There's Nothing Wrong With a Fig on a Plate

Christopher Kostow,
Executive Chef,
Meadowood,
St. Helena, California

Christopher Kostow, Executive Chef of Meadowood in the heart of Napa Valley, decided to become a chef after realizing that the philosophy degree he earned in college "didn't exactly have a practical application."

But it wasn't desperation that inspired the Chicago native to trade in his textbooks for an apron: "I started seeing in this business young people—well spoken, entrepreneurial—who were paying attention to what they were doing. I began to see that you could make a life out of it.

What Kostow's present job is like is something most chefs only dream about. Set on 250 private acres of lush vineyards and fertile fields, the Meadowood estate features a bountiful garden that Kostow says, "We have full control over. We sit down as a staff and go through our industry catalogs and decide what we want planted. We have a very, very ambitious and excited farmer who is just doing a fantastic job."

Kostow says the garden is one of the reasons he enjoys his current position. "Meadowood is very good about making sure that we're isolated and that we can farm in a more autonomous fashion. As a result, all of the bad things you associate with being part of a hotel are kind of gone and I'm able to reap the benefits of being a part of a larger structure with a bigger infrastructure... and the end result is something really amazing."

The garden serves as inspiration for a menu that Kostow notes, "We change a couple of days per week. I would say sixty percent of the dishes are in our existing style, but thirty to forty percent of them are what we call landmark dishes, dishes that are entirely fresh and we hope have never been seen before."

The menu may change, but one thing that remains steadfast is a mentality Kostow learned from Daniel Humm when he served as Humm's sous chef at Compton Place Restaurant. He explains: "He really supported me and I think he continues to. He's like me in that he thinks there's no reason to accept anything other than perfection from your staff. That's one thing. I really learned from him more so than a lot of other chefs I've worked for."

Kostow's commitment to perfection has certainly paid off for the chef, who earned his first Michelin star for a restaurant [Chez J] in Mountainview, California before he was thirty and maintains Meadowood's two stars with a formula that does not cater to the accolades: "We're trying to create a very singular experience. We want to be able to create a situation that when the guest has something here they can only experience it at this time and in this place. What we're constantly striving for is towards an original voice and I'm a very firm believer that three Michelin stars is when you've achieved that and you are what you are."

One of the ways Kostow attempts to find his restaurant's original voice is by re-evaluating the traditional fine dining equation: "I think we're very successful in creating a juxtaposition between exceptionally refined food and a very personable environment. We could very easily become a restaurant that could become pretentious. I think especially in this day and age as we move towards the democratization of food, that you can't do that and you shouldn't want to do that. You should want your guest to feel as comfortable as possible."

Making his guests feel as comfortable as possible begins for Kostow with the menu. "As a chef your starting point has to be what you want to eat. Some chefs try to guess what their guests want to eat, or guess what's going to be fashionable, or guess what's expected of them. I think at that point you're kind of cooking with one foot off the ground instead of using as your starting point the question, 'What would I want to eat?' And coupled with that, 'What do I want to share with my guests?'"

For Kostow, sharing food with his guests means not pushing it so far into the realm of experimentation to render an ingredient indistinguishable from its original form. He recently sat on a panel of East and West Coast chefs where some controversial statements were made. Kostow addresses the debate in a diplomatic fashion: "I think that the whole fig on the plate argument... I think that most of the time it probably should just be a fig on the plate. I don't think that most chefs should change the fig, and I'm not saying it's because I think they're not good chefs, I'm just saying that it doesn't prove that you know what you're doing to take something that's perfect and alter it."

Kostow's success certainly proves that the chef knows what he's doing. He also knows what he wants for his future, and how he feels about a recent phenomenon in the culinary world. "I want to continue to have freedom, creative freedom, financial freedom and freedom in how I spend my time. In this business, it can be very weird to define how success is determined."

