

chefs collaborative

local. sustainable. delicious.

June Member Spotlight: Chef Rob Corliss

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When/how did you know you wanted to be a chef?

There were 3 moments actually.

The first was in 8th grade... seriously. My interest was piqued. At that age, I did not fully comprehend what being a professional chef entailed but I was quite intrigued by food, the people who prepared it and all the roadside farm stands around our home in Pennsylvania. As a teenager, I would make the entire Thanksgiving dinner for our family and grandparents (I hope they were telling a young teen the truth when they said the turkey was not dry and that they enjoyed everything) and experiment making various soups for the family during the regular weeks. I was also fortunate to have a wonderful teacher in high school, Alice Gates, who directed me towards the world of the culinary arts.

The second was at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, RI (1986-88). This is where it clicked and I was hooked. What an eye opener chef school was! The discipline and confidence instilled in me was just what was needed to further shape my fascination of the culinary arts.

The third was at the Williamsburg Inn in Williamsburg Virginia (1988). This is where I started my career and had the distinct privilege of working under someone whom I will always call Chef, best friend and mentor – Chef Hans Schadler. Chef instilled professionalism, pride in the arts, attention to the details and a sense of focused creativity. I credit him with shaping my career and providing a solid base to grow from. He is a truly amazing person.

Your favorite childhood memory of food. How about earliest?

Something that you will learn about me is that I can never pick just one favorite, as my wife will attest to. We play the game "what was your highlight" at the family dinner table where my wife, daughter and I go around the table and share our daily highlight (singular is the key word there)... I always have two highlights, which drives them nuts.

- Sipping real birch beer tapped from pony kegs at golf tournaments with my dad in Lancaster, PA.
- Dutch oven cooking – fruit cobblers made over the campfire, during scouting camp outs.
- Fresh sweet corn from the fields down the road from my parents home paulus stand (love corn on the cob and now love to soak, season and grill it)
- Salt water taffy at the Jersey shore, on family vacations... what kid doesn't get hooked on that?
- Boysenberry chewing gum I would get at the 5 and dime up the road from my grandparents home in Jersey.
- Catching trout with my granddad on family vacations in Vermont. We would gather earth worms the night before, then he would wake us at 4:00 am to start the hike to key fishing holes (he had 100 acres on top of the mountain). We would try to hook the "elders" as we called the older, wiser, bigger trout. We would bring home our bounty and nanny (my grandma) would show us how to filet them, then we would griddle them in a cast iron pan along with sliced potatoes and scrambled eggs. It was fun, it was educational, it was primal, it was delicious and it bonded us.
- My grandmother's New England style bread pudding with custard baked into it. It was delish.
- Seeing the 100's of jars of canned food (all types of veggies, soup, sauces, etc.) in the cold cellar of my grandparent's basement...my granddad kept a detailed list of the inventory, dates, usage, etc. Very impressive and tasty.
- Making old fashioned ice cream with my dad with our hand crank machine and rock salt.
- Climbing the neighborhood black mulberry tree and sucking down endless pints of berries until our stomachs burst and we were covered head to toe in purple stains. My mom did not like trying to wash out the stains... which I finally now understand having a 5 year old daughter.

What's your favorite food to work with?

The fresh food the kids at Pleasant View Elementary in Springfield Missouri grow at the school greenhouse/culinary program (we will be in year 3 of the program). These kids and teachers truly ROCK!!! Somehow, the food coming out of those gardens just tastes better than anything else. Maybe it's because you can see the sheer delight beaming from the kids faces as they are eating a family meal together – from food that they planted, nurtured, harvested and then prepared. Every Thursday, during the school year, Curtis (the program founder) and I teach 120 kids (K-5) to cultivate their imagination in the garden and kitchen. It is great fun to see 5th graders cook for 1st graders and kindergartners.

What was your inspiration for the Latin flair the Unforked menu has?

I actually see the menu as more of a FLAVOR flair. The goal was to engage consumers with craveable flavors, which would connect with them and create indelible food experience. The culinary strategy was to have something that was familiar and comforting and then give it a hip

innovative twist; nothing too outrageous but definitely something that had a unique hook. There are sooooo many amazing flavors, cultures, cuisines and techniques to explore (Latin being a very tasty one of those). The menu is geared to showcase a range and evolve as we track emerging trends. It will be fun to look at Korean BBQ, Indian, North Africa, Mediterranean, ethnic fusion and other options which will fit our culinary strategy.

Some current menu examples are:

Kansas City homage

- KC Q taco
- KC torta

Cali/West Coast

- Cali taco
- Crispy Avocado taco
- Pink Lady taco

Latin/Hispanic

- Conquistador taco
- Traffic Jam taco
- Chipz

Mexican

- BFF taco
- Fundido Sirloin taco
- Migas taco
- Agua Frescas

Southeast Asia

- Thai Me Up salad
- Citrus Crunch Chicken (was actually like a PF Chang's crispy, sweet/spicy tossed chicken)

Artisan

- Barking Pig taco (which has become a fan fav and seems like our signature taco)

What made you decide to work with local vendors?

