

The Culinary Roots of Chef Lee Richardson

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"What would you like me to prepare for your birthday dinner?" "Where would you like to go to dinner for your birthday?" Fairly typical questions for anyone born and raised in New Orleans, those two innocent but contrasting questions from his grandmothers indelibly framed Chef Lee Richardson's perspective on food. Richardson started out in a traditional apprenticeship as a prep cook in Emeril Lagasse's French Quarter restaurant, NOLA. With so many culinarians waiting in line at Emeril's restaurants, Richardson accepted an invitation to join Chef Kevin Graham (the Savoy, The Royal Orleans, the Sagamore, and the Windsor Court Hotel), in an avant garde restaurant bearing his name, Graham's. Ironically, it was during his tenure with Graham that Richardson had his first brush with another budding chef who would be his most important professional influence, John Besh.

Before their paths crossed again, however, Richardson had the opportunity to round out his veritable "Who's Who" of New Orleans chefs with a stint at Anne Kearney's award-winning Peristyle and another partnership with Graham before a multi-year sojourn to North Carolina. Ten years later he would finally reunite with John Besh, ultimately becoming Chef d'Cuisine at Besh's celebrated Restaurant August. It was to be Richardson's his last stop before Hurricane Katrina occasioned his apotheosis at The Capital Hotel in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Recently Chef Richardson took some time out to tell us all about his culinary past and what's on his party menu.

Q: Where are your culinary roots planted?

A: Louisiana. I grew up in New Orleans. Wrapped around the influences of gulf seafood and the general culture of Creole and threads of Cajun tradition, I was blessed to have exposure to not only some of the very best home cooking that can be had but also to the areas' finest restaurants. Combined with early exposure to hunting and fishing I became a very adventurous eater early in life. All celebrations in all cultures are centered upon food and around a table, but for me there were some unique circumstances to my own experiences that have been powerful contributors to my outlook. On one side of my family my grandfather was a naval air commander – a fighter pilot. My grandmother, who was raised on a kitchen countertop in a French speaking household in New Orleans by an African American housekeeper, raised five children virtually on her own as they moved around the country from one naval base to the next. This was a tight community and a time where family values were a world away from where we are today. When the pilots returned home, the community gathered. Grills were fired up and the reunion of family was motivated by the separation and the uncertainty of war. Living was about giving, loving and appreciating the precious bounty, companionship and family. This set the stage for our extended family gatherings around the table during my childhood.

In balance to this, my mother, also raised in New Orleans, was a debutante and surrounded by a family of successful investors and philanthropists. We celebrated all of the same things on this side of the family that we did with the other, only we did it in New Orleans' finest restaurants.

So, back to the question, my foundation begins with Creole, which by my definition, is predominated by French technique and approach to cuisine. It is a little more unique for a couple of primary reasons. The array of available ingredients is a little different and there is the mixing of other cultures. Most recognized are Spanish and Italian, though I think African is the most significant contributor to the unique cuisine of New Orleans. The thing that is most obvious but rarely articulated is that it is all peasant food. It's not fancy; though it is difficult to replicate by the unknowing. This cuisine developed into what it became because it was prepared emotionally, whether to soothe the soul of the cook or the cooked for. This is quite literally the heart of Louisiana food and where my foundation begins.

Q: What is your earliest kitchen memory?

A: Usually on this question I tell a story about cracking eggs or spilling instant oatmeal packet about the kitchen floor when I was two. But, obviously this is my parent's memory not mine. My first real endeavor into the kitchen involved frying deer hearts and roasting mallards. It was a convergence of foundation. I'd say I was ten or twelve. Somehow I got turned on to venison hearts while hunting with my grandfather in Mississippi. Generally they were discarded with the rest of the offal. So whenever someone bagged a deer and everyone ventured down to the skinning shed to take a look at the trophy, I would reach in and cut the heart out and take it home. I never had much opportunity to shoot ducks, which made it a lot more exciting when they were given to me. I would take all this stuff home and cook it up with a neighborhood friend. We deep fried it, experimented with butter, and got our hands on a recipe for Cumberland sauce in one of my mom's cookbooks. That was probably the really beginning of moving beyond eating to cooking.

