



## Questions for Chef Thomas Castellon

### Why cooking ?

Many chefs choose cooking. I was born into it and then later chose to make it my life. As teenagers, my older brother and I were free labor for the kitchens my father ran in Miami. I confess early on this was at Solid Gold Strip Clubs, and yes, strippers did occasionally come through the kitchen. By the time I graduated high school, cooking was what I knew and the best place to start earning a living. I didn't discover my passion for cooking until much later. My first job out of my father's sight was with Southern Food Works Catering. They introduced me to pastry and baking, which became my first love. Yet my first real challenge, inspiration and opportunity to learn came at the St Lucie West PGA Country Club. I can still remember the first time my chef taught me how to properly roast a whole prime rib. He simply rubbed the roast with fresh thyme, rosemary, garlic, Worcestershire, and plenty of salt and pepper. We slowly roasted it for 3 hours. The flavor is still with me to this day. Here I learned that this wasn't just a job but a career I was choosing to pursue. I'll always be grateful for Chef Robert, the first mentor who opened my eyes to the culinary world. I was beginning to learn the potential taking simple things like bones and water (and a few other ingredients) to create a flavorful, unctuous jus. I will always be inspired by the endless possibility, the alchemy, the transformation.

### The French word, "Chef", essentially means "the boss" in the kitchen. How did you know you'd become a chef, as opposed to just a cook?

Teaching comes to me naturally and is an essential to a chef's role in building a team, which is, in turn, essential to running a great kitchen. Learning from my "chefs" is what motivated me early on. My mentors shaped me, making me who I am today. As I myself began to take on responsibility, cooks gravitated to me, knowing I was eager to teach them. I'm focused on doing that now for the cooks on my own team. Of course, I'm still learning myself, but I am so gratified by the feedback from the cooks I've worked with over the years who've shown me how much the learning meant to them.

### What characterizes your cooking?

Classics, well executed, sometimes elevated, sometimes simplified. The love and nurturing poured in to a classic jus accompanying a roast chicken takes a really great bird to a higher level. It's a three day process that is worth every minute: First, and very importantly, blanch the chicken bones to remove impurities. Then continuously nurturing the cooking of the stock, adjusting the temperature and skimming. The next day, roast another set of bones (previously dried overnight) and caramelize with a vegetable mirepoix, adding the stock prepared the day before. Finally, strain the stock, reducing it to the perfect consistency. You can feel, taste and see when you've brought it to just the right point. It is a beautiful reflection of what a traditional jus is made according to French tradition. Once you have mastered this, skies are the limit.

### What are the most valuable lessons learned from your chef mentors?

Jonathan Benno has been my most essential mentor. He taught me that being a good chef is not just about the cooking, but also about taking note of every aspect of the restaurant, from the dining room, to the dish pit. "Treat it like it's your own, and some day it will be".. he always said.

*(contd.)*

# RÔTISSERIE Georgette

## What's the best lesson or skill you can teach the young cooks on your team?

- Don't make the same mistake twice.
- Work extremely hard at your craft every minute that you spend in the kitchen.
- Maintain a positive attitude at all times . . . . and we'll take care of the rest.

## Your secret weapon in the kitchen (person or tool)?

Each and every member of our team. Tools can be improvised, our team cannot.

## What makes you such a great fit for Rotisserie Georgette?

The restaurant has two complementary faces: the seasonality of the vegetables and the care we take with them – AND – simply roasting whole fish, birds and cuts of meat. Both of these are at the foundation of my being as a chef, making this a perfect home for me. I strongly embrace tradition, and where our cuisine comes from, and here it is about classics with inspiration and seasonality.

## Aside from Rotisserie Georgette's general manager Catalin Pirvu, you work with an almost all woman management team (Owner Georgette Farkas, Maitre d' Melissa Fields, Pastry Chef Karima Karmouche, Pastry Chef). What's that like?

One of my earliest jobs as a chef was at a pizzeria in Jensen Beach FL. It was owned by three strong-willed women, whom I appreciated for the caring, determination and energy they put into their business. Their gender was not what defined them, but working with them taught me to look to character and ability, rather than gender. They also taught me the foundation to making great bread.

## If your girlfriend were coming to dinner tonight what would you prepare for her?

She delights in caviar – and here at the Rotisserie, we are big believers in life's little luxuries. Caviar is always on our menu. It is not about complex preparation, but rather about sourcing perfect ingredients and serving them beautifully. She's also a fan of our côte de boeuf, a cut of beef that would stand up to any great New York City steak house. I would top it with our seared foie gras and finish with a bone marrow beef jus. A beautiful salad would also be a must, in summer perhaps charred corn and sungold tomato; in fall endive, radicchio, pears and hazelnut vinaigrette.

## What's the greatest challenge in a kitchen where the majority of dishes are prepared on a rotisserie?

TIME & TEMPERATURE. As cooks, we develop an internal alarm clock for every heat source we work with. I've adapted my senses to our rotisserie ovens, which get hotter and hotter as the evening progresses. Timing and temperature plays a huge role in preparing our roasts, whether whole fish, birds or cuts of meat.

## Ingredients you love?

One of my earliest food memories is, as a teenager, purchasing a thyme plant to grow on my windowsill. I still remember coming home from school to the scent every day, which I loved so much. Still to this day, it takes me back. And then there are eggs, which I find to be one of the most gratifying ingredients that exists and which I love for their simplicity and diversity.

## Foods you really just won't eat?

# RÔTISSERIE *Georgette*

As a kid there was nothing I wouldn't try, and my father always loved that. I actually eat everything, hoping it is prepared properly.

## Working six days, makes your one night out precious. What restaurants are you dying to try (or return to)?

I am eagerly awaiting the opening of Restaurant Benno later this fall. This will be a collection of chefs and management gathered from the cultivation of Benno's former restaurants, and undoubtedly one of NYC's biggest openings this year. Neta, is a place I will return to again and again for their omakase. It's the perfect meal, that entices you course after course with a progression of amazing ingredients and techniques. And then there is the Brindle Room that I've loved since I first moved to New York. It's all about their comforting cast iron seared burger, hand cut French fries with rosemary aioli and milk stout.

## What are you dreaming of adding to the rotisserie menu this spring, summer, fall?

I am working on a slow roasted pork belly stuffed with a pork loin that is marinated in a fennel and herb persillade, served over a radicchio salad.

## An open kitchen where you see the guests and the guest's see you has its advantages and disadvantages. How's it working for you at Rotisserie G?

I learned to love the open kitchen during my years at Lincoln. Here, our rotisserie ovens are a beacon for our guests and the soul of the restaurant. I love the theater of it and also the informality and transparency with the chance to chat with guests who want to see what we're cooking up close.

## Do you ever tire of roasting chickens?

How could I? One of the first lessons I learned as a cook was how to truss a chicken. I still remember the day I roasted my first one over a bed of root vegetables with thyme and bay leaf, using the roasting juices for the sauce. I guess I've come full circle.

## What would you be doing now if you hadn't become a chef?

Without doubt I would be a photographer. It is art, which runs very deep in my family's history. I believe there is a natural connection between chefs and artists.

## Now, what would YOU like to ask the chef?

Send your questions to @t\_cast212 or email [tcastellon@rotisserieg.com](mailto:tcastellon@rotisserieg.com)

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