

living food



The big night unfolds as
guests enjoy the meal at
Slims in Cincinnati.



Chefs' Reunion

Connected by their love of food, four top cooks gather in Cincinnati to prepare a signature feast.

BY MIRIAM CAREY

PHOTOS BY BRAD RONEVICH

In the early 1990s, there was a buzz about the Caxton Café. Set in downtown Cleveland's developing arena district, near the Jacobs Field construction zone, the Caxton seemed to pull energy from the city streets and deliver it to the café's lively dining room. The atmosphere dazzled patrons, and foodies returned again and again to see what the café's talented young chef, Michael Symon, would come up with next.

Symon struck up a friendship with Patrick McCafferty, a farmer and food enthusiast who was growing fresh greens at his Tuscarawas County farm, the Good House, in Ragersville.

McCafferty would pull his pick-up truck up to the Caxton's loading dock to deliver fresh watercress and special-order greens, and usually he'd stay for a chat. It was the beginning of a long-term connection between the mild-mannered farmer and the inspired crew at the Caxton.

More than 12 years later on a sunny April afternoon, a pick-up truck pulls up to Slims, a restaurant on Cincinnati's North Side. Symon, Tim Bando and Tim Connors, who all worked at the now-defunct Caxton Café, have arrived to cook a reunion meal at Patrick McCafferty's restaurant in celebration of its first birthday.

The chefs are tired from working late the evening before and look a bit haggard after the long drive from Cleveland. McCafferty offers them some food — leftovers from the traditional *lechon asada*, a Caribbean-style Sunday pig roast at Slims — and soon the brightly colored room is filled with conversation, punctuated by the peals of Symon's signature high-pitched laugh.



The chefs rest briefly between courses (above). Tim Bando's scallop and blood orange appetizer (above, right). Symon quickly prepares a course for the big meal.

Plans are laid out for the next day's meal as the chefs load boxes of food into coolers and work out timing for the two sold-out seatings. Mostly, though, they reminisce about the old days and trade stories about mutual acquaintances.

Back in the saddle

The next day, the chefs arrive at the restaurant early to begin preparing the anniversary meal. They haven't cooked together in years, but within a few minutes, they've fallen into an easy routine, trading counter space, prepping food for each other, masterfully creating a four-course dinner to be served in just a few hours.

Tim Bando was a waiter and bartender at the Caxton when he first met McCafferty. Chopping blood oranges for tonight's appetizer, he recalls his frustration at the time. "I always wanted to cook and I had gotten to the point where I hated dealing with people," says Tim. "I wanted to go to cooking school, and Patrick invited me down to the Good House. I went down there to check it out for a day and stayed for nine months."

By that time, McCafferty had opened a restaurant at the Good House as a way to showcase the produce grown there and to generate additional income. It was an

experiment that would draw the attention of *The New York Times* and the influential *Zagat Restaurant Survey*, as well as friends and customers from all points in Ohio. But running a restaurant in the middle of Ohio's fertile farmland had its challenges, and the Good House closed in 1993.

Tim learned about cooking and farming while in Ringersville and eventually became the executive chef at Theory — a popular restaurant in Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood, just across the street from Symon's Lola Bistro.

Learning curve

In the late afternoon, McCafferty scratches his beard and pulls his farmer's cap off his head. Even though the guest chefs are doing the heavy lifting tonight — they're cooking all the courses — McCafferty is in charge of overseeing the staff, making sure tables are arranged, and worried that more people will show up than made reservations. It's just the kind of work that annoys him. The chefs trade smiles, knowing how uncomfortable McCafferty becomes if he's not behind a stove or a plow.

McCafferty never gave a lot of weight to success — at least not commercial success in a restaurant. "I used to look out at the cornfields from the kitchen at the Good



House and think, 'If I'm the chef, I'll be in here all the time looking out..."' Finding the right mix of farming and cooking and making both disciplines meet his high standards has been McCafferty's lifelong struggle. Even now, with his chef's garden in Cincinnati and a small, manageable restaurant where he can cook food and serve it to locals who truly "get" what he's doing, McCafferty laments the fact that success forced him to hire a dishwasher and seek out a linen service. "I never wanted to do that," he says, wistfully. It is clear that he stays up nights fretting about early frosts and trying to think of the perfect way to balance his love for food and his need for at least modest success.

RECIPES

Tim Connors quietly mixes rhubarb and strawberries for the dessert, stopping occasionally to chop shallots or slice oranges for the other chefs. The quietest of the gregarious bunch, he, too, has a farm and works nights at Western Reserve Bread Company, a bakery in Bainbridge, so that he can tend to his farmland during the day.

McCafferty is the kind of guy people want to know and to learn from. The produce he grows is top-notch and his cooking methods are the result of extensive training. He studied in the Napa Valley, graduated from culinary school in Ireland and reads voraciously, pouring over cookbooks and anything else that will enhance his cuisine.

