

## A La Carte

Celebrity chefs, culinary students, and charities inspire a one-of-a-kind gourmet dinner at the Detroit Athletic Club. // Photographs by Patrick Gloria

By R.J. King - May 7, 2024



The team that prepared and served an array of dishes and wines for Legends of the Stove, a tribute to metro Detroit's culinary heritage, held on Jan. 15 at the Detroit Athletic Club. Photo courtesy of Visionalist Entertainment Productions.

Major corporate and charitable events can take a year or more to organize, manage, and execute, and as soon as one anniversary or celebration is done, the planning begins for the next one.

But what if there isn't sufficient time to organize a major milestone, especially a one-of-a-kind culinary extravaganza and fundraiser that requires coordinating with 40 of metro Detroit's top chefs, sommeliers, restaurant owners, general managers, and maître ds?

For anyone planning a major event in a compressed time frame, consider the execution of Legends of the Stove, a tribute to metro Detroit's culinary heritage that was held on Jan. 15 at the Detroit Athletic Club. The only hitch was pulling together the entire production in 10 weeks during the holiday season.



## Legends of the Stove menu

“I wanted to give the DAC the first opportunity to be the location featured. I see the event being of benefit to a few local charities highlighting how the hospitality industry and chef community come together to help support social issues, and I see this taking place in February sometime. Clearly this would be a historical evening in so many ways.”

While Loving and Johnson, along with the DAC board of directors, were open to hosting the event in the club's main dining room and the neighboring Pontchartrain and Georgian rooms,

Apart from reaching out, confirming, and coordinating with the culinary masters on the dinner and dessert selections, and how and where offerings such as beef Wellington would be prepared on-site, the reception was being filmed as part of “Detroit: The City of Chefs.” The documentary will debut this fall on Detroit Public Television, and coincide with a red carpet premiere.

To get started, on Oct. 30, Chef Keith Famie, a longtime filmmaker and executive producer and director of Visionalist Entertainment Productions in Wixom, sent an email to Master Chef Shawn Loving and General Manager Charles Johnson of the Detroit Athletic Club.

“I would like to create a dinner event/invite only, which would include outside guests as well as DAC members,” Famie wrote. “These guests would all be seen on camera as we would film the service. We would invite several historical chefs to be part of the menu preparation, and we would film this as part of the story of current iconic chefs and those from the past.

one problem immediately emerged. The second-floor kitchen that services the hospitality rooms was being shut down in mid-February for a complete rebuild that wouldn't be completed until September.

Another potential challenge was the success of the Detroit Lions. After the team won its first playoff game at Ford Field — the DAC offers a pre-game buffet to several hundred members and their guests before each home game — the next contest could have been held on the same Monday night as Legends of the Stove.



The menu included Venison Epigrams with Sauce Grand Veneur by Chef Paul Grosz, who is joined by Margaret Fleming. Below is a selection of hors d'oeuvres.





Chef Luciano DelSignore (bottom) prepared and served Melanzane alla Parmigianina in the DAC's Georgian Room.

“When I received the email to move forward, I said, ‘Wow, I’m staring at Thanksgiving with hundreds of turkeys and dinners to prepare for our members, their families, and their guests, plus carry-out dinners,” says Loving, who served as the event’s culinary host. “And there was a different volume of food service for Christmas.

“I was concerned if we could prepare for Legends of the Stove with the same intensity and focus we’re known for, and deliver it all professionally. So, with my team, (I) put a plan together and I reached out (in early November) and let all the individual contacts know I was 150 percent in, but let me get through Thanksgiving first. And as far as the Lions, we were fortunate the second playoff game was held that Sunday. I mean, really fortunate.”

To mark Detroit’s historical role in the culinary world, Famie, a former chef at Chez Raphael, Les Auteurs, and Forte, wanted to celebrate the present, but also the past — not 20 years or 30 years, but three centuries of comestible history.

