



Who let the amateurs in the kitchen?

Chef Harding Lee Smith of The Grill Room, that's who

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(photos by Fred Field)



Generally speaking, I enjoy cooking. But that usually means seasoning some chicken for baking in the oven or mixing up a pot of stew or chowder on a lazy Sunday. I've often considered concocting fancy sauces, marinades and side dishes with recipes pulled from magazines and cookbooks, but the time commitment and exotic ingredients involved always scare me away.

Clearly, I am no gourmand. And, sadly, my experience in the “back of the house” dates back to a stint working for Colonel Sanders while in high school.

So when the opportunity arose to spend an afternoon cooking with Chef Harding Lee Smith at The Grill Room & Bar in Portland, oh yes, I sure did jump. Then, I panicked.

What if my natural clumsiness resulted in a kitchen catastrophe involving a vat of hot oil and my size eight-and-a-halves? What if I couldn't tell the frisee from the swiss chard? What if Chef Smith yelled, cursed and threw me out of his kitchen? (You're fired!)

Obviously, other victims were necessary, so Shannon Bryan (MaineToday.com) and Wendy Almeida (RaisingMaine.com) were enlisted for kitchen duty.

We arrived precisely at 2 pm and were handed our menus and prep lists. We would be making a special staff meal, and the courses were impressive: Wolfe's Neck Farm beef tartare with chopped egg, olive tapenade and crostinis; Hudson Valley foie gras with blood orange gastrique; grilled giant scallop with frisee, crispy capers and bacon-truffle vinaigrette; filet mignon served with andouille sausage-goat cheese polenta, swiss chard and bordelaise sauce; pepper-crusting sirloin with potatoes aligot, spicy broccoli and red wine sauce; and creme brulee.

It was a meal fit for a group with discerning taste. Or whomever dared eat it after the editorial staff was done in the kitchen.

Trimming & cutting & chopping

My afternoon in the kitchen was all about meat. Just meat. But that's to be expected at a place named The Grill Room where the wood-fired grill is the center of attention.

After donning an apron (unfortunately, no tall, white chef hat was offered), I took my place in front of a large wooden cutting board. And then I trimmed. And then I cut. And then I chopped.

I was tasked with creating succulent, tender filets from the giant lump of meat in front of me. A lump of meat that was spotted with a couple different kinds of fat — thin and shiny and thick and mushy. It was





my job to trim it all off, without leaving part of a finger in the filet.

Chef Smith first showed me how to pull and slice the thinner fat off without wasting too much of the choice meat. Then he had me turn my knife over to scrape off the thicker fat.

It took me a good 30 minutes to get to the stage where I actually cut the steaks. They were all supposed to be eight ounces when I put them on the scale, and I'm proud to say I was perfect on four of the five.

But what to do with the meat that didn't end up as part of the perfectly formed filets? Well, that would become tartare, of course.

If you're not as kitchen-savvy as I now am, you may not realize that beef tartare is served raw. As in not cooked. At all.

Because of that, a nice cut of meat is required and it has to be chopped pretty finely. And chop I did, keeping my finished pieces on ice while I was working. (The only thing I cut that wasn't meat was a lemon for its juice, and I halved it in the wrong direction.)

By the time I had completed my chopping it was time to put the steaks on the grill. Chef Joe Boudreau is the man on the grill and he shared the secret of grilling meat while we watched the steaks sizzle.

The grill needs to heat for an hour to get up to temperature before any meat goes on. Chef Boudreau places the wood in just so to keep the flame and the heat even. He can tell when a steak's done by touching it: the temperature and feel let him know when a filet is a perfect medium. It takes about eight minutes.

After the steaks were cooked, I was back at my station, looking on as Chef Smith mixed my chopped steak with mustard, chives, salt and pepper to create the tartare. He used a mold to form it, plated it, then topped it with olive tapenade and it was ready.

But still raw.

— Karen Beaudoin

Of sauces & shallots

I might be familiar with a kitchen as a mother of two children but I cook in the style of family dining (casserole dishes to accommodate lunch box leftovers).

So when Karen identified me as “knowing how to cook” to Chef Smith, I cringed. Then I clarified. “I know how to cook for a family. I don't really know how to 'cook.'”

I knew I was in for an unfamiliar kitchen experience when I looked around and noted the absence of my usual kitchen tools. Where were the measuring cups, glass mixing bowls and food processor?

After the quick intro by Chef Smith about our workstation assignments — for me that was mostly prepping sauces — I jumped right in with my first task.

Chopping shallots for the bacon-truffle vinaigrette set off my panic alarm initially. I wasn't sure what a shallot was.

After a quick check in with Shannon, who was also unsure about the identity of a shallot (this made me feel better), I figured it out by process of elimination.

