

AMERICA'S CULINARY PATRIOT: JAMES BEARD

Standing in line at the Delta check-counter, the executive chef of Rainwater restaurant in Alpharetta, Jay Swift, is worried about the dry ice in his baggage. Most important, he is concerned that his ice chest of premium fish exceeds his allotment of dry ice allowed by the airline. A suitcase full of fish may sound odd, but Executive Chef Swift is heading out of town for the opportunity to prepare a meal at The James Beard House, and shipping the ingredients was not an option. Indeed, no detail has been overlooked. Swift recalls the guidelines with a wry grin, "We used large ice chests and individually sealed each item as well as wrapped each container. It took a total of four chests and each was weighed and content-controlled by the airlines. Only one pound of dry ice per chest was permitted and the chest could be no more than 82 linear inches and no more than 100 pounds. In addition, each one had to be counted as someone's luggage, or we would pay an additional charge." Whew! And the packing is by no means the hard part; the biggest challenges await at the Beard House.

If you've ever wondered who the heck James Beard is and why chefs get so excited about cooking at his house, you're not alone. Any chef worth his kosher salt knows an invitation to cook at the Beard House is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Rife with the stress of perfect planning and execution strategies, it is also an opportunity brimming with culinary challenges and excitement.

James Beard is revered in the history of American cooking. Considered to be the father of American gastronomy, Beard believed in the possibilities of a uniquely American cuisine. His career ran the gamut as he worked as a syndicated columnist, adviser to restaurateurs and food manufacturers, and authored countless cookbooks about American food and culture. He was the first chef with a televised cooking show, *I Love to Cook*. In 1955, he established a cooking school in his Greenwich Village, New York, home, where he taught until he was 81. This unpretentious brick abode is now home to The James Beard House and The James Beard Foundation.

"The mission of the foundation is based on celebrating, preserving and promoting the culinary arts," explains Izabela Wojcik, the director of house programming for the James Beard Foundation.



*James Beard
continues
to influence
America's
culinary
pioneers.*

By Katie Kelly Bell

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BELTON CHAPPELL, HAIGWOOD STUDIOS

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Nearly every night of the week, culinary talents such as Emeril Lagasse and Charlie Trotter prepare and serve a meal to more than 70 guests. Several Atlanta chefs have also worked their magic in Beard's kitchen (see sidebar on page XX). As Wojcik emphasizes, "There really isn't another organization that is as centered around chefs as we are." Indeed, the Beard House is a chef's Carnegie Hall or Madison Square Garden, and many chefs consider preparing a meal here to be a highlight of their career. "Wolfgang Puck was one of the first chefs to prepare a meal at the house, about 15 or more years ago when he wasn't that well known. It has great meaning to be part of that legion of amazing chefs who have staged a meal here. It's a big career accomplishment," explains Wojcik.

Swift characterizes the opportunity to cook at the Beard House as one of the biggest thrills of his career. As he explains, "It felt like a sense of arrival. Rainwater Restaurant was moving from the local spotlight to the national spotlight." The innovative and charming Richard Blais, formerly of ONE.midtown kitchen recalls, "It's like cooking in a haunted house—a *good* haunted house. Probably like working in the White House where you know there's been so much history. I love finding pieces of equipment, sauce spoons and the like that you know were from some of the best chefs in the country. In fact, I always leave something behind. I know that is weird, but it's the truth."

Much of this fervor to perform at the Beard House explains why chefs and owners go to such expensive and tedious lengths to present a meal. Let's not overlook the mere \$10,000 it costs to pull off such a feat. Initially, chefs must apply for the opportunity to be invited to cook. They must present several menu options during the application process. Diligent work over menus and consideration of ingredients and their availability, as well as transportability, are essential to developing the perfect dinner. The Beard House members make the final decision as to who they will invite to prepare a meal.

Of course, chefs really do prepare this meal-on-wheels in James Beard's actual house, and not in some state-of-the-art grand kitchen theater. Hence, "When you have to execute a meal in a kitchen 20% the size your restaurant kitchen, it is just a matter of careful planning," offers Swift.

Izabela Wojcik describes the influence of the Beard House best. "For most of our guest chefs, the idea of walking in all these other chef's footsteps, who have previously prepared at the Beard House, is a powerful one."

