

From Seasoned Chef to Storyteller Walter Scheib on his book *White House Chef*



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For an Obama inaugural dinner, Walter Scheib's menu might include an appetizer of spice-rubbed, smoked quail with chipotle corn custard, an entrée of Indonesian-inspired beef prepared with fruits and spices, and a dessert of caramel ice cream topped with hot fudge and salted peanuts.

But since he no longer serves as the White House's executive chef, Mr. Scheib won't be preparing the inaugural meal. Cristeta Comerford, his former White House deputy chef, will be cooking for the Obamas.

After serving the Clintons for seven years and the Bushes for four, Mr. Scheib has also become a professional storyteller along the way.

His company, The American Chef, offers event services from state dinners to "culinary talks," where Mr. Scheib shares anecdotes about the workings of the White House.

His book "White House Chef: Eleven Years, Two Presidents, One Kitchen," co-authored with Andrew Friedman, also gives readers a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the two first families. Published in 2007, it reads as part memoir and part cookbook.

Mr. Scheib spoke to The Wall Street Journal Online's Melody Lan about the difficulties of writing his book and what it takes to be White House chef. Excerpts:

The Wall Street Journal: What were the toughest aspects of writing your book?

Mr. Scheib: For one, it was finding a way to humanize the Clintons and the Bushes, but at the same time not give away their personal business. Then it was a matter of how to still make it an interesting story.

Two, it was getting the balance right. The book is almost equal in number of pages for both families, so no one could say it was about a red or blue state.

I also had trouble recalling stories. I was trying to go back some 13 years ago -- 11 years on the job and two years after. I had to get the timelines squared away with actual events and make sure the book was historically accurate.

What did the Clintons and Bushes think of your book?

Both camps were given the opportunity to fact-check the book for inaccurate details or anything offensive. But they couldn't dictate the editorial side.

I remember I had written that "the Clintons were frequently late" and saw that Hillary had scratched through that sentence. She had replaced that line with "the President was frequently late."

The Bushes never got back to me.

Does the book consist of the best recipes you came up with throughout your time at the White House?

Most of the recipes ended up being illustrations for the stories. Like we talked about how Mr. Bush only ate certain things for lunch, like a BLT, and there's a recipe for a BLT -- not that you really need it.

What were the most difficult parts about working at the White House?

You don't have much of a social, professional or personal life. You are, for all intensive purposes, in jail. You stay there, work there and when you're done, you go home and don't talk to anybody about it.

It was crucial to constantly watch out what you said. You leave your politics and ego at the door. It's like going to the army. You're here to serve the first family.

Did you experience any kitchen disasters?

We were doing a state dinner in June one year and had decided to serve striped bass. The menu was set up, announced to the press and 600 menus had been hand-written. Two days before the function, I get a call from the Massachusetts fish guy we were buying from telling me they already caught the quota for striped bass for the season and couldn't catch anymore to fill our request. It was a debacle.

But the guy went to the governor of Massachusetts and explained what happened and the season was re-opened by special edict to catch just enough fish to fill our order.

These are the sort of things where you can reach out and make things happen when you can't in normal cases.

So what does it take to be a top-notch White House chef?

For a regular chef it's about their food, their restaurants, and their ego. As White House chef, you're doing what the First Lady wants. First and foremost, he or she must be clairvoyant and be able to anticipate what the first family wants even before they know it themselves.

Two, you must be circumspect and discreet. You also need to be able to cook pretty well. That's a nice touch.

What was your strategy on expanding their palates?

I worked in new ingredients through samples or in one of the courses. If it gets eaten up, you know you can further experiment with it.

On the other hand, neither of the Clintons or Bushes were really into veal, liver, sweetbreads, or shellfish -- those were scratched off. But then there's the big red circle around Hillary's favorite lamb ([see the recipe for Mrs. Clinton's favorite lamb dish](#)), Mr. Bush's beef tenderloin and so on. You know the items that always work, ones that sometimes work and ones that never work.

Did you ever gain weight on the job?

During Christmas time, even though you didn't actually sit down for a meal, you're around food for like 18 hours a day and it somehow absorbed into you. Yeah, I'd gain a few extra pounds.

But Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Bush were always on diets and I actually put myself on those same weight-loss programs. I'd frequently lose more weight than they did though.

Do you still cook for the Clintons?

When the Clintons left and the Bushes came in, I was still working at the White House. But my wife is a professional chef and she had a catering company so when the Clintons threw holiday parties in Washington I'd cook what they liked at home. Then my wife would take it to the events and set it up. The last thing you want is for the first family to find out you're still working for the former first family, too.

Cooking shows have continued to be very popular. Would you want one of your own?

Food TV has morphed into a personality thing and I don't really understand or watch it. But I do like Alton Brown and a couple of other guys on there because I learn a thing or two.

What other profession have you've wanted to pursue besides cooking?

Before I started cooking at age six, I fell in love with fishing at age four. After I left the White House, I told my wife that our financial situation was in order so we could just stop working and I could go to Florida and be the fishing guide I always wanted to be. She looked at me like I had said we should have a human sacrifice.

Whether I'll do it in the future? Nah, I'm having too much fun telling my stories.