Kostow also knows how he feels about a recent phenomenon in the culinary world: "The idea of just going to work every day and doing a good job and reaping the benefits and making people happy has become secondary to going on TV and all of those other things. Not that there's anything wrong with that, people are going to do what they're going to do, and I understand the motivation for doing what they do, but I really believe that it's going to swing the other way. He continues, 'We're chefs. We need to get over ourselves a little bit. Cook food and shut up. I think that as a society it's going to become so over-burdened and over-exposed with chefs that people are going to no longer want to go to these restaurants because they're going to think that the chef is not even there. What people really want to do is go somewhere and know that they're going to be taken care of... and I'll be in my kitchen waiting for that.'"
For the romaine crème fraîche:
- 7 ounces crème fraîche
- 8 romaine leaves

For the vinaigrette ice:
- 1 shallot, peeled and finely chopped
- 1 clove garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- 4 1/4 cups tomato water
- 1 ounce inverted sugar
- 1 tablespoon powdered glucose
- 4 sheets bronze gelatin, bloomed in water, excess water squeezed out
- 2 1/2 tablespoons sherry vinegar
- 2 teaspoons champagne vinegar
- Liquid nitrogen, as needed
- Salt to taste

For the garnish:
- Baby carrots
- Baby radishes
- Olive oil

To serve: In bowl, spoon romaine crème fraîche. Garnish with carrots and radishes and drizzle with olive oil. Sprinkle vinaigrette ice on top.

Crudité with Romaine Crème Fraîche and Vinaigrette Ice
(Serves 4)

J. Schorn
Schramsberg
Napa Valley, California 2002
Mimolette Croquette with Pickled Red Peppers and Tomato Purée
(Serves 4)

For the peppers:
- 2 red bell peppers
- 2 1/2 tablespoons simple syrup
- 1/4 cup white wine vinegar
- Salt to taste

For the croquette:
- 17 1/4 ounces mimolette, coarsely chopped
- 2 1/4 cups heavy cream
- 1/2 teaspoon Gelatin P*
- 1/4 teaspoon LT-100*
- 1 teaspoon Ultratex-3*
- 4 ounces all-purpose flour
- 1 cup beer
- 4 ounces rice flour
- 8 ounces brioche crumbs, toasted
- 1 gallon canola oil
- Maldon salt to taste

For the garnish:
- Castlevatrano olive slices**
- Escarole leaves

*available from www.le-sanctuaire.com or (415) 986-4216
**available from www.dilbruno.com (888) 322-4337

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Borage Agnolotti and Preserved Bergamot with English Cucumber Syrup
(Serves 4)

For the preserved bergamot:
6 bergamot, peeled, peelings and flesh reserved separately
Canola oil, as needed
For the pasta filling:
1 teaspoon olive oil
1/2 shallot, peeled and finely chopped
1 clove garlic, peeled and finely chopped
4 ounces blue borage leaves, stemmed
1 cup water
1 1/4 cups heavy cream
2 sheets gelatin, bloomed in water, excess water squeezed out
Salt to taste
For the pasta:
12 1/2 ounces all purpose flour, plus additional, as needed
2 egg yolks
1 tablespoon olive oil
Pinch salt
Water, as needed
2 eggs, lightly beaten
Pasta filling, from above
For the cucumber syrup:
1 pint freshly squeezed cucumber juice
1 ounce granulated sugar
Reserved borage cooking liquid, from above
Salt to taste
To serve:
Agnolotti, from above
2 ounces FAGE® yogurt*
2 ounces honeydew melon, cut into 1/4-inch cubes
8 lemon verbena leaves
Salt to taste
For the garnish:
Borage blossoms, stems and leaves intact

*available from www.fageusa.com or (518) 762-5912

Sauvignon Blanc “Hyde Vineyards”
Selene
Napa Valley, California 2009

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For the crispy rye cannoli:
2 ounces dark rye bread, frozen and thinly cut on a meat slicer
For the foie gras curing mix:
2 teaspoons granulated sugar
1 ounce pink curing salt
Pinch five-spice powder
3 1/2 ounces salt
For the foie gras roulade:
3 1/2 ounces foie gras lobe, trimmed and sliced lengthwise
into four portions
2 teaspoons curing mix, from above
For the foie gras mousse:
Curing mix, from above
10 1/2 ounces foie gras lobe, trimmed
1/2 cup heavy cream, plus additional, as needed
1/2 cup veal jus
1 gelatin sheet, bloomed in water
excess water squeezed out
1 teaspoon ice cream stabilizer
For the dark chocolate ganache:
3 1/2 ounces 72% chocolate
1/4 cup heavy cream
For the pickled apricots:
1/4 cup champagne vinegar
1/4 cup simple syrup
2 ounces dried apricots, halved
For the apricot syrup:
1 1/4 cups freshly squeezed apricot juice
1 teaspoon champagne vinegar
For the bacon vinaigrette:
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
2 ounces smoked bacon, finely chopped
1 tablespoon sherry vinegar
For the garnish:
Dandelion greens
Mizuna leaves