From medieval times, chefs and their kitchen brigades played a vital role in the success of the nobility. Following the French Revolution in 1799, the culinary teams of royalty and monarchs cast off what was a rigid system of trade guilds to bring forward fine-dining restaurants.

Still, the hierarchical structure of tightly operated kitchens remained in place. In fact, the double-breasted chef’s jacket is a lasting vestige of culinary leaders, evoking the venerable roots of military ranks.

Long shut off from dining rooms, the emblematic curtain to the back of the house finally opened locally a half century ago, led by Master Chef Milos Cihelka of the Detroit Athletic Club, who got his start at the London Chop House and, following his stint at the DAC, helmed the former Golden Mushroom in Southfield.

In 1972, Cihelka founded the Michigan Chefs de Cuisine Association, an organization that serves to lift the public profile of culinary teams while raising money for charities.

“When you look at iconic culinary figures in our region like Chef Milos, Chef Douglas Grech (Pontchartrain Hotel, The Great Dane, Restaurant Duglass), and Joe Muer Jr. (Joe Muer Restaurants), they set the plateau for all the chefs and culinary teams that followed,” says Chef Marcus Haight, the longtime executive chef at The Lark and today a professor in culinary arts at Schoolcraft College in Livonia.

To ensure that knowledge was passed on to the next generation, Haight and his fellow faculty members made it a point to include students in the preparation of the cuisine for Legends of the Stove.

Limited to 150 guests, the selections included Lobster Bisque with Chive Crème Fraiche, Duck Pie with Cherrywood Smoked Salmon, Pan-Seared Potato Gnocchi, Venison Epigrams, Sautéed Lake Perch Goujons, Red Spiced Wagyu Short Rib, and more.

Haight's dish was Rack of Lamb Genghis Khan; in keeping with the charitable nature of the event, the meat was donated by Fairway Packing Co. in Detroit. His students helped prepare the marinade, while undergraduates from Chef Brian Polcyn's (Pike Street, Five Lakes Grill, Forest Grill) class did the butchering.

"When I was at the event, I was struck by the overall positive attitude," Haight says. "I realized it was a snapshot in time to see everyone together who contributed to the restaurants in this town. It was a moment we'll likely never see again. We're fortunate to work in the Motor City, which brought so much here from around the world."

Starting in the 1920s, as local automakers and suppliers expanded beyond North America, executives and managers were introduced to new cuisines, wines, and spirits. At the same time, the region has long attracted people from nearly every country, given Detroit was founded in 1701 and is the oldest city in the Midwest.

Pair that with Henry Ford's decision in 1914 to double workers' wages to \$5 a day. The unprecedented pay hike, which was largely matched by other automakers and suppliers, attracted thousands of workers from every corner of the globe.

As Famie's filmmaking team notes, metro Detroit is "one of the world's most culturally diverse and unique places to dine." It also "paved the way for Detroit to introduce a diverse range of dining destinations rivaled only by New York or Paris."

"I really saw Legends of the Stove as a way to celebrate the past, honor the present, and nurture the future," Famie says. "The event wasn't easy by any stretch, but it was rewarding. We raised money for Gilda's Club Metro Detroit, Rising Stars Academy, and the Rainbow Connection."

To help defray costs, the participating restaurants and culinary institutes, along with Chef Source in Canton Township, Great Lakes Wine & Spirits in Highland Park, Carmela Foods in Fraser, and the Toni A. Wisne Foundation in Novi, among others, donated nearly everything.

Taking it all in, Famie, who has directed and produced dozens of films, and once appeared on a season of "Survivor," summed up the highlights.

"Our executive producers — Tony and Mary Schimizzi, John and Carole Kulhavi, and Roger and Mary Kreager — played an important role, and we had students participate from the culinary programs at Schoolcraft College, Oakland Community College, and Macomb Community College. When I look back, we might have been crazy to pull everything together in 10 weeks, but it was certainly worth celebrating the present and enlightening the future."