

Food for Thought

Chef Dan Scherotter '91 Gets Philosophical
in the Kitchen ~ MELISSA V. PINARD



Chef Dan Scherotter '91 prepares all his dishes thoughtfully, taking into consideration market trends, Italian traditions, and ingredients that are fresh, in season and locally grown near San Francisco. There, the climate is perfect for growing and the populace takes its eating seriously, which makes for a foodie's and a chef's paradise. Like many major cities though, San Francisco also has its share of governmental bureaucracy, and Scherotter, who has many responsibilities as a restaurant owner, has also found himself taking on another role — small business advocate.

A native of California, Scherotter was born in Palm Springs, but headed East to attend Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Mass., for his high school education. "I liked the East Coast, but it was way too cold up there," he says. So he looked South when choosing a college — to a place steeped in the history he was so interested in studying. He began his days at William and Mary as an American studies major, eventually switching to philosophy.

While at the College, he washed dishes at the King's Arms Tavern to make money, but with no intention of getting into the restaurant business. During a summer abroad in Italy, he wound up the only young man in a cooking class, an event that in retrospect changed his life forever. His first real experience in cooking came after that, when he was social chairman of his fraternity, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, where he regularly tried new recipes on the hungry students, cooking for the supper clubs at Kappa Alpha Theta and the Tri-Delts. "I kept that on my résumé for years," he says.

"Ten days after graduation, I moved to Italy," says Scherotter, "with dreams of becoming an expatriate writer." He started in Rome, where he earned his Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certification, but then moved to Bologna where there were fewer English speakers and he could pick up the language more easily. While there he taught English to pay the rent and cooked for free, for fun and to gain experience.

Scherotter started his formal training at La Accademia Italiana della Cucina in Bologna. But his real training came in a way one can only experience when immersed in the culture. "The ladies in the market of Bologna couldn't believe I was shopping and cooking for myself at the tender age of 22," he says.

They'd take him home and show him in detail how to cook.

He also used his English translation skills to get him in the front door in a number of that city's famed trattorie and ristoranti. "I'd tell them their English menu was terrible and I would be happy to write a new menu," he says, "but I would have to work in the kitchen to really understand the dishes, and I would do it for free."

Eventually Scherotter returned to the States and finished his formal training at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, graduating with honors. Since cooking does not pay well, and to get more experience faster, Scherotter worked two jobs cooking a lunch and dinner shift at different top restaurants. It's customary to work four seasons with a chef before moving on. He worked his way up the ranks working alongside several different types of chefs to get a well-rounded training — from classic French, to Asian Fusion and Nuevo Latino.

Three years after coming to San Francisco at the age of 27, he became a chef. In 1999 he

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ended up at Palio D'Asti, named after the famous medieval bareback horse race (Il Palio) in Asti, Italy, eventually buying out the founder in 2006.

But cooking isn't his only interest. He's used his skills as a writer and intellectual to become an activist for his industry and the small businesses of San Francisco. "I use the good Jeffersonian skills of argument and debate that I honed at the College," he says. "Far too often," he says, "well-meaning legislation does more harm than good, and I'm that guy who says so in public."

Because he is articulate and not afraid to talk to the press, the local restaurant association recruited him and now he serves as president of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association. He also serves on the Chef's Council of



Chef Dan Scherotter '91 sampling one of his culinary creations.

the Center for Culinary Development and advises the San Francisco Unified School District in their Academy of Hospitality and Tourism. He has lobbied, challenged and helped craft legislation at the city's board of supervisors on everything from health care to letter grading for restaurants.

"Currently, I am trying to stimulate the economy by getting Congress to change the business meal deduction from 50 percent to 100 percent," he says.

Although he dabbles in political advocacy, his focus is on preparing the cuisine and running the restaurant, which features Italian food from different regions depending on the season. His menu moves along the same map — the sunny South in the summer; the rich North in the fall and winter; and the green center

in springtime. "In the kitchen and in business," he says, "it's these limits that make you creative."

The other important part of the meal, "the fifth food group," as he says, is wine. "As a chef I am looking for wines that are food friendly, well-structured, not too fruity and relatively low in alcohol." It just so happens that his wife, Nina, who is pregnant with a boy, their first, due in September, runs a Burgundy importer/wholesaler.

With all the challenges of owning a restaurant, Scherotter found a way to combine the intellectual agility that he gained from his William and Mary education with his training as a professional chef. "It's not at all like what you see on television," he says, "but it's an exciting career."