Q: When you give a party, what's on the menu?

A: That's funny! I've worked 70 hours a week for the last ten years. Even still, the last party I threw was probably in college. I served gumbo, red beans and rice, and jambalaya back then, but that's another story.

My wife and I have our favorite people over for dinner when the moon's blue. I go for the food I want to eat and keep it pretty simple: most of the time roast chicken with a soulfully layered vegetable combo like ratatouille, succotash, macque choux, or root vegetables that have been roasted in the juices coming off the chicken. I put together a two or three bite sweet something and a seasonal salad and fresh vinaigrette. But the market drives all of my choices. I usually do a lap through the grocery or market first, taking note of the produce availability and letting the freshest looking meat, fish, or fowl drive the direction of my accoutrements. When I entertain, I cook for me and that is what I share.

Q: What ingredients do you always have on hand?

A: Salt and pepper! Unsalted butter, good vinegar, anything but balsamic, olive oil, onions, garlic and fresh goat's cheese.

Q: What is your most memorable meal?

A: I spent a weekend once at this beautiful estate in Cuernavaca Mexico. My host, a dual citizenship Swiss/Mexican served traditional fondue with kirschwasser on the patio just after sundown. The property was a little tropical and immaculately landscaped. The moment was sublime. The following morning we were treated to fresh juices, fruit and huevos rancheros prepared at the hand of true native artisans. It was all just the perfect things at their perfect peak at the perfect time in the perfect place.

Q: Any cooking secrets you'd like to share?

A: I have a saying I'd like to share. "If you ain't cookin' with a wooden spoon, you ain't cookin." I see a lot of cooks scraping away at pans with metal spoons. There are a couple of things going on here. One: the metal spoon scrapes up the pan and gets tiny metal particles in the food, and two: the metal spoon is much less effective at "digging up" all the concentrated flavors we call fond, leaving the best parts to be lost. The wood spoon evidences care in both the equipment and the resulting flavor experience. Cooking without care is not cooking its work.

Q: What are your favorite foods?

A: Nothing compares to a well roasted chicken in its natural juices or ripe tomatoes off the vine with a little sea salt, olive oil and a splash of vinegar. The best is drinking the juices that are left in the dish. I also never take a pass on sweetbreads.

Q: And what is the one thing you will not eat?

A: Calf's liver comes readily to mind. I also draw a line at neurological tissue.

Q: Who influenced your decision to become a professional chef?

A: My grandmother. It was the love she had for taking care of her family and the way that was expressed in her food that set me up. Once I actually got around to thinking about it, I spent a long day getting an inside view of Emeril's. They let me plate the amuse course as orders came in. I had so much fun. The energy was amazing. I can remember Tom Wolfe and Anne Kearney working the line that night. They took me out with the rest of the gang for drinks after service. I was really swept away by the camaraderie. That was the moment from which there was no turning back.

Q: If you weren't a chef, what might you be?

A: A psycho-profiler for the CIA - I'm intensely analytical.

Q: When you're not cooking what are your favorite pastimes?

A: You probably don't mean eating and drinking, huh? Deer hunting and late night blues. Getting in the woods and letting loose a little inhibition are both a little like medication when I get caught up in the grind.

Q: So what is your philosophy in the kitchen?

A: I have one major driver: my cooking is a very personal and intimate communication between myself and the recipient of my food. With that as an understood foundation, I focus on continual and incremental growth and improvement as opposed to say, perfection and only perfection at every step of the way. I believe in distributed autonomy as a means of engaging my staff in the growth of something that is exponentially bigger than I could ever be as a dictator of all things.

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