There is a wise saying: "a chef is only as good as the ingredients they use." Point blank, it is what we all should be doing as chefs, forming partnerships within our region and wrapping our arms around quality.... right? Kinda goes at the core of our DNA as a chef. With that said though, local has no impact if you don't back that up with consistent great tasting food (the food has got to taste good or guests won't come back)! It goes beyond supporting local, or local economics or for those getting on board due to consumer demand or pressure. It is the story behind the source which captivates me and will captivate our Unforked guests.

Working with local vendors is about a personal philosophy and way of life. It starts with exploring what artisan craftsmanship exists in the surrounding area. I start with the goal of ascertaining the highest quality offerings, exploring the sourcing options and then I figure out the pricing & how it works on the menu. It is important to craft a relationship with the people growing/producing your food. One needs to be diligent, figure out the distribution and carve out the time to let these relationships develop naturally.

First – I guess one must define local or what it means for their business. Seems placing miles is a bit constrictive. Some look at miles such as a 150 mile radius, some look statewide & into surrounding states and some look at regions. Go with what feels right to your operation.

Second – I see local (those things closer to home) applying more so to produce, fruit, honey, cheese, eggs and products of that nature. This typically encapsulates smaller scale family farms.

Meat and poultry seems more appropriate to look at through a “sustainable lens” vs. a local definition. We want our animals to be raised where it makes most sense, whether that is 10 or 1,000 miles away. Look at the optimum growing areas around the country, where the animals are raised with the harmony of the land.

Third – Transparency is key for an operation like ours and for those truly crafting “local and fresh.” Sharing with your guests where the food comes from and why you purchase what you do is crucial. Truthfully tout what you do and communicate that effectively in your messaging. Big or small, let guests know the wonderful things you are doing and what is important to you. Make this part of your culture and train your staff to share the passion. Don’t get caught up on using empty sustainable buzz words... let your actions speak loudly, genuinely and clearly.

How would you describe Unforked? Innovative and healthy fast food? Faster slow food?

Definitely innovative!

We are building off the delicious success and mass appeal of Jim Sheridan’s Sheridan’s Custard units. Jim has created a loyal following via his frozen custard (made fresh EVERY HOUR by the way and he has 21 custard stores in 8 states) and now his vision has merged with artisan tacos, tortas, salads, sides, beer/wine to create Unforked. Jim took 5 months converting his Overland Park, Kansas Sheridan’s Custard into what is now Unforked.

FLAVOR first!!!! We create indelible food experiences, for our guests – every day!

A “fast-fresh” concept: exceptional flavors at an exceptional value. We hope to be 2-3 steps ahead of anything the industry has seen and provide a perpetual source of leadership in foodservice.

Your everyday place/joint: we want to drive velocity and have Unforked be an everyday experience for our guests, not a special occasion or every now and then occurrence. It is definitely about the experience.

Food is more in the style of: Modern American, emphasizing high quality, seasonal, locally sourced (when possible) food. The food is wholesome, high in flavor and nutrient dense; so you feel good about what you are eating.

Food takes cues from: regional and international street foods, your fav "joint," your fav experience when you traveled, etc.

Our food is simplistic in its nature: Nothing frou frou here. Solid execution of technique, flavors and the final build. There is a comfort base to each offering (that a guest can connect to) with a subtle and unique twist that creates the "ah-ha" moment.

You've been in the business for a long time and you have a very impressive career. Do you still learn from your fellow chefs and epicureans?

Those are kind words for you to say – thank you.

The camaraderie within our profession is infectious. The beauty is working with one's peers, meeting new people and re-connecting with old friends. With an open mind, learning comes at every turn: from kids, students, chefs, foodies, farmers, operations, magazines, travels, etc.

My advice is to absorb as much as you can and engage all your senses in learning. The key is to take in all the stimulus and information, filter that into relevant, actionable nuggets of strategic wisdom and then make it your own. Put your personal style on all you do.

Every day is a day of learning and personal/professional development. Life and work is supposed to be fun! My inner chef voice always reminds me, I am only as good as my last meal. Meaning, appreciate any accolades, but never rest on your laurels.

Treat each meal and moment like it is your very first impression to the world. Strive to exceed expectations.

I have been fortunate to work alongside amazingly talented and creative people throughout my career; all of whom have enriched each culinary program and made me better. Hopefully, I will continue to garner respect in the industry and be able to make a positive impact on people.

What do you want your legacy to the culinary world to be?

Chef Rob Corliss inspired people (especially kids) to foster a deep connection with their food, environment and health/wellness.

Why did you become a member of Chefs Collaborative?

For:

- Inspiration
- Education on sustainability, culinary arts and all things epicurean
- Mutual sharing of passion and knowledge
- To develop new friendships
- To celebrate sustainability
- To become an active member and lead by example
- To make a difference and be a catalyst for positive change

Anything you want our members and friends to know about you?

My family is my light. Am continually amazed by my glorious wife and daughter. I'm a lucky man!

Gardening is my stress reliever and provides clarity & peace of mind. Our home garden is our shangri-la.

I have a love for animals and nature.

I would love a personal teaching on whole hog butchering.

I'm a diehard Dallas Cowboys fan... a lifer (you're gonna either love or hate that).

Posted by: Mallory

<http://chefscollaborative.org/2011/06/22/june-member-spotlight-chef-rob-corriss/>