

# A Chef's Journey

For an acclaimed restaurateur, finding success meant returning to Chicago

I'VE SPENT MOST of my adult life outside of the Midwest, where I was born and raised, but—in one of those unexpected twists at which life excels—my path ultimately led me back to Chicago, where I now work as the chef at a restaurant called North Pond. In the eight years since I've overseen the kitchen and menu there, the restaurant has done well, garnering excellent reviews and being credited in the press as a key player in Chicago's much publicized culinary renaissance. I've seen myself referred to in articles as an inventor, innovator, and artist. While I can't say that this kind of praise doesn't feel good—and while I certainly strive to be those things and more—the native Midwesterner in me always recoils a bit at such accolades. § Growing up in the suburbs

of Chicago, I was inculcated with the traditional mores that people tend to associate with this part of the country: a strong work ethic, an appreciation for family and education, a sense of thrift and pragmatism, and—something that turned out to be important to my cooking—a love for simplicity over superficiality. The food I make at North Pond has been called “seasonal American” and “modern French”, neither of which is off the mark, but really the way I cook is, more than anything else, a direct expression of where I come from. It is also the product of a decades-long journey that began and ended here, in Chicago.

A BEARS FAN and a diligent student, I was more or less typical of the suburban kids I grew up with—except for the fact that I seldom ate pizza and hot dogs and, from an early age, liked to plan my own multi-course birthday dinners, from potato-stuffed veal breast to braised lamb shanks. After high school, my parents gave me the ominous ultimatum faced by so many American young adults: go to college or go to hell. I attended the University of Pennsylvania and spent a year studying at the London School of Economics, making forays across the Channel into France, where I was amazed by the flavors I met with in dishes like rabbit terrine en croûte and duck with a red wine reduction. After graduation, I was afflicted with conventional postcollege directionlessness, accompanied by an overwhelming desire to be anything but conventional. Cooking for a living seemed an apt career choice.

At age 29, after a string of kitchen jobs on the East Coast, I took my first trip outside the developed world, spending five eye-opening, palate-expanding weeks in rural Haiti. To say the experience was unlike anything I'd known



From left, Bruce Sherman in the kitchen of Chicago's North Pond; the restaurant's dining room. Facing page, soft-boiled egg with bacon-infused sweet potatoes and parsley coulis—a popular dish at North Pond.



## RECIPE

**Soft-Boiled Eggs with  
Bacon-Infused Sweet Potatoes and Parsley Coulis**

SERVES 4

In this dish (shown on previous page), four of Bruce Sherman's favorite ingredients—eggs, sweet potatoes, bacon, and parsley—are paired in an unexpected way. The soft-boiled egg is an elegant counterpoint to the parsley coulis and sweet potatoes; a dainty strip of bacon placed on top of the dish provides visual whimsy and a smoky taste. "There's a certain voluptuousness to the egg yolk that you can't find elsewhere in nature," says Sherman.

- 1½ cups coarse sea salt
- 4 sweet potatoes (about 2 lbs.)
- 2 tbsp. chicken stock
- 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tsp. white wine vinegar
- ½ tsp. sugar
- 1 large yellow onion, thinly sliced
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper, to taste
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 8 slices smoked bacon, 2 halved crosswise
- Leaves from 2 bunches flat-leaf parsley, plus 4 deep-fried leaves
- 4 eggs
- 3 tbsp. butter, cut into small pieces

1. Heat oven to 375°. Cover bottom of roasting pan with coarse salt. Pierce potatoes all over with a fork; roast until soft, about 45 minutes. Peel and mash. Transfer mashed potatoes to a nonstick skillet; cook over medium-low heat until dry, 8-10 minutes. Press through a fine sieve; set aside. Discard solids.

2. Reduce oven heat to 350°. Meanwhile, put stock, oil, vinegar, sugar, onions, and salt and pepper into a pot. Cover with a circle of parchment paper (see page 90 to learn how to make one). Cook over medium-low heat until soft, 25-30 minutes. Purée onions in a blender; press through a fine sieve. Discard solids; set onion mixture aside. Put cream and 6 whole slices bacon into a small pot; boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer until thickened, about 25 minutes. Strain through a fine sieve. Discard bacon. Cover and set aside.