Pecan-Crusted Lamb With Morel Sauce and Red-Curried Sweet Potatoes

For the Pecan Crust

2/3 cup pecan halves (about 2 1/2 ounces)
1/3 cup fresh white bread crumbs
Pinch of ground cumin
Pinch of cayenne
Pinch of ground coriander
Pinch of freshly ground black pepper

For the Lamb

One eight-rib lamb rack (about 1 1/2 pounds), trimmed of excess fat
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon canola oil
1 1/2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
1/2 tablespoon honey
3/4 teaspoon roasted garlic puree

Directions

1. Make the breading: Lightly toast the pecan halves in a small, heavy-bottomed sauté pan over medium heat until fragrant, 3 to 4 minutes. Let cool, then transfer to the bowl of a food processor fitted with the steel blade and pulse to a medium-fine grind. Transfer to a medium bowl. Add the bread crumbs, cumin, cayenne, coriander, and pepper and stir to combine. Set aside. (At this stage, the breading can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 24 hours. Let it come to room temperature before proceeding.)
2. Precook the lamb: Preheat the oven to 325°F. Season the lamb on both sides with salt and pepper. Heat the canola oil in a large, heavy-bottomed sauté pan set over high heat. Add the lamb and sear well on both sides, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate and let cool.

3. In a small bowl, stir together the mustard, honey, and roasted garlic to make a glaze. Using a pastry brush, paint the glaze onto the meat portion of the lamb. Coat the lamb with the pecan breading by rolling the meat in the breading and lightly pressing it on by hand. (Be careful not to get any glaze or breading on the bones or it will scorch or blacken them.)

4. Put the lamb in a roasting pan and roast until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the thickest part reads 135°F to 140°F, about 20 minutes. Remove from the oven and let rest for 8 to 10 minutes.

5. To serve: Put the sweet potato puree in a pastry bag fitted with a medium tip, if using. Reheat the sauce, if necessary. Slice the lamb between the bones to make 8 chops. Pipe or spoon about 3 tablespoons of sweet potato puree in the center of each of four dinner plates. Place two lamb chops on each plate, spoon some sauce and mushrooms around the lamb, and serve.

To Make the Roasted Garlic Puree:

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Put a head of garlic in a small ceramic baking dish or ramekin. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon olive oil and 1 tablespoon water and season with salt and pepper. Cover with a lid or aluminum foil and bake until the cloves are soft, about 40 minutes (a small, thin-bladed knife will easily pierce right through). Remove the dish from the oven. When the garlic is cool enough to handle, separate the cloves and squeeze the garlic out of the papery skin. Mash smooth with a fork. One medium head of garlic will yield 3 to 4 tablespoons of puree. The puree can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 3 days. Stir leftover puree into soups and sauces, or into softened butter for an extra-flavorful spread.

Red-Curried Sweet Potatoes

2 medium sweet potatoes (about 6 ounces each)
1 1/2 cups orange juice, preferably freshly squeezed
2 teaspoons packed light brown sugar
About 3/4 teaspoon red curry paste, depending on desired heat level
3 tablespoons coconut milk solids (skimmed from the top of a can of unsweetened coconut milk)

1. Preheat the oven to 325°F. Arrange the sweet potatoes in a single layer on a baking sheet or baking dish. Roast until tender to a knife tip, about 1 hour. Remove from the oven and let cool. Peel the potatoes and transfer them to the bowl of a food processor fitted with the steel blade. Puree until smooth, then push them through a fine-mesh strainer set over a large bowl, pressing down with a rubber spatula or the bottom of a ladle to extract as much puree as possible.

2. Put the orange juice and brown sugar in a small, heavy-bottomed saucepan. Bring to a simmer over medium-high heat and cook until reduced to a syrup, about 10 minutes. Stir in the curry, then fold the mixture into the sweet potato puree.

3. Transfer the puree to a large saucepan over medium heat. Thoroughly fold in the coconut solids. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the mixture dries to a piping consistency, 3 to 4 minutes. (At this stage, the puree can be kept warm in a double boiler set over simmering water for up to 2 hours.)

4. Serve with a spoon, or transfer to a pastry bag fitted with the medium star tip.

Morel Sauce

3 ounces lamb stew meat, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
1 tablespoon chopped shallot
1/4 cup cabernet sauvignon or other full-bodied red wine
Freshly ground black pepper
2 sprigs fresh thyme
1 cup veal demi-glace (available at specialty grocers or online)
1 teaspoon roasted garlic puree
Salt
1 teaspoon canola oil
1 ounce morel mushrooms, trimmed and cleaned

1. Heat a medium, heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the lamb stew meat and cook, stirring often, until well browned, about 5 minutes. Add the shallot and cook until softened but not browned, about 3 minutes.

2. Add the wine and stir, scraping up any flavorful bits stuck to the bottom of the pot. Add a pinch of pepper and the thyme. Simmer until the wine is reduced by three quarters. Add the demi-glace and the garlic puree and simmer until reduced by one fourth.

3. Strain through a fine-mesh strainer set over a bowl and season to taste with salt and pepper. Keep covered and warm. Discard solids.

4. In a sauté pan, heat the oil over medium heat. Sauté mushrooms 3 to 4 minutes until tender. Add to sauce. Serve. Add the sautéed morels before serving. (Sauce can be cooled and refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 24 hours. Reheat gently before proceeding.)