

San Francisco Chronicle

RISING STAR CHEF: CHRISTOPHER KOSTOW

March 5, 2008



Chronicle / Craig Lee

A chef on the move - that's the best way to describe Christopher Kostow, who has packed a lot of experience into a short career. He's been at Meadowood only about a month, but already he's settled in, going about his work with a quiet confidence.

"I've learned quite a bit over the years, and for me to turn from being a sponge to being able to create is magical," he says.

Kostow started cooking at age 14, working in the kitchens at the Ravinia Festival near his hometown of Chicago. He continued working in kitchens throughout high school, but then attended Hamilton College in New York, where he earned a degree in philosophy.

While he enjoyed the intellectual pursuit, Kostow was quick to shelve his books and again take up the toque in San Diego. In 2001, he went off to cook in France; when he returned he headed to San Francisco and hooked up with Daniel Patterson at Elisabeth Daniel. From there, he signed on with Daniel Humm at Campton Place, preceding that with another extended trip to the South of France.

Humm, who's now at Eleven Madison Park in New York, became one of his mentors, changing the way he looks at food and cooking. Kostow's first job on his own was at Chez TJ in Mountain View, where he surprised just about everybody - except those in the South Bay who had tasted his food - when he earned two Michelin stars, thrusting that veteran restaurant and himself into the spotlight. It was little wonder that Kostow was picked to succeed Joseph Humphrey, when Humphrey left to go to Cavallo Point in Sausalito.

Kostow is now in his honeymoon period, having implemented his new menu only about two weeks ago. "It's so dynamic here. It's a group of people like me who are fired up and just want to do the best work they can," he says.



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At Meadowood, he has a bigger staff and is able to spend time thinking about dishes and presenting them. One dish he's just put on the menu is a rabbit with spring vegetables. He takes the loin of the rabbit and makes a mousse with fava leaves. He then slathers the mixture on romaine, rolls up the packets and cooks them sous vide. He braises the leg, removes the meat, shreds, seasons and re-

forms it back on the bone, crusts it in dried favas and parsley and fries it. The third element, the rack, is speared with pencil-thin asparagus, and all the components are arranged on a plate with green garlic puree, ham hock broth and almond froth.

He's quick to admit that he pushes the envelope, and he's had some failures along the way. He remembers one dish at Chez TJ where he created eight "overly thematic" sorbets. Lined up on the same plate were carrot cake, Fig Newton and rum and Coke sorbets. It lasted about three days on the menu.

Maybe it's his philosophy background - he's now reading Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion" - but he likes to deconstruct a dish intellectually and discuss it with others on the staff.

"I think I have an eye as to whether it's overly manipulated," he says. "You have to have the flexibility of mind and the firmness of logic to be able to reinterpret flavors."

-Michael Bauer, Chronicle Executive Food and Wine Editor

Citrus-Cured Sardines with Escabeche Vegetables

Serves 6

From Christopher Kostow of Meadowood in Napa. Prepare the sardines and escabeche a day before serving.

The escabeche:

- 1 1/2 cups white wine vinegar
- 1/4 cup + 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 5 sprigs thyme
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground allspice
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon coriander seed
- 1/2 teaspoon fennel seed

1/2 teaspoon yellow mustard seed
1/2 teaspoon whole white peppercorns
1/2 habanero
The sardines:
6 large sardines
3 1/2 cups kosher salt
1 lime
1 medium-size navel orange
1 lemon
2 1/2 cups extra virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons cayenne pepper

The vegetables:

1 young carrot, peeled
1 radish, cleaned
1 spring onion, peeled and cleaned
1 celery stalk, leaves and grit removed
1 baby fennel, cleaned and cored
1 pound baby spinach or other salad greens
6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1/2 teaspoon sea salt



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Instructions: In a medium-size sauce pot, combine all the escabeche ingredients with 1/4 cup water and bring to a boil. Remove from heat. Once cooled, transfer to a non-reactive container and let sit at room temperature for at least 7 hours or overnight.

Next, butterfly the sardines, leaving the heads intact. Rinse the fish well. In a shallow glass or ceramic baking dish, sprinkle a bit of the kosher salt over the bottom until it's covered. Lay the sardines in the dish, then pour the remaining salt over them, so that they are completely covered. Allow to sit for 15 minutes. Rinse the sardines well and pat them dry.

While the sardines are curing, prepare the marinade: Cut the peels off the lime, navel orange and lemon, leaving as little of the pith attached as possible. Add the whole fruit to a food processor along with 1/4 cup of the olive oil, and quickly pulse to roughly chop the fruit. Add the remaining olive oil as well as the cayenne, and pulse a few times to combine. Lay the sardines out in a non-reactive casserole or baking dish. Pour the citrus marinade over the fish, cover, and refrigerate at least 7 hours or overnight.

When ready to serve, shave the carrot, radish, onion, celery and fennel on a mandolin into paper-thin slices. Add the vegetables to the escabeche liquid and set aside.

In a large bowl, toss the spinach with 3 tablespoons of the extra virgin olive oil and the sea salt. Divide among six plates, or mound on a large platter.

In a large nonstick skillet, heat remaining 3 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil over medium-high heat until just barely smoking. Gently remove the sardines from the citrus marinade, allowing any excess marinade to drain off them. Add the butterflied sardines to the skillet, skin-side down. Allow to cook until the flesh turns slightly opaque. Remove from the heat, and gently lay the sardines atop the spinach. Spoon marinated vegetables on top of the sardines. Serve immediately.