3. Bring a pot of salted water to a boil. Add fresh parsley leaves; cook for 1 minute. Transfer parsley to a bowl of ice water. Drain, reserving ⅓ cup ice water. Purée parsley and reserved water in a blender. Press through a fine sieve. Discard solids and set aside.

4. Arrange halved bacon on a parchment paper-lined baking sheet; top with parchment and rest a second baking sheet on top. Top with a heavy weight, such as a cast-iron skillet. Bake until crisp, 30-35 minutes.

5. Bring a small pot of water to a boil. Add eggs, allow water to return to a boil, then cook until eggs are just soft-boiled, about 4-5 minutes. Transfer eggs to a bowl of ice water and chill. Gently peel eggs under running water and transfer to a medium bowl; cover with water and set aside.

6. To serve, reheat eggs briefly in gently simmering water; drain. Rewarm potatoes and bacon cream together; season with salt and pepper. Warm onion mixture and butter together; stir in parsley purée and season with salt and pepper. Spoon some potatoes into the center of 4 bowls; top each with an egg; pour parsley sauce around sides. Garnish with bacon and fried parsley leaves.

growing up is to put it mildly. What amazed me the most was not the deprivations in the areas I visited but, rather, how little those difficulties seemed to affect the Haitian people's exuberant spiritual and culinary life. The most prosaic meal, of smoky, charcoal-grilled langoustines, fried plantains, and ice-cold bottles of Prestige beer, became for me the very definition of honest, soulful food.

I ended up marrying my traveling companion on that trip, and a year and a half later, when Joan's job as director of a lending program for a nonprofit organization took her to Delhi, India, I went with her. I got a job as a consulting chef at a hotel and taught classes in Western cooking to the kitchen staff. To get to work every morning, I

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navigated streets that were alive with colorful goings-on, from women doing laundry in the gutters to street vendors hawking their wares. I did the shopping for my own meals at local markets redolent of freshly ground native spices, which were piled high in tented stalls. I learned over time not only which foods tasted the best at various times of year but also how to make do with only local, in-season foods, since, because of the growing seasons and limited commercial transport, that's all that was available. That principle has guided my cooking ever since. After three and a half years in India, my wife and I, now with a one-year-old daughter, decamped for Paris, where I'd enrolled in a government-run vocational college. There, I studied alongside France's next generation



## RECIPE

**Beets Two Ways**

SERVES 4

In this preparation (left), beets are served both cooked and raw in a pleasing juxtaposition.

- 16 baby chiongia beets, trimmed
- ¼ cup orange juice
- 1 cup vegetable stock
- ½ cup red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup honey
- Salt
- 2 tbsp. champagne vinegar
- Freshly ground white pepper
- 1 medium red beet, peeled and julienned
- 1 medium yellow beet, peeled and julienned
- 2 tbsp. canola oil
- 1 tbsp. thinly sliced flat-leaf parsley leaves
- 1 tsp. finely chopped chives
- ¼ cup chopped pistachios

1. Put baby beets, 1 cup orange juice, stock, red wine vinegar, half the honey, and salt to taste into a small pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer until tender, 40-45 minutes. Cool, strain, and reserve cooking liquid.

2. In a bowl, whisk together champagne vinegar, ½ cup cooking liquid, remaining orange juice and honey, and salt and pepper to taste in a bowl. Peel and thinly slice baby beets; add to bowl. Let marinate for 2 hours.

3. Soak julienned beets in separate bowls of ice water for 1 hour.

4. Meanwhile, simmer remaining cooking liquid in a small pot over medium heat to make a glaze, about 5 minutes. Set glaze aside.

5. To serve, divide baby beets between 4 plates, using a slotted spoon. Whisk together oil, parsley, chives, 2 tbsp. beet marinade, and salt and pepper to taste in a bowl. Drain julienned beets; pat dry; toss with dressing. Put dressed beets beside baby beets and drizzle with glaze; sprinkle with pistachios.