Sausignac
Château Richard
Sud-Ouest, France 1998

For the crispy rye cannoli: Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Using cannoli mold, wrap bread around it and bake until crispy. About 15 minutes. Set aside until cooled to room temperature. Remove molds.

For the foie gras curing mix: In bowl, place sugar, pink curing salt, five-spice powder and salt and stir to combine. [Note: Makes more than needed for recipe.]

For the foie gras roulade: Sprinkle foie gras with curing mix. On clean work surface, place plastic wrap and top with one portion foie gras. Using plastic wrap, roll into a tight, 1/4-inch cylinder. Repeat with remaining portions. In pot, heat water to 120 degrees and cook foie gras 90 seconds. Set aside in ice water bath until chilled. Remove plastic wrap.

For the foie gras mousse: In bowl, place half of curing mix and top with foie gras and remaining curing mix. Cover and set aside in refrigerator until chilled. Rinse foie gras and pass through a sieve. In saucepan, place 1/2 cup cream and veal jus and bring to a simmer. Add gelatin and cook until gelatin dissolves. Set aside 10 minutes. Add foie gras and stabilizer and whisk until emulsified. In food processor fitted with a metal blade, place mixture and pureé until smooth. Weigh mixture and add the same amount of cream. Return to food processor and blend until smooth. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve. Transfer to a piping bag fitted with a smooth tip and set aside in refrigerator until chilled.

For the dark chocolate ganache: In bowl, set over pot of simmering water, place two-thirds chocolate and heat to 113 degrees. Remove from heat, add remaining chocolate and whisk until cooled to 90 degrees. In saucepan, heat cream to 149 degrees. Add melted chocolate and whisk until emulsified. In acetate-lined 9-x-9-inch container, pour cream mixture into a 1/4-inch layer. Cover and set aside in refrigerator until chilled and set. Slice into 1/4-inch cubes. [Note: Makes more than needed for recipe.]

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Foie Gras and Crispy Rye Cannoli
with Bacon Vinaigrette
(Serves 4)
Smoked Mackerel with Escabèche Sauce and Vegetable Ash
(Serves 8)

For the escabèche sauce:
5 ¼ ounces granulated sugar
3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped
½ habanero pepper, finely chopped
10 sprigs thyme
1 tablespoon allspice, crushed
1 teaspoon caraway seeds
1 teaspoon fennel seeds
1 teaspoon mustard seeds
1 teaspoon white peppercorns
3 ½ cups white wine vinegar
½ cup water
Salt to taste

For the vegetable ash:
2 ounces fennel tops
2 ounces celery leaves
4 sprigs parsley
4 sprigs tarragon
10 chives

*available from www.ingredientexperts.com
or (856) 778-6623

For the ice cream:
1 ¼ cups whole milk
¼ cup glucose
3 ounces granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon guar gum
½ teaspoon carrageenan
½ teaspoon monoglyceride*
9 ounces crème fraîche
Freshly squeezed lemon juice and salt to taste

For the potato cylinder:
4 Idaho potatoes, peeled, ends trimmed, halved lengthwise

For the mackerel:
8 6-ounce mackerel fillets
Salt to taste

To serve:
Activa TM8, as needed
Sourdough, frozen and thinly sliced on meat slicer
Olive oil, as needed

For the garnish:
Sourdough crumbs, toasted
Pearl onions, quartered and blanched
Baby carrots, thinly sliced and blanched
Carrot greens
Radishes, thinly sliced and blanched
2-inch celery batons, blanched
Celery leaves

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Suckling Pig with Sorghum-Seaweed Syrup and Salted Cherry Purée
(Serves 20)