Turnip and Potato Gratin

Executive Chef Robert Holley, Atlanta Fish Market
(prepared while at Brasserie le Coze)

Yield: 8-10 servings

- 3 cups heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons finely minced garlic
- 2 tablespoons finely minced fresh thyme
- 2 cups grated Asiago cheese, divided
- 1 1/2 pounds turnips, peeled and finely sliced
- 1 1/2 pounds Yukon gold potatoes, peeled and finely sliced

In a saucepan, combine heavy cream, garlic, thyme and 1 1/2 cups of Asiago cheese. Bring mixture to a boil. Add the turnips and potatoes and simmer on low heat for approximately 15 minutes, stirring often. Be very careful not to let mixture burn on bottom of pan.

Pour mixture into a 10 x 12 baking dish and cover with remaining 1/2 cup of Asiago cheese. Bake at 350 degrees for approximately 35 minutes until golden brown and turnips and potatoes are fork tender.





Poached Halibut in a Light Mussel Broth with Basil Pistou

Executive Chef Robert Holley, Atlanta Fish Market

Yield: 4 servings

Vegetables

1 each zucchini, yellow squash, red, yellow, and green pepper
2 Roma tomatoes
1/2 head fennel

For the Vegetables

Cut vegetables into 3/4 x 3/4-inch dice. Briefly blanch all vegetables, except tomatoes (leave raw), separately in boiling water. Shock blanched vegetables in ice water bath. Drain vegetables and tomatoes on paper towel and reserve for plating.

Mussel Broth

1 cup finely sliced shallots
5 cloves garlic, finely sliced
10 stalks fresh thyme
1/4 cup olive oil
2 cups white wine
2 cups clam juice
2 pounds mussels (cleaned and de-bearded)

For the Mussel Broth

Sweat shallots, garlic and thyme in olive oil until tender. Add white wine and clam juice and bring to a boil. Add the mussels and reduce heat to simmer. Gently cook mussels until they open. Strain mussel juice and pick mussels from shells and reserve for final plating.

Basil Purée

3/4 cup canola or olive oil
1 cup packed fresh basil (leaves only)

For the Basil Purée

Briefly blanch basil in boiling water and shock in ice water bath. Squeeze basil leaves dry and purée in oil. (You will have extra.)

Halibut

4 7-ounce halibut fillets
salt and pepper to taste

For the Halibut

Place seasoned halibut fillets in a saucepan and cover with mussel juice. Poach gently over low heat approximately eight to ten minutes. Be careful not to boil. With a slotted spoon, remove fillets from stock. Keep warm until final plating. Add vegetables and 1/2 cup of basil purée to the stock and bring to a boil.

With a slotted spoon, place equal amounts of vegetables into serving bowls, then place halibut fillets on top of vegetables and divide mussels between the plates. Ladle mussel broth over top of halibut fillets and serve.

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Area Chefs Who Have Cooked at the James Beard House and where they are today

Hugh Acheson (Five & Ten)
Joël Antunes (Joël)
Jaime Adams (Veni Vidi Vici)
Rafi and Rita Benjelloun (Imperial Fez)
Nicholas Bour (formerly at Iris)
Tom Catherall (Here to Serve Restaurants)
Shaun Doty (Shaun's)
Dean Dupuis (South City Kitchen)
Gregory Gammage (Bones)
Robert Holley (Atlanta Fish Market)
Gerry Klaskala (Aria)
Derek Morgan (D. Morgan's)
Adam Newton (Oceanaire)
Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison (Bacchanalia)
Kevin Rathbun (Rathbun's)
Guenter Seeger (Seeger's)
Jay Swift (Rainwater)
Joseph Truex (Repast)

For more information on The James Beard Foundation and The Beard House, visit www.jamesbeard.org



Pecan Crusted Lamb Loin with Skillet Roasted Greens and Candied Sweet Potato Charlotte

Executive Chef Joseph Truex, *Repast*
(prepared while at ?)

Yield: 4 entrées

Lamb

2 28-ounce Australian lamb racks,
rib bones removed and trimmed
olive oil
salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons Dijon-style mustard
1 cup Japanese bread crumbs (panko)
1 cup crushed pecans
1/4 cup finely chopped mixed herbs, such as thyme, chives,
parsley and rosemary

For the Lamb

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sear lamb on all sides in a hot pan with a bit of oil. Remove from the pan, season with salt and pepper and coat with mustard. Mix bread crumbs, pecans, and herbs with enough olive oil to bind and crust lamb racks with the mixture. Roast in the oven for 25-30 minutes until the center reaches an internal temperature of 125 degrees. Let rest approximately 20 minutes before serving.

