

Man's Fast Track: From Racer to Chef

By CRAIG CLAIBORNE

DIFFERENT ingredients seem to go into the making of a European and an American chef these days. Exceptions can be found, but the typical young European chef entered the kitchen as a teen-ager, where his first task was peeling vegetables and scrubbing pots and pans. His family was rarely well endowed with money, but from diaper days onward his meals were sophisticated. They were cooked with uncommon care by a mother or an aunt or a grandmother, and the notion that good food should always be prepared carefully is now a mainstay of his cooking philosophy.

By contrast, the typical young American chef came from a family of reasonable means, but was nurtured on foods whose inspiration left some-

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thing to be desired. The idea of food preparation as an art was as alien to him as travel into the stratosphere until he reached adulthood.

Such is the case with James Schmidt, the executive chef of the well-known London Chop House in Detroit, a young man whose culinary talents have been garnering praise beyond that city's limits. He has been described as an innovator of the first rank, a chef who, despite his youth, is fully conversant in American foods and both new and traditional dishes.

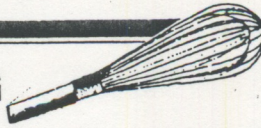
Answering a recent invitation to display his skills, he arrived in my kitchen burdened with boxes of produce — rainbow trout, golden whitefish caviar, sweet peppers in assorted colors, balsamic vinegar, fresh foie gras from ducks raised in New York State and bars of white chocolate for a masterpiece of a dessert that is his own creation.

As he doffed street clothes and donned a white uniform, he said that he was born in Champaign, Ill., and that cooking professionally had not entered his mind before his 20th birthday. He is now 29 years old.

He recalled being interested in a lot

YOUNG CHEFS

Second article of a series appearing periodically in Living.



of things that had nothing to do with cooking: "I studied electrical engineering at the University of Illinois. To pay my way through school I worked as an auto mechanic. Because of that I got into racing as a full-time hobby. I earned money at it, too. I raced cars and motorcycles and dragsters and anything else that moved."

One day, he suddenly decided he was bored with school and with work. "I wanted to see Europe and I heard of a cooking school in Avignon. I don't know why that appealed to me, but it would be as good a reason as any to see France."

As Mr. Schmidt moved about the kitchen, getting a lobster ready for the kettle (it would be turned into a seductive fricassee), he said he was not raised on what might be called grand cooking, American or otherwise. "Mother was a good cook, but the foods she prepared were basic," he said. "The things I remember best were fresh vegetables right out of the garden." His father, now retired, was a part-time farmer and superintendent of printing at the University of Illinois.

The school he chose in Avignon, a school called Luberon, was as he put it "geared toward Americans," most of them amateurs who wanted to be professionals. One of the instructors was Madeleine Kamman, the cookbook author and cooking teacher. At night he attended wine classes in Avignon at an institute called Maison du Vin, sponsored by the vintners of the Côtes du Rhône. There he was taught evaluation of French wines, mainly from the Rhone Valley.

At the cooking school, he learned the preparation of soups and appetizers; roasting; fish cookery; the creation of desserts, including pastry making, and the preparation of the classic sauces in the French repertory. These include sauces made with butter and eggs, such as hollandaise and its derivatives, sauces made with oil, such as mayonnaise and its derivatives, and the brown sauces.

Turning his attention to a sumptuous platter of sautéed fresh foie gras on a bed of shredded red cabbage flavored with balsamic vinegar, he con-



The New York Times/Vic DeLucia

James Schmidt of Detroit's
London Chop House.

tinued speaking of Avignon, where he spent 11 months, living in hotels in and around the town. "I couldn't afford the three-star restaurants of France back in those days," he said, "but I did eat at Hiely, a restaurant with a two-star rank. The thing I remember best about that meal was mousseline of pike. It was an original and unforgettable experience."

Of his training in those days, he said, "The greatest thing I learned was the sense of taste, how to harmonize flavors, and the search for quality."

