

CHEF CHARLIE PALMER & DRY CREEK KITCHEN

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Charlie Palmer grew up eating vegetables from his family's garden in upstate New York. As a young adult, he trained at the Culinary Institute of America, and throughout the years, Chef Palmer's love for farm-fresh food has continued to grow. He has managed, opened, and owned numerous award-winning, Michelin-star, and James Beard-awarded restaurants, and he continues to do so today. Chef Palmer has an excellent reputation for training new chefs, offering internship opportunities for current students, and employing more than 70 CIA graduates. During a recent trip to Healdsburg, California, I interviewed Chef Palmer and dined at Dry Creek Kitchen.

DINNER AT DRY CREEK KITCHEN

I have visited Sonoma Wine Country several times in the last five years and was thrilled to dine at Dry Creek Kitchen with my husband Steve in the late spring. My dinner began with a simple cocktail made with sparkling wine, elderflower syrup, and a lemon twist. It was a light

and refreshing way to start the meal. Dinner commenced with a canapé of tasty Gulf Shrimp Dumplings served with Palmer Estate Yuzu Ponzu, chili oil, and scallions. The tender and mild shrimp stuffing came alive with the spicy sauce and paired wonderfully with the 2021 Cobb Riesling from Abigail's Vineyard. We shared two first courses: the Grilled Brokaw Avocado with kumquat, tangelo, pepita crema, salsa macha, and peanuts for a delicious crunch, and a Gulf Shrimp Stuffed Pappardelle consisting of a perfectly cooked piece of pasta, Preston Farm's green garlic, Eco Terreno fava leaves and lemon balm. I continued drinking the delicious Cobb Riesling, and Steve enjoyed a glass of 2021 Limestone Sauvignon Blanc.

The entrées were exceptional. Steve chose the Seared Dayboat Scallops served with an herbed risotto cake, blood orange, Jennifer's rangpur lime, and Swiss chard. The dish was buttery and creamy and went very well with the dry, crisp aromas of apple, guava, and lime in the 2021 Limestone Sauvignon Blanc. I tried the Coffee Crusted Pork Tenderloin paired with a glass of





Vivier 2021 Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast. The tenderloin arrived accompanied by crisp pork belly, sweet potato fondant, and braised cabbage. On a scale of one to ten, both entrées received tens in my book.

We finished dinner with a decadent Peanut Butter Bar and Meyer Lemon Cheesecake. The Peanut Butter Bar was rich and light at the same time, and the cheesecake was perfectly balanced between sweet and tangy. Our dinners at Dry Creek Kitchen were delicious and well worth a visit to Healdsburg, California.

I asked Chef/Owner Charlie Palmer some questions about his background, cooking style, work with new chefs, and current role within his restaurant collective.

CHEF PALMER'S BACKGROUND

Who influenced your love of cooking as a child?

Sharon Crain, who was a home economics high school teacher, exposed me to the world of food and the possibilities of a career as a chef.

Do you have a favorite childhood dish?

Some of my best memories were of somewhat classic French dishes such as beef bourguignon, coq a vin, and, of course, all types of basic baking—apple tarts became my go-to since I lived on an apple orchard.

Who was the most considerable influence during your culinary training and why?

My true mentors began while I attended the CIA. First was a Belgian chef named Leon Dahmons. When I first arrived in NYC, Jean-Jacques Rachou and Andre Soltner were fabulous mentors. Each one opened the world of great cuisine to my eyes and made me realize that my life would be spent not only as a chef but also exploring food and all of the possibilities that surround it.

If you could only have five ingredients, what would they be, and what would you make?

Donabe chicken—chicken, jasmine rice, scallions, shiitake mushrooms, and smoked bacon. I love to make this go-to dish often for many reasons, mainly because it is made in one pot and is easy to clean up.

Have you created a specific dish that wowed you far beyond your expectations? What was it?

We have this new dish at Charlie Palmer Steak IV that I love. It's called «The Seaside,» and it's a medley of fresh, seasonal seafood lightly seared tableside with chicory, blood orange, and avocado. It is light and delicious, and best of all, we prepare it right in front of the guests.

What do you love most about Dry Creek Kitchen (DCK) and its location in Sonoma County Wine Country?

