

Zebra in South Park with Chef / Owner Jim Alexander

By Maralyn Hill



Jim Alexander, Certified Executive Chef and Owner of Zebra Restaurant in the South Park area of Charlotte, North Carolina, has been a friend and favored chef for both Norm and me for a long time. When we lived in Charlotte, we frequently took guests to Zebra and I have to say its breakfast, lunch, and dinner options are all outstanding.

Jim opened Zebra in 2001 and it has continued to grow. I first met him while interviewing him for Time-Warner Cable in 2003. He exudes talent and surrounds himself with an outstanding team.

I've watched Jim cook in his kitchen, on stage at Charlotte Shouts, and numerous other times. Never have I seen him as excited about a sous chef as he is about Chris Wriggle, who lives nearby in Monroe.

Jim says, "Chris is the best cook ever to grace our kitchen. All the cooks rock at Zebra, Chris is a 'Rock Star'...super soups, creative featured fish and 3 course lunches. His flavor building profiles are really excellent. I have never isolated one person like this, but Chris is truly special. Other chefs may know what I mean...he just makes everything taste SO GOOD!" As a result, we have a recipe from Jim and Chris.

It's been a decade since I've interviewed Jim and a few of my questions are the same, but his answers are different.

MDH: Since you opened Zebra in 2001, what

have been your highlights?

JA: Every year brings a new and often unexpected highlight-- 2013 was the Siskey wedding and patio renovation with a new outdoor fireplace, water features and wrought iron walls.

MDH: Of all the special events at Zebra from wine pairing dinners to chef's table, etc. what are your personal favorites and why?

JA: 2012 was a banner wine year. We hosted Harlan Estate, Araujo Estate, Todd Anderson, and Paul Hobbs. Each wine dinner was special due to who they are individually and how important each of them is to the industry as a whole. My all time favorite, of course, is my cousin's winery, Falcor.

MDH: What is your favorite cooking utensil?

JA: My sous chefs. Let the young'uns cook!

MDH: What is your favorite station?

JA: Pastry, maybe my sweet tooth has intensified with age!

MDH: When did you expand to catering?

JA: When the line at the front door got down to five or so!

MDH: I've noticed your catering goes beyond French cooking. Are you enjoying the creative challenges?

JA: You know 20 years as a club chef prepared me to make pretty respectable pool hut food, golf turn food and creative-themed parties. It is really a blast to pull out some of the old

repertoire and see the look on the cook, service staff and even guests' faces. They think I'm just a one trick pony. Little do they know!

MDH: Has there been one that was a "wow" moment?

JA: I have an amazing sous chef. He just, as we say in the industry, puts his foot in everything. I get wowed tasting his daily features. Like today, he did a Tortilla Soup. I know, but have you ever had a good one-- silk, touch of lemon, smokey chicken pieces and a poached egg, OMG. I am going to put it on the menu. This kid does this every day. His father was a sous at Charlotte Country Club way back.

MDH: You've expanded your team over the years. What is the most important trait you look for in a potential team member?

JA: Attitude—a cliché for sure, but you cannot train attitude. Every employee must stage with us. It is just as important that we fit their needs as they fit ours. Of course, legacy is good too. I have another kid here. His dad is the current president of the Carolina's American Culinary Federation (ACF) and his brother is sous chef at Biltmore. I don't worry about his attitude.



MDH: What would you tell someone who wants to enter the culinary field?

JA: Did you know, if you study hard, work at it, really love it, you can make \$10 an hour after graduation? In addition, you can work nights, holidays, weekends, and get no benefits.

MDH: Anything else you want to cover?

JA: Okay...A guy walks into a bar (teehee) seriously. My sons, Geoff and Charles, have a beer and wine retail store in Asheville in a really cool space. They have the largest craft beer selection in Western North Carolina. Not bad and they are profitable! Check out Appalachian Vintner.

MDH: Personal favor--can I have the recipe for the almond or whatever the praline vase is? I have enjoyed that every time I've visited Zebra.