As Symon crushes a box full of fresh morels in the Cuisinart, he reminisces about first meeting McCafferty. "His greens were super-fresh, picked that day, and his mix was more interesting than

McCafferty looks downright giddy. An eclectic group of people walk in — a politician, a young artist, a bookstore owner from Cleveland, old restaurant friends, and a few surprised-looking newcomers. The food is served promptly, and a murmur of approval can be heard throughout the room. A glass of wine is spilled and Doug Petkovic, owner of Theory and long-time friend of all the chefs, springs into restaurant-manager mode without missing a beat, covering the spill with linens, quickly replacing silverware. Everybody does his or her part. It's a successful night, a watershed moment to commemorate the first birthday of a dream.

After dinner, a smattering of out-of-towners loiter, drinking wine and talking, not wanting the reunion to end. Blair Whidden, who was part owner of the Caxton Café back in the day, has made the journey to Cincinnati for the evening. "I never go out, never," says the Cleveland businessman, "I hate being away from my kids, but I had to come down for this." A bit older than the chefs, he has the air of a proud mentor as he surveys them. "One of the graces of the restaurant business is that you succeed on your own merits. All these guys want to be the best at what they do," he says.

Symon, Bando and Connors are success stories, graced with good timing, a bit of luck and a

great deal of talent. They traveled to Cincinnati not just for Slims' birthday, but also to honor their friend and to say thank you.

A few weeks later, McCafferty reflects on the event and his colleagues. "I'm not a teacher. If I influenced them, it's just because we were friends and worked together side by side and they were influenced by it," he says. He pauses and, like a true Ohio farmer, says, "I just sold them lettuce." ●



Michael Symon and Tim Bando at work.



anything I'd tried before," says Symon. "His watercress had a peppery taste...to this day I have never seen anything as good." Symon credits McCafferty with instilling in him strong ideas about the importance of fresh food, one of the hallmarks of nationally recognized Lola Bistro. "A lot of what we do at Lola is based on what I learned from Patrick 12 years ago," says Symon. "Patrick is a purist," adds Symon. "He does everything based on passion."

Big night

At the 8:30 seating, Slims is packed. There are at least four more guests than expected, so a few friends from Cleveland offer to stand and eat at the butcher block table in the corner so that the "real guests" can have seats. The first seating went so smoothly,

For Slims' first birthday, the chefs prepared simple, seasonal dishes brimming with flavor. The following are two of the appetizers served.

Tim Bando's Scallops in a Blood Orange Emulsion With Radish Sprouts

SERVES 4-6 AS APPETIZERS

Juice of six juicing or blood oranges*
4 oranges, peeled, sectioned, skinned and chopped**
1 medium shallot, minced
1 clove garlic, minced
1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/4 cup chopped parsley
Salt and pepper to taste
Splash of rice vinegar, if needed
1 pound dry-packed scallops
2-4 tablespoons cooking oil
Radish or alfalfa sprouts for garnish

In a large bowl, mix orange juice, chopped oranges, minced shallots, garlic, olive oil, parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. If mixture tastes too sweet, add a splash of rice vinegar. Drain slightly, and place 1/4-cup-sized portions of orange mixture on appetizer plates.

Add cooking oil to a hot pan, sear scallops on both sides and cook until medium (3-5 minutes, depending on size of scallops). When done, drain scallops and arrange on plates over orange mixture. Garnish with sprouts and serve immediately.

* If blood oranges are not in season, use regular oranges.

** To prepare oranges, peel and then cut the skin from the oranges with a knife so that no white remains. Cut each section from the orange, being careful to avoid any skin or membrane.

Tim Bando's Roasted Wild King Salmon with Greens, Golden Beets and Horseradish

SERVES 6 APPETIZER PORTIONS

3-4 golden beets
1 tablespoon champagne vinegar
1 tablespoon horseradish
2-3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1-1/2 pounds wild king salmon

Clean beets, cut in half lengthwise and roast in a 350-degree oven about 30 minutes or until soft. Set aside and let cool. When cooled, peel and cut into large chunks and place in a food processor. Add vinegar, horseradish and 1 tablespoon of the olive oil. Blend until pureed and add additional olive oil if the mixture looks dry.

Preheat oven to 200 degrees. Cut salmon into 4-ounce pieces, clean well and roast in the oven for about 5 minutes.

Arrange beet emulsion on plates and place salmon artfully over the emulsion. Serve immediately.

Slims, 4046 Hamilton Ave., Cincinnati, 513/681-6500. Wed.-Sat. 5:30-until the food's gone; Sun. 1-4 p.m. Prix fixe menus: dinner \$24, Sunday lunch \$10. No credit cards accepted. Slims does not have a liquor license, but guests are invited to bring their own bottles.