Skillet Roasted Greens

1-2 tablespoons olive oil
2 bunches fresh greens, about 8 cups, washed and coarsely chopped. This could include a mixture of Asian greens, or mustard, collards, turnip greens, beet greens, kale—any toothy substantial green will do.
1-2 cloves garlic, chopped
1/8 cup water or vegetable broth
salt to taste

Optional flavorings: sesame oil,
ume (Japanese plum) vinegar, tamari
Optional toppings: sesame seeds, chopped almonds
or walnuts, toasted pumpkin seeds

For the Skillet Roasted Greens

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat and add greens and garlic, stirring to coat with oil. Stir occasionally until greens are barely wilted, just a few minutes. Add vegetable broth or water and stir, allowing greens to steam until barely tender. Salt to taste. Add flavorings and toppings as desired and serve.

Sweet Potatoes

1 quart water
2 cups sugar
1 lemon, sliced
1 orange, sliced
4 sprigs mint
1 cinnamon stick
2 pounds sweet potatoes
2 ounces heavy cream
2 ounces butter
salt and pepper to taste

For the Sweet Potatoes

Bring water, sugar, lemon, orange, mint and cinnamon to a boil. Add potatoes and reduce to medium heat. Cook potatoes until soft and remove pan from heat. Allow potatoes to cool completely in liquid. This can be done a day ahead, leaving potatoes in syrup overnight. If left overnight, gently reheat before proceeding. Drain potatoes. Heat cream with butter and mash potatoes together. Season with salt and pepper. Pipe purée into round cylindrical shapes and serve.



Dinners at the Beard House raise money for the foundation. Money can also be raised by hosting James Beard dinners in cities around the country. Sia Moshk, Owner of Sia's and Mitra, has held several dinners at Sia's that featured at least 15 different chefs from all over town. The restaurateur has raised more than \$20,000 for the foundation since 2003. "I wanted to support the foundation locally," explains Moshk. "James Beard is all about chefs, not restaurants, so I support them in any way I can. I love to get more people involved."

Shrimp Curry in Buttered Toast Cups

Executive Chef Joseph Truex, Repast

Yield: 24 pieces

1/4 cup mayonnaise
1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro
2 1/2 teaspoons fresh lime juice
1 teaspoon mango chutney
1/2 teaspoon Thai green curry paste*
6 ounces peeled cooked medium shrimp, coarsely chopped

Fresh cilantro leaves and toasted sliced almonds for garnish
6 slices of white bread
soft butter

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Place bread slices on work surface; brush lightly with butter and cut using a round pastry cutter into 4 2-inch rounds. Press each into miniature muffin cup, buttered side down. Bake until toast cups are golden brown, about 10 minutes. Cool completely in tins. (Can be made 3 days ahead. Remove cups from tins and store airtight at room temperature.)

Whisk mayonnaise, chopped fresh cilantro, lime juice, chutney, and curry paste in medium bowl to blend. Stir in shrimp. Season salad to taste with salt and pepper. (Salad can be prepared up to one day ahead. Cover and refrigerate.)

Place toast cups on serving platter. Spoon one teaspoon shrimp salad into each cup. Garnish with cilantro leaves and toasted sliced almonds.

*Thai green curry paste is available at Asian markets and in the Asian foods section of some supermarkets.

Demi-tasse Peanut Soup

Executive Chef Joseph Truex, Repast

Yield: 16 small appetizers (8 if served in regular coffee cups)

1 rib celery, chopped
1/2 small onion, chopped
1/2 stick butter (4 ounces)
1 1/2 tablespoons flour
1 quart chicken broth, heated
1/2 tablespoon lemon juice
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon celery salt
1 cup peanut butter
1/2 cup ground peanuts

Sauté the celery and onion in the butter in a large saucepan or in a Dutch oven for five minutes. Add the flour, stirring until blended. Stir in the hot chicken broth. Cook for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Then add peanut butter, adjust seasonings and stir. Serve in demi-tasse and garnish with chopped peanuts.

