

## ***A True Iron Chef***

*John Griffin, CEC, CEPC*

***There are many names bandied about on TV for the best Chefs. Top Chef, Celebrity Chef, Culinary Star, Iron Chef, the Real Master Chef, the list goes on. The shows are about contests with people running around the kitchen making very pretty plates, tempers flaring and voices raised. It might be entertaining, but it is not very realistic.***

A True Iron Chef, seems to me, would not just be a showman in a practice kitchen, but would be someone who can organize a kitchen and staff which produce safe, outstanding food for any amount of guests, on time, in a professional and delicious manner. A True Iron Chef is one who can handle individual plates or great numbers, as well as ensuring that the finest food from the finest ingredients is served every meal.

Williams College is lucky to have such a Chef. The culinary department at Williams College is headed by Robert Volpi, Director of Dining Services. Chef Mark Thompson is the Executive Chef and has a well-developed career in food service. For instance, he served as Senior Executive Chef at the Olympic Games in Atlanta '96. Mark has been running the kitchens at Williams for about 8 years. With a staff of about 90, they serve 25,000 meals a week when they have a full complement of students. They also put on some very high-end catering events of great size and quality. Catering Chef Jim Guiden is an integral part of this team.

The Dining Services at Williams is committed to using sustainable products while keeping a small ecological footprint on their part of the world. They buy local products in great quantities, and pay well for quality ingredients. They do not have TV show kitchens; their kitchens are clean and organized with fresh food and washed hands. The staff is courteous, hard working, and clean; no one is running in the kitchen. This is not a TV show or a culinary contest, this is the real deal every day of the year.

My wife Suzy and I were honored to be invited to help at the Williams College on the weekend of September 24<sup>th</sup>. This weekend was special, it being the convocation weekend for the new college president, Adam F. Falk. They had a lot of catering to do for very important guests so they invited some outside professional help. We were assigned tasks, as a small part of a two-day schedule of catering that would ultimately feed 5,300 guests.

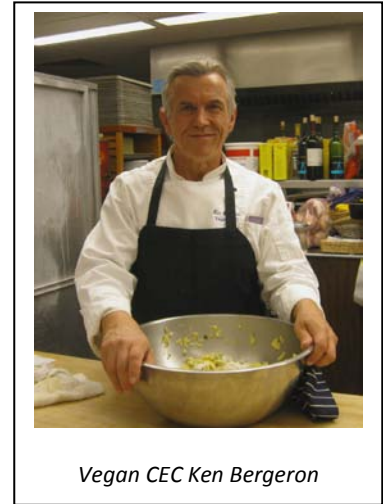


*Chef Mark Thompson*

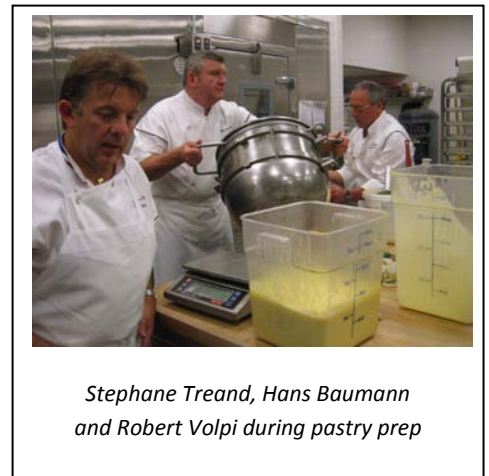


*Catering Chef James Guiden*

Ken Bergeron, nationally known as a premier Vegan Chef, was also asked to take part in this weekend's events for his expertise and as a friend of Williams College. The College has a significant number of requests for vegetarian and vegan food. Ken is a Certified Executive Chef with the American Culinary Federation and his book "Professional Vegetarian Cooking" is a staple in culinary libraries. During the weekend, Suzy and I watched Ken prepare a dish for a VIP dinner, "Tofu Medallions with Artichokes and Capers Française". This dish was an example of masterful cooking techniques by someone who understands the vegan diet, and understands all the nuances of cooking.

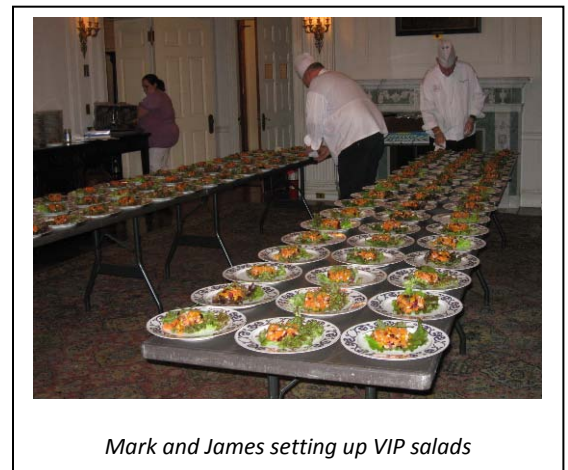


Also there to help was the crew from "Swiss Chalet Fine Foods", a national company specializing in fine pastry ingredients ([www.scff.com](http://www.scff.com).) Y. Hans Baumann, who heads the company, was preparing pastries for several parties along with Stephane Treand and Lionell Clement, Pastry Chefs. One of Stephane's creations was a beautiful sugar centerpiece. Lionell was instrumental in producing the desserts served on Friday.