For the salted cherries:
1 tablespoon shiso salt
1 tablespoon kosher salt
60 cherries, pitted

For the pork leg confit:
2 pounds salt
2 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped
15 bay leaves
Legs of 1 20-pound suckling pig
Duck fat, melted, as needed

For the smoked pork belly:
1/2 teaspoon pink curing salt
3/4 ounces kosher salt
2 ounces light brown sugar
Belly of 1 20-pound suckling pig
Applewood chips, as needed

For the pork neck:
Neck of 1 20-pound suckling pig, boned
1/2 teaspoon ActiVo® RM
6 cloves garlic, peeled
8 ounces granulated sugar
1/2 cup honey
1/2 cup dark soy sauce
1 tablespoon five-spice

For the pork loin:
10 slices bacon
1 1/2 tablespoons ActiVo® RM
Loins of 1 20-pound suckling pig

For the pork racks:
Racks of 1 20-pound suckling pig
1 cup reserved garlic mixture, from above

For the pork shoulder sausage:
Shoulder meat of 1 20-pound suckling pig, trimming, coarsely chopped and set aside in freezer until chilled
7 ounces pork fat back, coarsely chopped and set aside in freezer until chilled
1 teaspoon freshly ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg
Pork casing, as needed
Salt to taste

For the sorghum-seaweed syrup:
1 1/4 cups sorghum syrup
3 sheets nori
1/2 cup dark soy sauce
1 tablespoon light soy sauce

For the cherry purée:
3 1/2 ounces sour cherries
1 1/2 tablespoon simple syrup
1/4 cup water
Salt to taste

To serve:
Canola oil, as needed
For the garnish:
Mendocino seaweed, sautéed in olive oil and seasoned with salt
Bronze fennel fronds
Green fennel fronds
Baby fennel bulbs, roasted
*available from www.wscp cocaine.com or (866) 249-0400
**available from www.seaweed.net or (707) 805-2996

For the salted cherries: In non-reactive container, combine salts, add cherries and gently mix to completely submerge cherries in salts. Cover and set aside in refrigerator 36 hours. Gently rinse cherries and discard salt.

For the pork leg confit: In bowl, combine salt, garlic and bay leaves. In large, non-reactive container, place half of salt mixture, top with legs and cover with remaining salt mixture. Cover and set aside in refrigerator eight hours. Rinse legs and discard salt mixture. In pot, place legs and enough duck fat to cover them. Heat fat to 180 degrees and cook until meat is tender and falling from bone, about six hours. Skim fat solids from surface and discard. Remove legs and drain on paper towels. Strain cooking liquid through a fine-mesh sieve and reserve. Remove skin from legs and reserve. Pick meat from bones and shred. Discard bones. In bowl, combine shredded meat and enough reserved cooking liquid to just moisten meat. On half-sheet tray, lay skin in a single layer and top with shredded meat mixture. Press to form solid layer, cover and set aside in refrigerator 12 hours.

For the smoked pork belly: In bowl, combine salts and sugar. Rub belly with mixture and transfer to a non-reactive container. Cover and set aside in refrigerator six hours. Rinse belly. In plastic bag, place belly and seal at highest setting in commercial vacuum sealing machine. In pot, heat water to 145 degrees and cook belly 24 hours, pressing occasionally during process to retain shape. Remove from bag and transfer to tray of applewood-limed cold smoker. Smoke 45 minutes.

For the pork neck: Dust neck with Activo® RM and fold in half. Transfer to container, cover surface with plastic wrap and top with a five pound weight. Set aside in refrigerator six hours. In blender, place garlic, sugar, honey, soy sauce and vinegar until smooth. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve. In plastic bag, place neck and 8-ounces garlic mixture and seal at highest setting in commercial vacuum sealing machine. Reserve remaining garlic mixture for pork rack, below. In pot, heat water to 145 degrees and cook neck mixture 15 hours, pressing occasionally during process to retain its shape. Set aside in ice water bath until chilled. Remove from bag. Reserve neck and discard remaining ingredients.