Chef Smith's demo on how to dice a shallot lasted about 15 seconds. His hands and knife worked in a blur of motion. When he asked for confirmation I understood his instructions, I nodded a bit uncertainly and then got to work.

I cut the shallot in half, then laid one half facedown on the cutting board to slice it. Then I made a cut parallel to the cutting board before turning and making the final dice cut.

The dicing took me more than a few minutes and I was midway through the second half of that shallot before I started cursing it.

But I was not the only one struggling with chopping. Shannon had her own troubles with the chives. Where oh where was a darn food processor when I needed it?

I finished dicing two shallots before moving on to slicing the next ingredient in the vinaigrette, the bacon. This involved cutting the layer of skin off the top of the uncooked slab before slicing it. While I was trying to get over the unsettled feelings I was having about touching the pig's skin and cutting it off the meat, I had my first kitchen crisis. I failed to watch the pot with the blood orange base for the blood orange gastrique and it boiled over on the stove.

Oops.

Chef Smith came to the rescue, moved my pan to a cooler part of the stove and scraped off the sticky overflow.

I went back to slicing the bacon with hopes that was the last of my mishaps. I put the bacon in the oven, set the stove timer and went back to my kitchen bane (aka dicing shallots).

Once the bacon was crispy, I was charged with dicing it.

At that point I had a better handle on how to properly hold my knife (none of that one finger on top of the blade stuff per Chef Smith's coaching — a full grab with thumb and finger on the blade's neck with my other three fingers on the handle) and the bacon dicing went much more smoothly than those darn shallots.

During dicing, I was also cooking hardboiled eggs on the stove and I managed that without a boil-over mess.

Working in the kitchen is nothing if not a test of your multi-tasking abilities.

— Wendy Almeida

Foie gras & faux pas

It's true — shallots are a foodstuff beyond my realm of expertise. Also out of my league: foie gras, tartare and any sort of quickened chopping.

Once the straps on my apron were pulled into a competent bow, I was lost in the Grill Room kitchen. Stranded, it seemed, in a culinary minefield with nothing but a spatula and a heavy-bottom pot to defend myself.

But Chef Harding Lee Smith wasn't about to let we amateurs destroy his kitchen. So before he handed over any sharp objects he gave a tutorial on the cutting. Then Wendy, Karen and I were directed right into the meat of it.

I have to think that Chef Smith saw a hint of my meat-slicing aptitude, since I ended up staring down an immense slab of beef that would've sent a lesser soul screaming toward the ladies room.

Of course I too have an unofficial food diagnosis: An unabashed carnivore with a raw meat aversion.

It was questionable how the Shannon-meet-raw-beef encounter would go. But I carved the fat from that mass of meat as if I were peeling an orange.

Once the meat was sliced into thick portions and set aside, Chef Smith brought over a food I was intimately familiar with: Potatoes. A treasure in any form, the potato may be the single fare I feel confident preparing.

So I peeled with self-assurance, wedged with expertise and dumped the chopped tubers into a pot that was already heating on a stovetop burner. But before my proud smile could reach its full ear-to-ear potential, I heard a sizzle from the stove. I peered into the pot. “Chef? Shouldn’t there be water in here?” Kitchen foul No. 1.

With my culinary confidence slightly shaken, I tackled the chives. Chef Smith demonstrated an easy mastery over the thin, green onions. They fell to pieces with a slight rock of the knife — that is until I took over. Same chives, same knife, yet I produced a weed-wackered mess. The chef’s comment was something along the lines of “You cut those chives with a baseball bat?” Kitchen foul No. 2.

The potatoes made a return, now softened, and my instructions were to rice them using a not-so-handly kitchen contraption aptly called a “ricer.” Drop some wedges in, turn the handle and the potatoes are squished through the ricer with mild effort. Easy work, until the pot slips, knocks over a nearby container and sends the disgruntled chives spilling onto the counter. Why do you hate me, chives? Kitchen foul No. 3.

I moved onto the foie gras, which I scored by making shallow diagonal cuts on both sides.

Next, onto the bone (wherefrom it came, I know not). Using a spoon, I dug out the marrow as though I’d been doing it for years. It was tossed into a pot and melted down for use in the bordelaise sauce.

And soon Karen’s, Wendy’s and my work began to come together. Aside from being stingy with the potatoes (an accusation I’ll continue to deny), I plated two courses without dropping, spilling or flinging anything important. And the unruly chives protruding from the beef tartare were only slightly noticeable.

We novice chefs exhaled with relief. We’d met our deadline (give or take) and the Grill Room staff approved of our work.

My appreciation for the culinary world is renewed. My fear of raw meat nearly dashed.

And the chives? Let’s just say that should we meet again, perhaps “unexpectedly” in a dark alley off Commercial Street, I’ll show those chives a thing or two.

-- Shannon Bryan