

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

by Evan Marquisee

Every visit to Celebrity Kitchens is a surprise. During my most recent visit I was surprised as soon as I walked in: the chef was wearing a flamboyant mask adorned with glitter and a feather plume. John Reda, a jazz player in a tuxedo, was dishing out silky smooth music that made me want to throw money. The fact that the evening had a Cajun and Mardi Gras theme might have explained the chef, who looked like a Liberace version of Batman, and the woman with the neon-pink mask, but not the 12-year-old boy who was sitting at my table.

What strange spell does Celebrity Kitchens cast to lure a middle-school boy such as John Boyd, a wrestler, baseball player and football enthusiast to learn to...cook? "I've been wanting to cook for a long time, so my mom bought me lessons and I really like it," explained Boyd.

But he's not the only one who likes what he's found here.

"The combination of education and entertainment inspires people to try new things. The first time I ever tried duck was here. It was stupendous," said fellow diner Amy Pollock, before launching into an inspired recollection of a ten-course Asian fusion dinner at Celebrity Kitchens that culminated with a fried dessert spring roll filled with banana, chocolate, and almonds.

There are lots of reasons to frequent this establishment; the food is only one of them. Many find themselves captivated by the spectacle and showmanship of the rotating gallery of celebrity chefs. In fact, Celebrity Kitchens has its own television show, which is broadcast to 1.97 million viewers every Thursday night at six o'clock on Channel 28 in Wilmington.

The chefs/performers spread their cooking wisdom across the audience like warm brie across a baguette. Michael Opdyke of Michael O. Foods and Wines, Inc. and Elizabeth Brodt, who has 40 years of cooking experience in a variety of regional cuisines and the good sense to specialize in desserts, operate with the continuity of tag-team wrestlers.

Opdyke explained that King's cakes, part of our upcoming dessert, are made in a circular form to symbolize the Wise Men's journey to find Jesus. Brodt moved on to the next subject: Many people often make the mistake of not washing white rice, which is covered in talcum powder. Who knew? Many members of

the audience nodded and gasped as their long-unanswered questions were dispatched. Still others were there for different reasons: Opdyke called for the wine and a woman in the audience clapped enthusiastically and let out a cheer. Opdyke turned to the rest of us and told us to keep an eye on her.

He also introduced jazz musician John Reda, who had been alternating seamlessly between clarinet and sax, Sinatra and rhythm and blues. "Like so many jazz musicians, John's here because the charges haven't been dropped in the other states," joked Opdyke, drawing laughter from the audience and a good-natured smile from Reda.

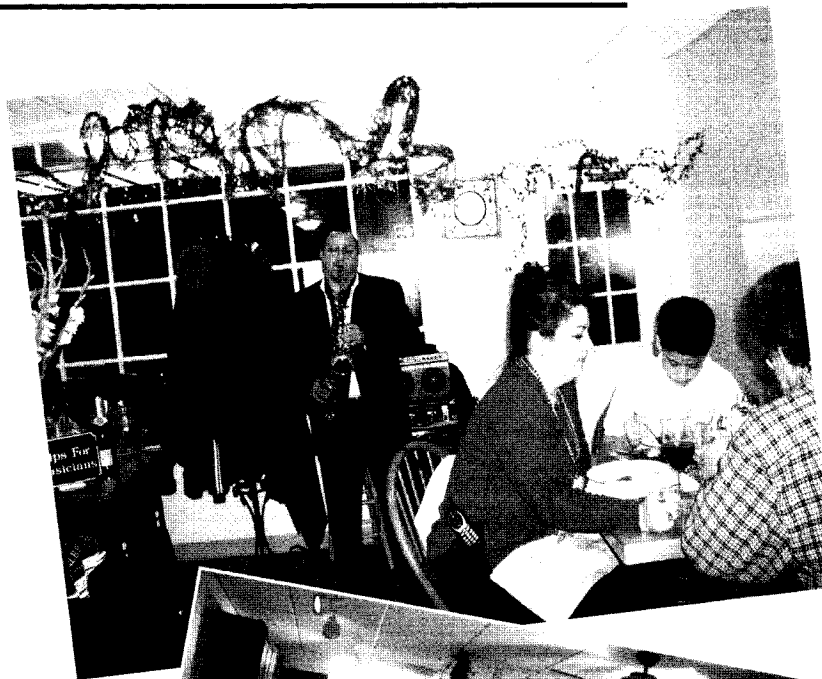
The performance continued, and if that wasn't enough to captivate diners' interest, there was an abundance of social opportunities. With the help of Bob Pollock, the mayor of Arden-Croft, his wife, Amy Pollock, and Boyd, we inhaled the shrimp appetizer before it occurred to me that I had come to write an article on the food. By the time the gumbo was served I'd regained enough of my senses to put pen to paper.

The course was served with a sweet strawberry iced tea and a fine champagne. The gumbo itself was deep and dark, with rice congregating around spicy sausage, chicken, and duck. The roux was packed with layers of flavor that brought the dish to life.

"I thought it was awesome," said Bob Pollock, when asked his opinion on the gumbo. "It had just the right amount of spice. It had thickness to it, a body that hung on the meat and rice. I love the shredded duck. That just melted in your mouth, didn't it?" he asked our nodding table mates, whose mouths were too full to reply.

I was already wondering how I was going to be able to make it through the meal. It's so good, and there's so much. One thing I would recommend to first-timers: starve yourself beforehand. You won't begin eating right away while you watch your meal being prepared, but later, as the inspired creations roll in like waves, you'll be glad your stomach still has the room.

The next entree arrived. Lobster, bacon, and Cajun spices filled the dirty rice with robust flavor; the textures sewed the dish together like a beautifully stitched quilt. Atop the bed of rice sat my favorite treat of the night, a corn muffin baked to perfection. The crisp crust gave way to a soft, slightly sweet inner alcove reminiscent of warm cookie batter. A



light file of fresh rockfish was moist and flaky. Opdyke brought around bottles of imported hot sauces for us to try.

Brodt's King's cake was served with a side of bananas Foster that was the best I've ever had. As Opdyke helped prepare the desserts he conjured a four-foot plume of flame from the bananas Foster, but what might normally be the highlight of the meal is reduced to a mere footnote.

"Mmmm," cooed Amy Pollock, as she tasted the dessert. The rest of us shared her sentiment, as we glanced at one another and tried to figure out if everyone else was having the same quasi-religious experience.

"When I know I'm cooking for other people, I cook with a deeper love for the food," said Opdyke in his summary speech. "I force myself to add that ingredient, because the most delicious foods are made with love and that's the best thing you can taste in this food."

Opdyke's dedication to giving



everything he can to his cooking reminds me of something Brodt mentioned earlier: "There's a saying in New Orleans: There's no such thing as too much." Celebrity Kitchens appears to back that sentiment wholeheartedly.