For the pork loin: On clean work surface, place plastic wrap and arrange five bacon slices in single overlapping layer. Sprinkle with Activo® RM and top one end with one loin. Using plastic wrap, roll into a tight cylinder and secure ends tightly. Repeat process with remaining bacon and loin. Set aside in refrigerator four hours. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Remove plastic wrap and transfer to a roasting pan. Roast until cooked through, about one hour.

For the pork racks: Rub racks with reserved garlic mixture, from above. Transfer to a container, cover and set aside in refrigerator two hours. Preheat oven to 400 degrees and roast racks until cooked through, about 45 minutes.

For the pork shoulder sausage: In bowl, combine shoulder meat, fat back, cinnamon and nutmeg and stir to combine. Season with salt. Pass mixture through meat grinder fitted first with medium die then with smallest die. Fill pork casing with mixture and twist ends to form sausage. Place sausage in plastic bag and seal at highest setting in commercial vacuum sealing machine. In pot, heat water to 147 degrees and cook sausage 22 minutes. Remove from bag and reserve.

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For the crispy tomato syrup: Preheat dehydrator to 194 degrees. In saucepan, place sugar, agar agar, citric acid, tomato water and water and heat to 217 degrees. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve. Pour into half-sheet pan and set aside in refrigerator until set. Place in dehydrator 24 hours. Cool to room temperature and break into bite-size pieces.

For the ice cream: In saucepan, place milk and cream and heat to 122 degrees, while whisking constantly. Add all remaining ingredients except oil and using hand-held immersion blender, purée until smooth. Weigh mixture and transfer to a blender. For every 53 ounces, add one cup oil and purée until smooth. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve and set aside in ice water bath until chilled. Set aside in freezer until solid. Freeze in ice cream machine according to manufacturer’s instructions.

For the chocolate almond fudge: In saucepan, place milk, glucose, trimoline and almonds and bring to a simmer. Remove from heat, cover and set aside at room temperature 20 minutes. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve. In bowl, place chocolate and pour milk mixture on top. Whisk until emulsified. Fold in whipped cream and spoon into Fleximold® of desired shape. Set aside in refrigerator until chilled and set.

For the black olive purée: In saucepan, place brine and agar agar and bring to a simmer. Transfer to a blender, add olives and purée until smooth. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve and set aside in refrigerator until chilled and set. Blend one more time and set aside in refrigerator until chilled.

For the olive oil glaze: In saucepan, place all ingredients and heat to 122 degrees, whisking constantly. Set aside in refrigerator until chilled. For the brioche chips: Brush brioche slices with cocoa butter and sprinkle with sugar. In sauté pan, toast brioche until golden brown on both sides. To serve: Plate as shown. Garnish with almond powder, borage and green almonds.

Chocolate Almond Fudge with Olive Oil Glaze and Black Olive Purée
(Serves 8)

For the crispy tomato syrup:
- 1 1/2 ounces granulated sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon agar agar
- Pinch citric acid
- 1 1/4 cups tomato water
- 1/2 cup water

For the ice cream:
- 2 1/2 cups whole milk
- 1/4 cup heavy cream
- 4 1/2 ounces granulated sugar
- 1 1/4 ounces whole milk powder
- 6 ounces dextrose
- 1/2 tablespoon ice cream stabilizer
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- Olive oil, as needed

For the chocolate almond fudge:
- 1/4 cup whole milk
- 3 tablespoons glucose
- 1/4 teaspoons trimoline
- 2 1/2 ounces Marcona almonds, blanched and toasted
- 3 ounces 64% chocolate
- 1/2 ounce 40% chocolate
- 1/4 cup heavy whipping cream, whipped to soft peaks

For the black olive purée:
- 1/4 cup black olive brine
- 1/4 teaspoon agar agar
- 8 1/2 ounces pitted Greek olives

For the olive oil glaze:
- 2 1/2 ounces Mycroiol®
- 6 ounces 55% chocolate
- 1/4 tablespoon olive oil

For the brioche chips:
- 2 ounces brioche, frozen, sliced thinly on meat slicer
- Cocoa butter, melted, as needed

For the garnish:
- Almond powder
- White borage
- Green almonds

*available from www.postiche.com or (561) 999-9483

[Image of food items]
Caraway Cake and Yeast Ice Cream with White Chocolate Cream
(Serves 6)

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