishes, unlike people, are simply a sum of their parts. Each ingredient builds upon and mixes with every other ingredient. They have to be of a certain quality or the whole dish will suffer. Skimping here ultimately cheats the cook and his guests out of the optimal flavor experience. This is not to say that spending extravagantly is necessary when cooking at home. On the contrary, it is common sense to conserve money whenever possible. However, you should buy the best quality ingredients you can afford and should always avoid the obviously substandard. Generally speaking, the ingredients that are worth paying a little more for are oils, vinegars, meats, seafood, chocolate, cheeses, and produce.

It is also important to remember that the quality of ingredients will play an important role in the ongoing development of the cook’s palate. So be warned. Once you have had the best of any one product or ingredient you run the risk of setting high expectations. Once you have been fortunate enough to have eaten Beluga, then you know that no other caviar satisfies so completely. Premium ingredients will become the standard by which you set your culinary bar.

Good tools are also an integral part of creating restaurant-quality food at home. Every good kitchen should have a gas stove and a predictable oven. As far as pots and pans go, they should be heavy gauge and of even weight for their size, and a good kitchen will have several of varying sizes. I prefer nonstick sauté pans with oven-resistant handles, heavy-gauge pots, and enameled cooking vessels. Good knives are also a must. Weight and sharpness are key factors. In knives, fewer and better is optimal. Rather than investing in a lot of knives one really only needs one good chef’s knife, a paring knife, a serrated knife like a bread knife, a slicer, and a butcher’s knife to round out your collection. To maintain your knives you will need a sharpener, and to preserve your counters you will need cutting boards. I like to have two: one dishwasher-safe for meat and seafood and a wooden one for everything else.



Beyond these basics there are a few other kitchen gadgets and accessories that make it possible to create professional-quality cuisine:

Blender	Salad Spinner
Chinois (fine strainer)	Sharpening Steel
Food Processor	Sheet Pans
Fry Thermometer	Spatulas (rubber and metal)
Digital Meat Thermometer	Stand or hand mixer
Mandoline (Japanese and/or French)	Timers
Microplane Grater	Tongs (heavy gauge)
Mixing Bowls (glass or metal)	Towels
Pepper Mill	Vegetable Peeler (speed peeler)
Rolling Pin	Wooden Spoons

These tools combined with a few other techniques will help you to prepare amazing food. It is important to have your instruments ready ahead of time so that the final assembly process flows smoothly once you are ready to begin. Make sure that ovens and grills have been preheated to the desired temperatures and that the right pots and pans are available and ready for use. In addition, plates and bowls should be chilled or heated well in advance so that they can be used immediately as dishes are plated.

When preparing a multicourse meal, certain food items can be made ahead of time and kept at room temperature. These might include most vinaigrettes, relishes, non-heated purées, and many desserts. Cold items, such as salad greens, chilled soups, sorbets, etc. should remain cold until used.

Items that are served warm can be treated in one of two ways. One option is to cook them in advance and gently reheat them shortly before being served. This is a good technique for meats that benefit from “resting,” soups, starches, and roasted vegetables. The other option is to cook the food right before being served. I recommend this method for seafood, which must be served hot and generally suffers when reheated, and for heated sauces, fried proteins, and soufflés. Whether you are cooking in New Orleans and Newport like I do, or any other city around the globe, the proper preparation will help ensure the ideal palate-pleasing presentation.

GOOD NEWS. . . NEW ORLEANS TO NEWPORT

New Orleans is unique among American cities. I love the historic architecture framed by tremendous sprawling oak trees. Wandering down the majestic, and not-so-majestic, streets of New Orleans, you can hear fantastic live music every night. There is so much good music in the city that one of the most difficult decisions we make is to decide

which show to catch. While our sunsets are intense, the pace of life in New Orleans is slow. New Orleans may be the most European-looking city in the United States, but it also shares a laid-back Caribbean vibe. People are friendly and quick to shoot the breeze, but slow to move.

