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FIRST COURSE

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It's a question most chefs never get the privilege of pondering:
What to serve the **Dalai Lama**?

In Milwaukee chef Sandy D'Amato's case, the answer was veal.

Veal?

Despite expectations that a vegetarian feast would be in order, the team of chefs assembled to cook for His Holiness on his recent visit to Madison was given no such instruction, said Catherine McKiernan, executive chef at the Madison Club, where the elaborate luncheon was held.

The **Dalai Lama** is, it turns out, a meat lover.

And so the five-course menu, served to about 60 people on May 3, including the guest of honor, his entourage and assorted citizens, included a stuffed pheasant breast, D'Amato's slow-cooked veal roast with scalded morels and escarole, and an asparagus soup with a chicken stock base.

A cured fish appetizer, mixed green salad, eggplant-and-chickpea entrée, and three full-size **chocolate** desserts completed the menu.

Created and coordinated by Jim Walsh, a Wisconsin native who attended UW-Madison, the luncheon cost \$500 to \$1,000 a head and was a fund-raiser for the Deer Park Buddhist Center and Monastery near Madison.

Walsh is the founder and CEO of Hawaiian Vintage **Chocolate**, a premium **chocolate** whose trees were blessed by the **Dalai Lama** and whose **chocolate** was the first ever eaten by the spiritual leader.

Fittingly, his latest product, **Intentional Chocolate**, is a dark **chocolate** that's engineered to promote "an increased sense of energy, vigor and well-being" in those who consume it.

Walsh told D'Amato he picked him to be on the chef team after eating at Sanford Restaurant in Milwaukee.

He was looking for restaurants that had a zen-like feel, where the service and food and ambience "all made sense together."

Sanford measured up, as a place where "nothing seemed forced," and it seemed as though "everything was meant to be there."

D'Amato may not have put "zen" and "Sanford" in the same sentence before, but he was duly flattered.

The other chefs were Shawn McClain from Chicago's Spring Restaurant, Green Zebra and Custom House

and John Gadau and Phillip Hurley, co-owners and chefs of Sardine and Marigold Kitchen restaurants in Madison.

They weren't operating completely in the dark about their honored guest.

They knew the **Dalai Lama** eats only breakfast and lunch, and that his vows prohibit him from eating anything after 1 p.m.

"Everything had to be seasonal and local and Wisconsin-themed, as it were," McKiernan said, noting the presence on the menu of pea shoots, pheasant and "a lot of asparagus."

D'Amato's veal came from Strauss Veal in Franklin.

For security reasons, the chefs didn't know exactly when the exiled leader would show up. They were told it could be 11:15 or 11:45 a.m., 12:15 or 12:30 p.m.

The chefs also had been briefed on **Dalai Lama** protocol: Never turn your back on him. Don't touch him. Don't speak to him unless he speaks to you.

Right around noon, D'Amato was heading downstairs to the kitchen, one level below the dining area, to check on his food.

Halfway down, he met His Holiness heading up the stairs.

"So I did kind of a little moonwalk backward all the way up and smiled," D'Amato said.

The chefs had hoped it would be possible to get a photograph with him but were not planning to press the issue.

When the **Dalai Lama** saw them all standing behind the table of food, the **Dalai Lama** said, "Oh, the cooks! Picture! Picture!" D'Amato recalled.

"He grabbed my hand and another other fellow's . . ." and the proof is printed in this newspaper.

And how did His Radiance like the food?

With all due respect, "he chowed down," D'Amato said.

In addition to the veal dish and a Warm Bittersweet **Intentional Chocolate** Tart with Coffee Ice Cream, D'Amato brought bread for the meal from his Harlequin Bakery.

"He ate nine pieces of bread," the chef said.

The **Dalai Lama** commented later that everything was really delicious, D'Amato said, asking how this dish and that were made. And, he noted approvingly, "it's good quantity."

Ashley Walsh of Los Angeles, Jim Walsh's daughter and co-coordinator of the luncheon, sat at the **Dalai Lama's** table.

