

Four Decades of Experience Help Chef Satisfy Diners with Food that Makes Sense: A Conversation with Michael Beriau

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In an industry known for its competitiveness, Executive Chef Michael "Mickey" Beriau literally took his best friend's job, but it was hardly a stab in the back. When he took over the kitchen at the White Cliffs Country Club five and a half years ago, it was because his best friend was retiring and it was the only job for which Beriau would consider leaving his corporate chef position at Dole and Bailey. And, he doesn't regret it for a minute.

"This is any chef's dream come true," he said. "I always say we have a membership that is appreciative of their good fortune. They never hesitate to tell us how pleased they are with what we do."

And, what they do is create a dining room experience that is an extension of the 450 members' homes. Eighty percent of the membership lives on club property in Plymouth, MA, so Beriau and his staff update their menus monthly to accommodate their frequent diners.

"In any private club you know what you can change and what you can't," he said. "We don't lose sight of who our audience is."

With over 40 years experience in the industry, and most of that coming in private clubs, Beriau certainly knows how to cater to a niche audience. However, he hasn't let that stand in his way when it comes to creating innovative new cuisine.

"I've always been interested in doing eclectic American regional cuisine," he said.

With training from the Culinary Institute of America, his cuisine is heavily influenced by classical French flavors, but he doesn't let that stop him from coming up with unique new dishes.

"When your roots are with classical French cuisine, you can cook anything in the world," he said. "You have an idea of what's going to go good with what. I've always had an 'it has to make sense' philosophy when it comes to food."

Aside from his training at the CIA, Beriau credits his time at Dole and Bailey with increasing his knowledge of the product he works with in his kitchen. He worked closely with the National Cattleman's Beef Association during his eleven years as the company's Corporate Executive Chef, including his time spent on the association's "Muscle Profiling Project".

"My knowledge base went from a 7 to a 10," he said. "If you have an idea of where it begins, you have an idea of where it should end up."

These days, Beriau is helping to improve the knowledge base of his staff at the White Cliffs. With fourteen staff members during the season, he runs a tight kitchen, but encourages his staff to cross-train and further their culinary educations. Most of his staff has worked at the club for quite some time.

"I have an incredibly gifted young staff," he said. "They were part of the reason I came here."

Beriau also encourages his staff to be involved in the American Culinary Federation, which he has been an active member of since the late 1970's when he started competing in culinary events. In 1988, he traveled to Germany for the Culinary Olympics as part of the ACF New England Culinary Team, and in 2000 he was the assistant manager and coach of Team USA. He has stopped competing, but continues to judge at ACF events.

"The feedback we give them is the most important part of the competition," he said. "[When I was competing] there wasn't anyone there to explain how to get to the next level."

Due to his background in competitions, Beriau is extremely focused on plate presentation for the country club in both the restaurant and banquets. However, he doesn't sacrifice taste just to have an over the top presentation.

"We make sure it tastes really incredibly delicious first and then we figure out how to present it," he said. "If you can create healthy cuisine, with an Olympic presentation and have a fair price, then you will be a winner."

Although he strives to create the best presentations, he doesn't want his guests to be paying for it, so he uses every piece of each item that comes into his kitchen, in order to stretch his food costs as far as he can.

"Our philosophy is you need to treat the byproduct with the same integrity that you treat the main event," he said. "If it's edible, we're using it."

Looking towards the future, Beriau thinks that infusion cuisine and regional American cuisine are trends that are here to stay, but he thinks they will become even more refined. For him, the key demographic to watch is the baby boomer generation. At the country club, he will be focused on educating himself and his staff about food allergies.

"We're trying to become experts in the allergy field so people with allergies will have the same 'wow' effect as the person with no allergies," he said.

With his focus on continuing his education and that of his staff, as well as serving his members wonderful culinary concoctions, it's easy to see why Beriau was awarded the 2007 ACF National Chef Professionalism Award. After spending a lifetime getting to this position in the culinary world, Beriau's focus is on elevating those around him.

"I want to leave behind a memory that is based on quality, integrity and never settling for mediocrity," he said. "The whole point of my life now is to give back – not just to the members, but to the staff."