What persuaded him to pursue cooking professionally, he said, was the realization that chefs turn an inspiration into something concrete. He learned, too, that in cooking "no two things are the same; it makes you think, and then you adapt and move quickly."

He returned to America in 1975. Soon after, he decided to leave Illinois and move to Massachusetts, where Madeleine Kamman had a school for professional chefs and had opened a well-received restaurant, Chez La Mère Madeleine, in Newton Centre. (The restaurant closed in 1979 when she returned to France.)

"I attended professional classes during the week and worked weekends at Mère Madeleine," he said. That ended after two years when Mr.

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Schmidt graduated at the top of his class.

As he put the finishing touches on a devastatingly rich and outrageously good butter-cream mousse dessert called white chocolate jazz, he described meeting the owner of the London Chop House, Lester Gruber, who was visiting Boston. The young chef joined that restaurant in 1977, starting in the storeroom to learn about purchasing. He transferred to the night chef's position and took over as executive chef two weeks later. "Since then," he said, "I have worked every job in the kitchen a few hundred times."

The restaurant seats 170; on Saturdays, he is involved with and supervises the preparation of about 300 dinners. From now through the end of the year, Mr. Schmidt will have little time for his family — he is married — and friends; he will likely work 100-hour weeks.

He is keen on America's bounty, especially from Michigan. These foods include a variety of wild mushrooms, such as chanterelles, morels, pigeon mushrooms, slippery jacks and wood urchins. He harvests wild leeks, wild watercress and cattails. "You cook the center stems," he said. "They have a real nutty flavor."

Perch, pickerel, northern pike,

whitefish, smelt and rainbow trout often grace the restaurant's tables. Lobsters, oysters, mussels and periwinkles come from Maine, foie gras from New York and New Jersey. He makes his own wine vinegar and smokes his own fish for the restaurant.

Mr. Schmidt has not lost his taste for things European, however. He travels abroad twice a year for two or three weeks to taste wines and make the restaurant's selections.

Duck Liver With Chervil

- 1 small red onion, peeled
- $\frac{1}{2}$ pound Belgian endive
- $\frac{1}{2}$ pound red cabbage, quartered and cored
- 1 bunch fresh chervil or 2 bunches fresh chives
- 2 tablespoons corn oil
- 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch thick crosswise slices fresh foie gras, about $\frac{1}{4}$ pound total weight
- Salt to taste, if desired
- Freshly ground pepper to taste
- $\frac{3}{8}$ cup hazelnut oil, available in fine food specialty shops
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup balsamic vinegar, available in fine food specialty shops.

1. Cut the onion lengthwise in half. Put the halves on a flat surface and cut crosswise into thin slices. There should be about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup.

2. Cut off and reserve the tips of the

endive. Cut the remaining endive into 2-inch lengths. Cut each piece lengthwise into very thin strips. There should be about 1 cup loosely packed.

3. Put the quartered cabbage on a flat surface and cut it crosswise into very thin shreds. There should be about 2 cups.

4. Pull off the top leaves from the stems of chervil. There should be about 2 cups. Reserve 10 or 12 leaves for garnish.

5. Heat the corn oil in a heavy skillet. When it is hot and almost smoking, carefully slide the foie gras slices into the skillet. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cook over high heat about 45 seconds. Carefully turn each slice and cook about 1 minute longer. Remove and drain.

6. Add half of the hazelnut oil to the skillet and when it is hot add the onion and red cabbage. Add salt and pepper and cook, stirring, about 1 minute. Add the remaining hazelnut oil. Stir and add the balsamic vinegar. Toss briefly and pour the mixture into a mixing bowl. Add the endive strips and chervil. Toss well.

7. Arrange pieces of the reserved endive tips around an oval or round platter, alternating them with the reserved chervil leaves. Spoon the red cabbage mixture in the center. Arrange the foie gras slices over the red cabbage mixture.

Yield: 4 servings.