There is no other cuisine in the world like that of New Orleans. It is a combination of all the styles brought here by the peoples of France, Spain, Africa, and the Caribbean who came and, against the odds, survived to mix their food and culture with that of the Native Americans already living here. The end result was a “Creole” cuisine that is thick with flavor, literally and historically.

While many cities have their sprinkling of foodies, all true New Orleanians love to eat, and it is one of the very few things we take seriously. I have never lived in a place where ordinary people cook so much and so well. We have good food everywhere—at every gathering, party, and festival. Our homes and fine restaurants are filled with good food and good conversation about food. I often hear people on the street speaking passionately about what they just ate and where they ate it. The food is sometimes from a restaurant, but often this bubbling chatter is inspired by a home-cooked meal.

In New Orleans people not only cook, but congregate in the kitchen. I cannot tell you how many times I have gone to someone’s home for dinner and several, if not all of the guests, have ended up in the kitchen. People watch and talk as the food is prepared while nibbling random ingredients and sipping wine. Often guests will also roll up their sleeves and help with the prep work or cooking. There is something really comforting about being close to food as it is being created—kind of like being around the campfire, only tastier.

Unfortunately this kind of shared, congenial cooking relationship between diner and chef is not possible in most restaurants, but my position is unique because I am located somewhere between the home and restaurant environment. People who eat my food have come to a comfortable home to dine while enjoying an elegant atmosphere and all the amenities found in a fine restaurant. Guests are always welcomed into the kitchen and often come in to watch me cook or ask questions. It is a rare blend of the restaurant experience with the more personal aspect of cooking at home. It is rewarding to have such intimate and immediate contact with the people for whom I am cooking. The entire cooking process has come full circle when I have prepared a meal and then spent time with the people for whom I prepared it.

I have also had the pleasure of completing this circle in Newport, Rhode Island, over meandering meals spanning the last eight summers. While summers in New Orleans are oppressively hot and humid, the summer weather in Newport attracts people from all over the world. My arrival in Newport around June first each year to cool and crisp ocean breezes is a wonderful respite from the New Orleans summer steam bath. The weather warms over the summer and is cool again by the time I leave with the family in late September. The rocky shoreline and sandy beaches are lovely. It is easy to spend the day lazing on the sand between swims while watching people surf or dive.



Newport used to be home to the America's Cup, and it would be an understatement to say that sailing is anything but huge. Every slip in Newport harbor is filled by July fourth, and regattas can often be seen on the horizon. Yachts sail in from ports all over the world; the largest boats are so big and luxurious that it is mind-boggling. These lucky people could spend their vacation time anywhere in the world, but they choose Newport and come in droves.

As if the splendid weather was not enough, there are numerous other attractions that draw visitors to the island. The nation's first jazz festival opened here in 1954 and has hosted a myriad phenomenal artists such as Miles Davis, Nina Simone, and Bob Dylan. In addition to music, great art is produced in Newport, and it is widely considered an artists' colony. The inspiring ocean views may help explain this attraction.

I am undeniably attracted to the variety of produce available in both Newport and New Orleans. Shopping with geography and the differing seasons in mind is an indispensable part of gathering quality ingredients and making good food. As a taste for high-quality ingredients develops, it does not take long to realize that fresh foods are only available at certain times of the year. Although you can buy a tomato in the grocery store on any day of the year, you can only buy Creole tomatoes in New Orleans during the early summer months. Do not get me wrong, we do live in modern times; never before in history has the marketplace gone to such lengths to bring the world to the cook. I get positively excited when I enter a Whole Foods Market and am always able to find meats, cheeses, and wines from all over the world.

The bounty of local ingredients harvested in and around New Orleans is immense. First let's look at the seafood. Bayous and lakes supply us with large blue crabs, crawfish, and flounder. The Gulf of Mexico provides shrimp and salty oysters along with numerous fish such as black drum, cobia, tuna, and mahimahi. In addition, local farmers bestow juicy, sweet strawberries and sappy, plump figs. Our citrus selection includes oranges, lemons, grapefruits, and satsumas. Chicory-blended coffee, pecans, honey, and cane syrup, along with lesser-known produce such as okra, mirlitons (also called alligator pears or chayote), squash, and innumerable other products make their way from Louisiana farms to our tables. This list is even more impressive given that it is a region that really has only two seasons—"hot," from late spring thru early fall, and "not quite as hot," the rest of the year.