JA: I got this from Master Pastry Chef Chris Northmore 100 years ago in Atlanta. We used it as a sockle for desserts until one day a club member asked for a "Welcoming Vase" salad. That was around 1996. It became my signature salad from that point forward.

MDH: Last question, Jim, would you be kind enough to share one of your recipes?

JA: Not only will I share mine for Zebra Lobster Waldorf, I'll share Chris' for Zebra Mushroom Truffle Ragout on Creamy Polenta. I'm sure your readers will enjoy both.

MDH: Thanks Jim, it is always a pleasure.

Zebra Lobster Waldorf

Prepared by Jim Alexander
Zebra Restaurant and Fine Catering
4 Appetizer Salads

- 1 Live Lobster, about 1 ½ pounds
- Salted Water to boil Lobster
- ¼ Cup Crème Fraîche or Sour cream
- 2 Tablespoons Mayonnaise
- 2 Teaspoons Star Anise Syrup or Sambuca
- 4 Dried Apricots, diced
- 1 Stalk celery, diced
- 2 Tablespoons dried cherries
- 8-12 Pecan halves, toasted
- 1 large, just ripe, pear
- Bring water to boil, cook lobster

approximately 6 minutes
Cool lobster in ice bath, remove meat, dice meat, reserve.

Place lobster meat in medium bowl, add all ingredients except lobster claws, toasted pecans and pears. TASTE MIXTURE, adjust seasoning with fresh squeeze of lemon, pepper and salt.

To Assemble and Serve:

Using a mandolin slicer or very sharp slicing tool, cut pear into paper thin slices. Shingle approximately 6 slices for each portion. Lay slices on work surface, top with lobster salad, roll up and serve cold with toasted pecan halves and lobster claw garnish.

Chef Notes: At Zebra, we finely shred (chiffonade) some of celery and top the salad as a garnish.

Zebra Mushroom Truffle Ragout on Creamy Polenta

From Sous Chef Chris Wriggle
Serves Six

- 1 Tablespoon olive oil
- 2 Tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup diced onion
- 1 Tablespoon minced garlic
- 2 Pounds chanterelles and/or morels, cleaned and sliced
- 2 Teaspoons chopped fresh thyme leaves
- 2 Teaspoons chopped fresh oregano leaves
- 1 Cup chopped tomatoes
- 2 Tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 Cups chicken or vegetable stock
- freshly ground black pepper
- 1 Tablespoon chopped fresh basil leaves
- 1 Tablespoon chopped fresh parsley leaves
- 4 Teaspoons truffle oil
- 1 recipe cooked polenta*
- Chopped fresh herbs, for garnish (such as basil, parsley, thyme)

Place a 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Add the olive oil and butter to the pan. Once the butter melts and starts to foam, add the diced onions and sauté until translucent, about 3 to 4 minutes.

Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the mushrooms, cook on high

stirring occasionally. Some browning is good, about 10 minutes.

Add the thyme, oregano, chopped tomatoes, tomato paste and sliced truffles and stock to the pan. Bring the contents of the pan to a boil and reduce to a gentle boil. Continue to cook, stirring occasionally until the liquid has reduced and thickened, about 20 minutes. Season with the salt and pepper, and add the basil, parsley and truffle oil to the pan. Stir to incorporate and reserve.

*Soft Polenta

- 4 Cups water
- 1 Teaspoon salt
- 1 Cup polenta or yellow cornmeal
- 1 Cup
- 1-3 Tablespoons butter
- 2 shallots, minced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 Cup grated Parmesan

Bring the water to a boil with salt, shallot and garlic, whisk in polenta and return to boil. Lower heat, cover and cook on low approximately 30 minutes (read your polenta or cornmeal instructions...some are finer mill and quicker cooking...some take over an hour) When polenta is cooked, finish with whole butter (EVOO can be substituted) and cheese.

For plating:

Spoon soft polenta in center of bowl, ladle ragout in center, sprinkle with fresh herbs just before service. If you like, grate fresh truffles over top like we do at Zebra!

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