Dry Creek Kitchen has been a labor of love since the beginning, 20 years ago. When I first visited Healdsburg, I fell in love with the area, and DCK has been an homage to wine country ever since. We feature everything made within Sonoma County on the menu, from the produce to the wine. We have the most expansive list of Sonoma-only wines in the world. And finally, its location is second-to-none, right on the Healdsburg Plaza.





PALMER'S COOKING STYLE

How has your idea of Progressive American cooking evolved or changed over the years, and what does the term mean to you today?

Cooking has always been an evolution and something I've prided myself on since the start of my career. The way people are eating has continually evolved, from the multi-course tasting menu in my early days in New York to now, where neighborhood-eatery style eating is really leading the charge. Our concepts are more varied now, from the upscale and fine dining Charlie Palmer Steak IV and Dry Creek Kitchen to the fun, casual Italianesque concept at AperiBar.

In my experience, many fine dining establishments in America have an increasing Asian influence. Has the cuisine in your restaurants shifted in this direction, or are you still using predominantly French techniques and flavors with your local artisanal products?

I would say we still use classic French techniques in our kitchens, but there is a lot more Asian influence, especially with the ingredients. We're also cooking lighter—an example is that seafood salad I mentioned earlier. We want people walking away from the table feeling good and satiated but not overly stuffed. If you take a look at our Dry Creek Kitchen menus, for example, you'll see a ton of Asian or Asian-inspired ingredients, like our canapés with Gulf Shrimp, citrus ponzu, and chili oil.

Do you have any favorite regional products for each of your restaurants? (For example, a specific goat cheese from Sonoma County or a vegetable from a particular area near New York.)

That's a hard one, especially because we're using seasonal ingredients whenever possible. Liberty Duck will always be one of my absolute favorites, and I'm so happy to report that we have had their ducks back on the menu again after they ran into some hardship with the Avian flu earlier this year. At Charlie Palmer Steak IV, we're featuring a new cut called a "Long Island Strip," which is a variation on the New York Strip; it's super tender without the fat of a New York.

HOW PALMER INSPIRES AND TRAINS NEW CHEFS

You have trained numerous chefs in your kitchens. Do you know how many, and what are three practices or ideologies that you want to instill in them while they train in your kitchens?

I don't think I can even guess how many over the years. Mentorship is very important to me, which is why I've been on the CIA board for so long and was chairman a while back. Cooking can be a challenging profession, so you've really got to love it and have passion for it, which is the first step in the process. It is essential to stay focused, keep your station organized, and TASTE the food.

How would you describe your leadership style in the kitchen?

I like to say that we're not curing cancer in the kitchen, and if you don't make mistakes, you won't learn, so in the kitchen, I think I'm pretty fair and very level-headed, but I also run a tight ship because you have to.

How do you inspire creativity in your kitchens, and how does your staff contribute to new dishes?

My Exec Chefs and Sous Chefs really run their kitchens. I want them to feel like they have autonomy over the menu since they are the ones cooking it day in and day out. But I will always offer constructive feedback and ideas for things we can do differently/better/etc.

Do you encourage your intern chefs to open restaurants that will eventually be your competition?

Of course. There will always be new restaurants in this world, and our young chefs will be the future. Bryan Voltaggio is a great example. He was our Executive Chef (and even the GM for a time) at Charlie Palmer Steak in DC, and then he went on to open his successful restaurants all over, and I truly support that.

Do you feel that restaurants are more collaborative and supportive of one another today, and does that vary by location?

Yes definitely. The kitchen atmosphere has changed over the past thirty years, and chefs are more open to ideas, conversations, and collaboration.

What is the most challenging part of training CIA graduates or an intern?

When they get into the weeds on a busy shift, you have to teach them that they need to stay focused, keep cooking consistently, and work to be faster and better.

What is your favorite part of working with CIA graduates and other intern chefs?

Go CIA! I love the CIA and its students. We want our young culinarians to succeed and go on to do great things. My assistant is a CIA graduate, and we share that CIA bond together, like so many of my chefs.

Could you describe your idea of the perfect intern chef?

There is no perfect intern; each one is so different, so that's hard, but I look for someone who is passionate, wants to learn, and works hard.

PALMER'S CURRENT ROLE IN HIS RESTAURANT COLLECTIVE

Do you still cook in any of your kitchens, or do you solely have a more managerial role throughout your collective?

I'm always in and out of all my kitchens. My role definitely requires more guidance and mentorship now, but I am still in the kitchen most days/nights of the week. ❖