The fact that I travel with the family to Newport, Rhode Island, for a portion of the year adds variety to the particular local ingredients available. It certainly heightens the cooking experience to select and cook local ingredients at the height of their season. I have been inspired to create new dishes and entire meals from just one attention-grabbing item I discovered at the local farmers' market or fishmonger's shop. Moving from the South to the East Coast each summer has exposed me to a greater array of products and thus allowed me to further expand my culinary repertoire.

Because there are four true seasons in Newport, the change in ingredients is quite remarkable. There is a garden located on the estate and it is usually just starting to come to life when I arrive. Harry Eudenbauch, the estate's immensely talented gardener, provides me with a garden filled with fresh herbs, lettuces, tomatoes, beets,

chard, carrots, melons, etc. He also grows beautiful fragrant flowers that fill the house with their aroma and color all summer long. On the property the lady of the house also maintains a working henhouse complete with three dozen Rhode Island Red hens and the fresh eggs they lay each day. A few lucky neighbors are invited to come over and buy, on the honor system, any eggs that have not been reserved for the day's meals. Fall offers apples, quince, chestnuts, and many types of pumpkins and squash.

The waters surrounding Newport are enlivened with literally tons of fresh seafood, but the varieties available are very different from the ones offered in New Orleans. Instead of shrimp there are scallops. While oysters are collected on the East Coast, they are quite different from the ones found in the Gulf of Mexico. Other indigenous seafood includes mussels, clams, striped bass, cod, and tuna. And the grand New England lobster dwarfs the small but feisty Louisiana crawfish. The gentleman of the house loves lobster so much he catches them himself. Each summer he takes a small boat about a quarter of a mile off the shore of the house and sets out ten lobster pots that have to be pulled up seventy-five feet from the ocean floor. In addition to all the hard physical labor, he also puts a lot of thought into the proper storage of the lobsters. I maintain a one-hundred-gallon tank in the garage which he keeps stocked throughout the summer with his hand-harvested lobsters. Our summer lobster boils offer the freshest lobster possible combined with the sweetest corn; nothing else in my opinion epitomizes summer quite so well.

Like the lobster boils, we do repeat certain events each year. Each summer, the family maximizes their time spent out on the water. They take their boat, the *Minnie-Lynnie*, on numerous picnics, day trips, overnight jaunts to nearby islands, and fishing trips.

These one- to three-day fishing excursions are the most involved of the water outings. The otherwise comfortable boat is outfitted with special equipment, a guide, the very knowledgeable Captain David Prebble, and a truly indispensable first mate, Joe Cleverdon, who is normally the captain for both the *Minnie-Lynnie* and *Gigi*, the family's fifty-foot sailboat. The crew, family, and guests travel as far as one-hundred miles offshore to strategic fishing spots. Last summer's catch included mahimahi, swordfish, bluefin tuna, yellowfin tuna, and an extremely rare bigeye tuna that weighed in at one hundred and seventy-five pounds. The fish are bled immediately to preserve the quality of the flesh. At the end of each successful trip, the fish are brought back, cleaned, portioned, and then distributed among many very appreciative friends and family. Nothing is better than eating the freshest fish, but giving it away is a close second.

All involved appreciate the organic process of angling a meal from the water and onto the table. As a chef, it is gratifying to then construct my meals around the freshest of fish. For the family, it is gratifying to eat food they have harvested themselves. This collaborative culinary celebration is only made possible because they appreciate the effort and perseverance that it takes to personally pursue special meals along the food chain.

