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## CELEBRITY CHEFS ADD SIZZLE TO AN INN'S MENU

Executive chefs at the finest restaurants are not always in the kitchen. Many periodically abandon their 12-burner stoves, pack their things, and get out of town. Unlike the rest of us, who are loading sunscreen and novels into our travel bags, they are likely to be toting knives and vinaigrette for freelance cooking gigs at country inns and rural wineries.

The trail of dozens of chefs often leads to New Hampshire and the **Bedford Village Inn**. The "Celebrity Chef Series," in its third year, offers 11 ambitious menus from March through September. Served in the Overlook Room, one of eight cozy dining areas in a restored 18th-century farmhouse, the series' all-star list makes a foodie drool. Recent five-course extravaganzas featured such Boston luminaries as Lydia Shire of Locke-Ober, Ana Sortun of Oleana, and Jasper White of Summer Shack.

Yet this inn's restaurant has racked up several dining awards on its own, while having a nationally recognized wine cellar with over 700 labels. So why would it import high-caliber chefs for one-time events?

Owner Jack Carnevale becomes animated when talking about food. "We want to keep it interesting here. Keep it cutting edge," he explains. "It's a feather in our cap to bring in this caliber of chef. I have a supportive staff who want to learn from these people."

With this level of talent Carnevale raises the bar for fine-food consciousness in New Hampshire. He keeps his loyal local clientele excited and also reaches a broader market of people who know these chefs and follow them around. "We have celebrity chef groupies," says Susan Foster, who organizes the series.

Susan Samson, the owner of Sakonnet Vineyards on the southeast coast of Rhode Island, agrees such dinners are a great way to reach customers. "Food is a great hook," she says, adjusting the baseball cap she often wears. "I call it `Sakonnetizing.' It's a great way to educate the public that wine and food are natural components."

Samson, who bought the vineyard 17 years ago with her husband, Earl, says they are still working to persuade the public their wine is good. "I don't mean this in a derogatory way," she says one recent rainy morning. "But people from other regions - New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut - are more open to us. New Englanders are generally more suspect."

As a way to reach out to the public - and to chefs with influential wine lists - the Samsons created a Master Chefs Cooking Series, expanding on the program begun in the early 1980s by original owner, Lolly Mitchell. Held in what was once a private home on the estate, the classroom has windows on three sides with bucolic views of the vineyards and the Sakonnet River beyond. What works so well is the intimate scale and sense that one is working at home.

"It doesn't have all the bells and whistles" of a big commercial space, Samson acknowledges. On the other hand, students say they feel less intimidated in this environment. When White (whose restaurant uses Sakonnet's Vidal Blanc as a house wine) forgot to bring his whisk, he found a wire hanger and improvised.

Of course, cooking at a vineyard is a great way to learn about wine. During each session, Christian Butzke, Sakonnet's new winemaker, conducts a tour and lectures on wine and food pairing. At the end of the day students share the meal they have prepared and drink - what else? - wines from the vineyard.

In addition to classes, Sakonnet hosts a big food and wine event every summer. This year's benefits the Culinary Apprenticeship Program of the Anthony Spinazzola Foundation. For the past eight years, 400 people have flocked to these sold-out soirees held under a huge white tent to taste wine and nibble treats prepared by more than a dozen chef-luminaries.

This year's event, dubbed "Summer and Smoke," featured an afternoon of grilling and barbecuing. Mike Mills, of Memphis Championship Barbecue fame, lugged a smoker from Las Vegas for his baby back ribs; lines formed as well to taste his trademark baked beans. Chris Frothingham from Todd English's Bonfire Steakhouse showed up, as did Kenny Callaghan from Blue Smoke in New York. A live rhythm and blues band played tunes from the 1950s and '60s.

"This was more raucous than usual," says Sampson, still recovering two days after the event. "It was fabulous. We're going to do it again next year."

Up the coast from Sakonnet, across the state border, the family-run Westport Rivers Winery has its own ambitious program for pairing wine with fine dining.

"Chefs are deciding that cool climate wines are very food friendly," says owner Bob Russell, referring to their location near the sea that produces mainly Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Riesling, and other Alsatian varietals. He uses food "as a promotional and educational tool to show fine wine can be made in Massachusetts."

Russell works to cultivate personal relationships with chefs who have a vision, seeing them in a "mutual symbiotic relationship" with his winery. He is assisted in this endeavor by Kerry Downey Romaniello, Westport River's executive chef, who helped develop the Long Acre House Wine, Beer, and Food Education Center on vineyard property.

"Foodies want wine with a balance of clean and acidity, which is great for food," Romaniello says. In June, Sortun prepared a meal in which each of five courses was paired with a sparkling wine. In a twist on the usual spanikopita, Oleana's chef fried beer-batter-dipped soft shell crabs, split them in half, and stuffed a traditional mix of spinach and feta cheese into the crispy crab "pastry"; a smoky eggplant puree with toasted pine nuts accompanied the dish, which was paired with a 1998 Brut Cuvee RJR.

Events are scheduled at the Long Acre House through November. Each makes a point of pairing Westport Rivers wines with local products cooked by New England chefs. (Russell is a charter member of the Chef's Collaborative 2000, whose mission is to buy and promote locally grown and produced food.) "Every event is different," he says. "Some chefs like to teach in the demo area, while others come out and cruise the room between courses." With education as an underlying theme, the winemaker, who happens to be Russell's son Bill, gives an in-depth tour of the vineyards and winery.

At the **Bedford Village Inn** last May, dinner was prepared by Clark Frasier and Mark Gaier, the chefs and owners of Arrows Restaurant in Maine. Wine pairing was done by Ed and Judy Mansing of R.P. Imports, who chatted during the meal about their boutique selections, explaining why the spring pea soup with chunks of Maine lobster (intensely flavorful and fresh) went so well with a Domaine J. Lassalle Brut Reserve 1er Cru (crisp and delicately balanced).

Though not all the wine and food pairings were perfect (the Neyers Syrah Hudson Vineyard seemed too big for the subtle flavors of the roasted poussin with a lemon thyme-sourdough stuffing), the choice of the experts worked most of the time. Having someone else choose the food and wine gets one out of the always-ordering-the-same-thing rut. Bob Russell calls this a "submersion for conversion" experience, where one is open to whatever is offered as opposed to traditional restaurant dining where the guest is always in charge.

And at how many restaurants can you actually chat with your chef and ask how a certain dish was made?

At the end of the sumptuous meal at the **Bedford Village Inn**, the entire kitchen staff came out for a question and answer session. Carnevale was a cheerful impresario, a low-key stand-up comedian who gently pressed the shy guests to interact with the chefs. Before you could say "grilled lamb brochettes with Sichuan marinade on basil skewers" (our hors d'oeuvre) the room was filled with waving hands.

So the next time you discover your favorite chef is out of town, you may want to pack your appetite and take it on the road.