RECIPE

**Spice-Braised Lamb Shanks with Lentils**

SERVES 4

In this dish (facing page), Sherman marinates and braises lamb shanks in a spice-based marinade. He leaves the spices whole in order to extract their flavor slowly during the long cooking process. The shanks are served atop a bed of small French green lentils (called lentilles vertes du Puy), which are simmered with aromatics, including an onion studded with cloves—a traditional French flavoring for legumes.

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| 2 cups white wine, preferably gewürztraminer                    | 4 1-lb. lamb shanks, trimmed and frenched                           |
| 1/4 cups extra-virgin olive oil                                 | 3 tbsp. canola oil  |
| 1/3 cup coriander seeds   | 3 Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste                    |
| 3 tbsp. fennel seeds  | 6 cups chicken stock  |
| 2 tsp. black peppercorns  | 1 1/2 cups French green lentils (lentilles vertes du Puy)           |
| 1 tsp. red pepper flakes  | 4 whole cloves  |
| 10 cloves garlic (8 whole, 2 halved)                            | 4 slices smoked bacon, quartered                                    |
| 4 cinnamon sticks, halved                                       | 1 delicata or acorn squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1/4" cubes |
| 4 green cardamom pods   | 2 bosc pears, peeled, cored, and cut into 1/4" cubes                |
| 6 carrots, peeled (4 thinly sliced, 2 cut into 1"-thick rounds) | 3 plum tomatoes, peeled, cored, and cut into 1/4" cubes             |
| 3 ribs celery (2 thinly sliced crosswise, 1 quartered)          | 1 tbsp. thinly sliced flat-leaf parsley leaves                      |
| 3 medium yellow onions (2 thinly sliced, 1 halved)              |   |
| 1 3" piece ginger, peeled and thinly sliced                     |   |
| 1 orange, thinly sliced, ends discarded                         |   |

**1.** Combine wine, 1 cup olive oil, coriander, fennel, peppercorns, pepper flakes, whole garlic, cinnamon, cardamom, sliced carrots, sliced celery, sliced onions, ginger, and oranges in a bowl. Add lamb; toss to coat. Divide between 2 large sealable plastic bags and let marinate in the refrigerator for 36–48 hours.

**2.** Heat oven to 300°. Remove lamb from marinade. Scrape off any marinade that clings to lamb; reserve marinade. Heat canola oil in a wide pot over medium-high heat. Season lamb all over with salt and pepper. Brown the lamb, turning occasionally, 12–14 minutes. Transfer lamb to a plate. Add reserved marinade; cook, scraping up browned bits, 2–3 minutes. Add lamb and stock; boil. Cover pot with foil; braise in oven until tender, about 2 1/2 hours. Remove from oven; let cool for 20 minutes. Transfer lamb to a bowl; set aside. Strain broth, discarding solids; skim off and discard fat. Reserve lamb and broth.

**3.** Put lentils and 2 cups water into a pot. Bring to a boil; drain and rinse lentils and return to pot. Press cloves into onion halves; add to pot with remaining garlic, carrots, celery, and bacon. Cover with water; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer until tender, 25–30 minutes. Discard all aromatics and return lentils to pot with squash and 2 1/2 cups lamb broth; cook over medium heat until squash is tender, 4–5 minutes. Add pears; cook for 1 minute. Add tomatoes, parsley, and chives; cook until tomatoes are softened, about 1 minute more. Season the lentil mixture with salt and pepper. (Reduce any remaining lamb broth slightly over medium heat.) Divide lentils between 4 large bowls and top with lamb shanks. Drizzle with reduced broth and remaining olive oil.

of butchers, fishmongers, and pastry chefs, who were learning their respective artisanal crafts, refined and perfected over centuries. Between classes, I crammed in stints at upscale restaurants, browsed the city's legendary markets, and juggled the demands of marriage and parenthood within the confines of a garret apartment. It was an intense, exhilarating year, during which my cooking skills underwent a dramatic and profound transformation; by the end of it, I was invigorated but exhausted and was beginning to feel the pull of more-familiar surroundings.