Although we usually leave Newport in September, the family once again heads north to celebrate Thanksgiving. By this point in the season, the leaves are long fallen, knobby



chestnuts blanket the sidewalks, and a frosty cold envelops the night. The family eschews their oceanside summer oasis for the pastoral environment of a Westport, Massachusetts, farmhouse a mere hour away. Like the property itself, surrounded by ancient-looking stone walls and charming old farm buildings, the food I prepare here tends to be less formal and more relaxed. Authentic countryside dishes are accompanied by an authentic Massachusetts country turkey raised just up the road at Helger's farm. While every Thanksgiving dinner all over America is a special event, a true cornucopia of food, it is especially warm and well executed in this cozy little farm house.

Following closely after the New Year, the height of New Orleans's social season arrives at Carnival time. Mardi Gras is a time of celebration for the entire city, and this family is no exception. They love to entertain friends and family while the world's largest party goes on all around them. Because they are involved with various Carnival organizations, I have the privilege and challenge of feeding Mardi Gras royalty, float designers, historians, and many others. I have served very formal meals for as many as 35 and lavish buffets for over 150 people. Returning from the bacchanal, hungry parade-goers will find roasted meats and vegetables, shrimp Creole, salads, fried seafood, pastas, and numerous desserts on the buffet. The entertainment for these parties often consists of serpentine Brazilian dancers grooving to the music of not one, but two bands set up at different ends of the house.

While these Mardi Gras meals presage the beginning of the leaner Lenten season, the Easter meal, usually enjoyed in New Orleans, marks the end. Although some people may not think of Easter as a food-centered holiday, we certainly do. The menu always includes a casserole, deviled eggs, ham, roasted lamb, late winter and spring vegetables, and chocolate desserts. Working with a family for whom eating and entertaining are inextricably lined makes my job a year-long adventure.

THE CHEF KNOWS THE WORLD. . . WORLD, MEET THE CHEF

The good chefs I have met all have a well-rounded view of the world they inhabit. By "world" I am not simply referring to the immediate surroundings in which they happen to live, but the more global environment. Any chef worth his salt will have a command of local flavors and ingredients, but good chefs see the bigger picture. They know ingredients, but they also know something about the histories of the cultures from which they emerged. This understanding adds another aspect to the resultant dishes and an increased respect for the people and places from which they originated.

Chefs are further enriched by their contact with the people who provide their foods. Farmers, fishermen, and foragers have substantial knowledge of their products and a deep sense of respect for the earth itself. Most of these producers willingly share information with the curious chef who wants to know, for example, how the various seasons affect each particular product. This knowledge, again, increases the chef's appreciation for his food and respect for the people who nurtured it. So when the

final product reaches the table, it is prepared not only with a chef's culinary skills but also with respect. That is the ultimate recipe for an enjoyable dining experience, not only for the patron, but for the chef as well.

Although the chef learns about the world via his food, diners often know little of the chef who prepared it and why he does what he does. I simply love what I do. In my case this professional fulfillment is an inextricable part of my general personal fulfillment. When I finally left the restaurant business, I was not happy. Internal and external stresses, long hours, and physical overexertion had really started to take a toll on me. Let me put the difference between the public and private cooking environments in perspective. When I worked at Commander's Palace in New Orleans, we served approximately 400 diners, or "covers" in restaurant jargon, per night with more than 20 cooks. At Gautreau's, where I was executive chef, we did around 150 covers with up to 5 cooks. Now, my average meal serves a delightfully manageable number of four people.

I will never forget the moment that I first learned about the possibility of my present job. Having been honored with an invitation to cook at the James Beard House in New York City, I was sitting in the lobby bar of a midtown hotel unwinding from a long day of hard work with my Gautreau's (an upscale New Orleans bistro) sous chef, Brent Bond. I was tired, both from the excitement and pressure of this upcoming dinner and from the restaurant's busy season back in New Orleans. I made an offhand comment like, "I should have stayed in school." It was at this moment that Brent, understanding my level of exhaustion, mentioned that the owner of the restaurant knew a family looking for a private chef.