Chef Louis Ferretti was also on hand. Lou was also an Olympic Chef in Atlanta, and lent his vast knowledge of the logistics and style needed to put out large numbers of great meals. During the Olympics, there were some 18,000 meals prepared for each meal period during the three week period. He is also the author of "Entertaining with Chef Louis Ferretti".

The dinners that Suzy and I helped prep were only a small part of the weekend's events. Back at the main kitchen, staff were setting up a reception for 800 guests, a sit down dinner for 1700 students, a campus-wide cook out for 2400, plus a full brunch on Sunday, and regular college foodservice restarting Monday morning. This was in addition to the two VIP dinners for 200 and 300 people respectively. This is the type of operation that a true Iron Chef is in charge of. Mark works with a well trained staff in kitchen facilities that are exemplary with state of the art equipment. Every kitchen has culinary trained Chefs and a majority of the staff is certified in food safety.

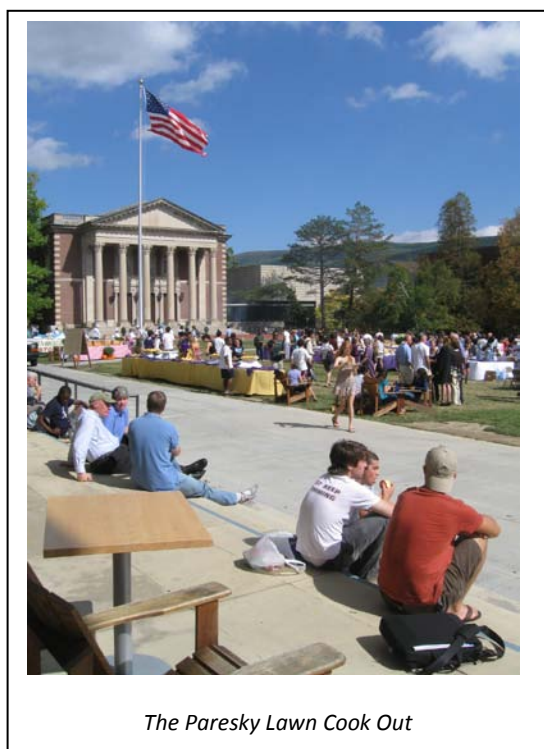


For our small part, Suzy and I helped prep the two President's dinners and plate one dinner on Friday. I started by trimming and cutting 40 beef tenderloins, all of highest quality and sourced locally through the Northeast Family Farms Coop. Suzy spent most of her time trimming vegetables to spec, all bought from local farms including notably Peace Valley Farm and Ioka Valley Farm in the Williamstown area.

The dinner was held at Mt. Hope, a beautiful mansion in the midst of the Berkshires with views of a dozen peaks all around. There were passed hot and cold hors d'oeuvres, a plated salad for all and then the main course. This was a Statler chicken breast with pecan stuffing and a roasted red onion jus lié. The dinner was plated by 10 people in two lines with every plate crisp and steaming. The only interruptions in the line were for the alternate entrees; Ken's vegan dish and a separate gluten-free dish. It took about 12 minutes to prepare the 220 plates. Then the room was cleared and cleaned in a very quick fashion and the Pastry Chefs began the dessert setup.



*Lionell Clement plating dessert*



*The Paresky Lawn Cook Out*

This was no ordinary dessert, but a complex dish encompassing all the elements of a fine dessert menu; crisp, cake, cream, fruit, and chocolate. The peach cake slices were each perfect and uniform, garnished with cherry compote, a raspberry sauce (coulis), plus a nut brittle garnish and a chocolate fan.

Every single part of this dinner was made fresh, safe, and served perfectly for taste and time. The service was quick and professional. There was no last minute theatrics, no arguments or tension, and the guests only knew that this great meal was served at the precise time.

Suzy and I would like to thank the staff and students at Williams College for the opportunity offered us. We were able to work with fine people, in a very organized, professional system that is more rare than one might think. It was fun, instructive, met great people, were introduced to some fine food, got to eat some of it, and we were able to work with a True Iron Chef.