IT WAS 1997, and in the 18 years since I'd left for college, Chicago had changed. I'd been reading about the city's vibrant food scene for a while, and although other, more-exotic destinations still had an allure, I found myself drawn back to where I'd grown up. Chicago's emerging gastronomic reputation was an attraction, to be sure, but there was also something less tangible: the values I'd always attributed to the Chicagoans I'd known—namely, a respect for family (I now had one) and for community, which I had sorely missed when we were living abroad.

I also had my career in mind: after years of cooking in other people's kitchens, I longed to run one of my own, and Chicago seemed fertile ground. The chance presented itself in the most banal way. Two years after returning to the city, I answered a classified ad in the *Chicago Tribune* for the position of executive chef at a restaurant, which the ad didn't name. The place turned out to be an 18-month-old establishment in an 87-year-old building that once served as a warming shelter for ice skaters beside a small body of water known as the North Pond, which sits in the shadow of luxury high-rises in Lincoln Park, just north of the Loop.

I was offered the job and took

it, but I had no idea what I was getting into. The kitchen I'd inherited was more Fawcett Towers than Eiffel Tower. When, on my second night, I found several of my (now former) cooks sharing a bottle of tequila in the bathroom just before service, I knew I faced some hardship. I told the owner that I'd stay on only if he gave me the freedom to run the kitchen the way I wanted—and to reinvent the menu and make it my own.

AS I STARTED creating dishes for North Pond, I quickly realized how deeply influenced they were by my former teachers, from Parisian sauciers to Haitian housemaids. The menu became a compilation of dishes made by many different methods, to keep the food interesting for both diners and cooks. I paired complicated techniques

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with basic ones to highlight the artfulness of each. One of the first appetizers on that menu was a dish that ultimately evolved into its current incarnation: a warm, soft-boiled egg served atop creamy, bacon-flavored sweet potatoes surrounded by bright green parsley sauce with a smoky stick of bacon alongside. The egg is, as has often been said, a simple form of perfection; I wanted this pairing to do that perfection justice and, at the same time, not take itself too seriously. This was Chicago, after all.

Another addition to the menu was a favorite dish from my teenage years, braised lamb shank. I now marinate it with a palette of spices that I learned how to use in India: coriander, cinnamon, (continued on page 68)



## RECIPE

**Apple-Lavender Tarte Tatin**

MAKES ONE 9" TART

The secret to making this tart (shown on page 66) is to cook the apples patiently over low heat, letting them caramelize slowly; if you try to speed up the process you'll run the risk of burning them.

- 12** tbsp. butter
- 1/2** cup dried, edible lavender buds (see page 96), plus sprigs for garnish
- 8** firm apples such as golden delicious or northern spy, peeled, halved, and cored
- 1/2** cup sugar
- 1** 10" circle frozen puff pastry, thawed and chilled

**1.** Melt butter in a small pot over medium-high heat. Remove pot from heat, add lavender, cover, and set aside to let infuse for 30 minutes. Warm butter again and strain through a fine sieve, pressing lavender with the back of a spoon to extract as much as possible; discard solids. Set lavender butter aside.

**2.** Arrange 14 of the apple halves vertically around the sides of a 9" cast-iron skillet, all facing in the same direction, nesting them as tightly as possible. Arrange remaining apples halves in center of skillet, rounded side down. Brush apples evenly with reserved lavender butter; sprinkle all over with sugar. Cook over medium-low heat, without stirring, until apples are deep brown on the bottom and softened about halfway up, about 1 1/2 hours. Let cool for 30 minutes.

**3.** Meanwhile, heat oven to 425°. Prick puff pastry all over with a fork and arrange on top of apples, punctured side down; tuck edges in around apples. Bake until golden brown all over, about 15 minutes. Let rest for 5 minutes, then run a knife around the edge. Place a large plate over the skillet; invert tart onto the plate. Garnish with lavender sprigs and serve with vanilla ice cream, if you like.