I was looking to transition into a different line of work, and Brent was interested in becoming Gautreau's executive chef, a position which he filled competently after I left. I began pursuing the position as soon as we returned to New Orleans. I went to the family home to meet them and see the kitchen. The chemistry seemed good and the position sounded new and exciting. I cooked my first meal for them on Valentine's Day; it was a three-course meal for four people. I do not recall what I cooked that night, but I do know that it has been eight years since I cooked that first meal, twice as long as any other job I have ever held. And in that time, I have cooked more than a thousand meals for them in dozens of locations.

Although people generally understand that I have prepared many different types of meals as a professional cook, they always want to know if I have any favorite or specialty dishes. I would not say that I have one food that is my favorite, but there are a few things I always enjoy preparing and eating. Braised dishes are always fun for me to prepare and delicious as well. The fact they are cooked in one pot is an added bonus. I never seem to tire of roasted chicken or game hens, and grilled lamb T-bones keep me tantalized as well. I like to keep frittatas and quiches around as they are good both hot and cold. Dessert making was not a big part of my earlier restaurant career, but I have mastered many techniques as a private chef. Panna cottas and tarts are some of my favorite desserts to prepare, and brûléeing, caramelizing sugar with a torch, never gets old.





Although I do not have a favorite food, I would probably say that my specialty is cooking fish. It has always seemed to come naturally for me. But a private chef does not have the luxury of doing only what comes naturally. I am solely responsible for every phase of every meal. Doing my current job, combined with years of restaurant training, has helped me develop into a well-rounded chef. I have to be proficient with all aspects of food preparation in order to be a successful private chef. I do not think a chef who is hyperspecialized or inflexible could handle the job.

I would describe my style of cooking as simple, but not plain. I incorporate good technique with regional ingredients to maximize flavor while altering the natural flavors of the ingredients as little as possible. I aim to cook food that is healthful, uncomplicated, but also aesthetically pleasing, incorporating a lot of color and texture. I do not cook much fried food because I do not like the way it makes me feel. I try to create three-course meals which will satisfy diners, and yet not leave them overly full when they are finished. My emphasis on healthful, well-balanced meals mirrors my commitment to a healthy, well-rounded life.

My becoming a private chef is a reflection of that commitment. Now that I no longer work in the restaurant industry, I live a more relaxed, well-adjusted life. I am free to do other things I enjoy like exercising, reading, and pursuing other artistic outlets besides cooking. The moderate pace of my work life is liberating, and I am able to channel that enhanced freedom, happiness, and creativity into even better food.

My current job is not easy. There is great pressure on me to produce, and no one with whom to share blame for any culinary missteps. My level of control, however, ensures that mistakes are infrequent. Fewer unknowns linger, allowing me to give maximum focus to the food itself. Today I cook with heart in a temperate environment with pleasant lighting and great music. It is truly amazing what a difference physical comfort makes on my work product. Other chef friends have suggested that my particular personality may in fact play the largest role. Although I sometimes miss the camaraderie of a busy kitchen full of laughter, but also of yelling, I do enjoy working by myself or with smaller groups of people. Ultimately both of these factors, environment and inclination, probably play a role in my job satisfaction. I enjoy my work setting, the pace at which I work, and the food and ideas that I continue to create.

Pondering this act of creation brings me to the artistic aspect of cooking. In my opinion, cooking is singular among artistic crafts because it alone stimulates all five senses: taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing. A sweet soufflé can lightly tickle the tongue or coat it with a syrupy glaze. It can rise resplendently or fall like a lead balloon. The aroma of a fresh-baked tart calls to those far and near, while the light crunch of that first bite announces the arrival of the soft warm center. Food moves people on so many levels, recalls their fondest memories, soothes their greatest disappointments, and heals in times of sorrow. Good chefs are keenly aware of all the fine details that will make their dishes memorable: aesthetics, aromas, flavor combinations, temperatures, and timing. When the meal is over, diners can be filled with satisfaction and good memories which far outlast the food itself.

Michael Sape