"He pretty much lapped up every single plate that he had put in front of him," she recalled. "He loves food; he likes good food."

Before this, the biggest luminary D'Amato had cooked for was Julia Child, on her 80th birthday. For McKiernan, it was Al Gore.

By comparison, McKiernan said, "This was much more intense. It was nerve-wracking. There was more security here for the **Dalai Lama** than there was for Al Gore."

"This was the biggest thing I've ever been involved in," D'Amato echoed. "It was really exciting when he came in.

"You listen to him speak . . . he just transcends politics and religion. What he's saying is . . . all about compassion and love and getting rid of your anger. And everything that is bad in the world was created by man, so man can fix it all."

D'Amato had brought along a copy of the **Dalai Lama**'s latest book, "How to See Yourself As You Really Are," hoping to get the author's signature.

The **Dalai Lama** obliged — but first he referenced the title and laughed.

"He has this real infectious giggle," D'Amato said. "He said, 'Look, there's no "self" in Buddhism, and this is my book.' "

Nevertheless, he signed it, addressing D'Amato and his wife, Angie, with a message in Tibetan. He translated it as: "I hope the two of you have wonderful success and wonderful happiness in all of your lifetimes."

Yes, that last word is plural.

D'Amato said he's always believed he'd come back in his next life as a food.

"Maybe a hot dog."

Sanford "Sandy" D'Amato, chef/co-owner of Sanford Restaurant, 1547 N. Jackson St., Coquette Cafe, 316 N. Milwaukee St., and Harlequin Bakery, is a James Beard Award winner. For more information, visit www.sanfordrestaurant.com.

RECIPES

You can eat like the **Dalai Lama** by making this recipe served to the spiritual leader on his recent visit to Madison.

Sandy D'Amato adapted his slow-cooked veal recipe for faster home preparation.

Veal with Morels, Escarole and Rhubarb Essence Makes 4 servings

Rhubarb essence (see recipe)

Marinated potatoes (see recipe)

2 tablespoons clarified butter

¼ pound fresh morels, cleaned and cut in half

1 large shallot, finely diced (about 2 tablespoons)

1 head escarole, cleaned and cut into 1-inch pieces, washed and dried

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

2 tablespoons olive oil for sautéing

4 medallions (6 ounces each) veal loin or veal strip loin (I prefer Strauss Veal)

Half-dried rhubarb slivers to garnish (see note)

Prepare rhubarb essence and marinated potatoes. Set aside.

Place a large sauté pan over high heat. When hot, add clarified butter. When butter is hot, add morels and sauté about 2 minutes. Add shallot and escarole that has been tossed with the extra-virgin olive oil. Cook 1½ minutes until escarole is wilted. Season with salt and pepper and immediately remove from heat.

To finish: Place a non-stick sauté pan over high heat. Add olive oil and season veal medallions with salt and pepper. When oil is hot, add meat and sauté about 2 minutes per side or until lightly golden. Remove from pan.

To assemble: Divide escarole, morels and marinated potatoes among 4 plates. Top each with a veal medallion and garnish with rhubarb essence and half-dried rhubarb slivers, if desired.

Note: To make half-dried rhubarb slivers, cut thin slices of rhubarb and toss with sugar. Bake in preheated 225-degree oven until-half dried.

Rhubarb essence:

2 cups rhubarb juice from juiced fresh rhubarb, cooked until reduced to ¼ cup

1/3 cup grape seed oil

2 teaspoons sugar or to taste

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Mix together all ingredients.

Marinated potatoes: 1½ cups water

½ cup vinegar

Salt to taste

2 Idaho potatoes, peeled and diced small

1 tablespoon chopped parsley

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes

20 grinds of black pepper

2 cloves garlic, chopped fine

In saucepan, bring water, vinegar and salt to a boil. Add potatoes and cook until tender. Drain well and place in a bowl. Sprinkle parsley over top of potatoes. In small skillet, heat oil with red pepper, black pepper and garlic until garlic turns light brown. Pour over potatoes and mix.

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