(continued from page 65) cardamom, ginger, and cloves. I serve the lamb atop an earthy stew of small French lentils, brightened and sweetened with diced pear, squash, and tomato—an assemblage I learned to prepare while studying in France. If there was ever a dish that was truly a representation of my journey as a cook thus far, it's this one.

THROUGHOUT THESE years of running a kitchen—a job as stressful as it is invigorating—my mantra has always been “big picture, big picture, big picture”. That means stepping back, inhaling deeply, and remembering what I learned during my travels to places where eating was more an act of sustenance than one of gastronomic discovery. I now try to pass along

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that perspective to my fellow cooks, reminding them that while our jobs require us to focus with extraordinary intensity on subtleties of flavor and execution, we must not lose sight of life's larger issues.

These days, I stay involved in my community by developing relationships with farmers, teaching in my daughters' schools, and helping to manage the local farmers' market. I also think of the artisans I studied with in Paris, remembering to look at my craft in the larger context of craft and tradition. Indeed, returning to Chicago has allowed me to rediscover the simple—though not simplistic—integrity of well-crafted food that is the authentic expression of a season and a place. —BRUCE SHERMAN, a 2007 James Beard Foundation Best Chef nominee

## RECIPE

**Bread-Crusted Halibut with Leek Ragoût and Red Pepper Purée**

SERVES 4

In this novel preparation (shown on previous page), Sherman creates a crisp and buttery crust for halibut filets using sliced white bread. (See page 92 for a closer look at the process.)

- 2** large red bell peppers
- 12** tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt** and freshly ground white pepper
- 2** tsp. honey
- 1** tsp. sherry vinegar
- Dash** of Tabasco
- 4** large leeks, white and light green parts only, trimmed and thinly sliced crosswise
- 1** cup plus **2** tbsp. chicken stock
- 4** 6-oz. boneless skinless halibut filets
- 1** egg white, lightly beaten
- 4** 1/4"-thick slices dense white bread
- 1** tbsp. butter
- 1** tbsp. chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves
- 1** cup mesclun greens
- 4** tsp. aged balsamic vinegar

**1.** Heat oven to 425°. Toss the peppers with 1 tbsp. oil and salt and pepper to taste. Roast on baking sheet, turning once, until soft and blackened, about 25 minutes. Transfer to a bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and set aside to let steam for 15 minutes. Discard the skin, seeds, and cores from the peppers. Roughly chop the peppers and combine them with 1 tsp. oil, honey, vinegar, Tabasco, and salt and pepper to taste in a blender and purée. Strain the purée through a fine sieve into a bowl; cover to keep warm.

**2.** Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the leeks and cook until soft, 30–45 seconds. Drain the leeks in a colander in the sink, transfer them to a bowl of ice water, and let chill. Drain the leeks again and pat them dry with paper towels. Heat 4 tbsp. oil in a nonstick skillet over medium-low heat. Add the leeks, 2 tbsp. stock, and salt and pepper to taste. Cook until the stock has evaporated; add 2 tbsp. more. Repeat process until 1 cup of chicken stock total has been absorbed, about 30 minutes total. Cover and keep the leeks warm.

**3.** Season the fish filets with salt and pepper to taste. Brush the flesh side of the filets with egg whites. Place the filets, egg white-coated sides down, in the center of the bread slices and press gently to adhere. Trim the excess bread from sides (see page 92). Heat 3 tbsp. oil and the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Cook the filets, bread-crusted side down, flipping once, until golden brown and cooked through, 6–8 minutes.

**4.** To serve, stir 1 tbsp. of the oil and the remaining 2 tbsp. stock into the pepper purée and season with salt and pepper to taste. Stir the parsley into the leeks and pile them neatly onto the centers of 4 plates. Place the halibut filets on top of the leeks. Spoon the pepper purée onto the plates, forming 3"-wide dots. Arrange the greens next to the filets, overlapping them slightly on top. Drizzle the plates artfully with the remaining oil and balsamic vinegar.