

## In the Kitchen

Chefs' tables truly are the best seats in the house.

Interactive dining options run the gamut in Jacksonville. From dinner theater at the Alhambra to fondue parties at The Melting Pot and parades of skewered meat at Tinto Churrascaria—there's something for most adventurous diners.

Another dining experience that's become popular at many high-end restaurants across the country—the chef's table—is slowly gaining traction in the River City. Though it varies slightly depending on the restaurant, the concept involves guests eating in or near the kitchen while the chef prepares a special meal just for them. Usually, the chef will explain the thought process and the ingredients behind each course and answer questions from his diners. In some cases, the guests are encouraged to leave the table, strap on aprons and get behind the stove to help prepare the meal as well.

The idea isn't necessarily new—tables of birthday children at Japanese steakhouses have long marveled at chefs flipping shrimp high into the air and making smoking volcanoes out of onion rings—but these chefs and restaurants are taking it to the next level.

Rick Epley, executive chef at the Omni Jacksonville hotel, in the summer opened a \$20,000 private kitchen in the midst of the downtown hotel's main kitchen. With Epley at their disposal, guests can reserve the room for private dining, interactive classes and team-building events. The 600-square-foot walk-in room feels like a home kitchen, decorated in warm wood and velvet reds, and can accommodate up to eight for a seated dinner. Reservations are required at least a week in advance, and subject to availability in Epley's schedule. Upon reservation, the chef calls the guests to determine their likes and dislikes to prepare a custom menu, typically working with seasonal ingredients already in the kitchen's pantry.

In October, a friend and I dined in the chef's kitchen to sample a menu from the hotel's



Rick Epley of the Omni Jacksonville Hotel cooks up something great for diners in his chef's kitchen.

Flavors of the World program (Omni chefs study the cuisine of a particular country each year and feature it in their respective restaurants; this year, it's France). We enjoyed sautéed scallops, fresh pea soup, salmon fillet, tenderloin, escargot and chocolate mousse, all expertly paired with various French wines. We savored every last bite, but the best part of the meal was the interaction with the chef. We shot Epley with questions about his trip to France and the lessons he learned about its food, watched him plate the dishes and learned about the ingredients and methods he used for the meal. The atmosphere was casual, but intimate, something beyond the ordinary dining experience. The personal attention stroked our egos, for sure, but talking about the food and its merits felt like we were at a judges' table on *Top Chef* or *Iron Chef*.

Of course, if diners want a tad more privacy or don't care to talk about the regions in which their foods were grown, the chef can become a fly on the wall, too.

A dinner in the Chef's Kitchen at the Omni costs \$125 per person and comes with at least a seven-course meal and wines paired for each course. The hotel has crafted different packages to promote the dining option, including a one-night stay at the hotel, parking, dinner for two in Chef's Kitchen and breakfast for two starting at \$229 per couple.

Other resort chefs in the area also offer chef's tables. Chef Ted Peters of Azura at *One Ocean* in Atlantic Beach has his Adventurous Palate tasting menu, available by reservation. A party of up to eight guests can reserve the table, in

the center of the restaurant, where Peters greets them and serves a five- or seven-course dinner based on the guests' preferences. Cost ranges from \$85 to \$160 per person, depending on the number of courses and whether wine is ordered. Meanwhile, Richard Gras, chef at Salt in The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island, has his Salt in the Kitchen. Up to four guests can reserve the table, inside a glass-enclosed room in the heart of the kitchen. Gras and other chefs prepare, at minimum, a custom 10-course tasting menu for \$175 a person (\$275, with wine). Each guest is given an apron and encouraged to join the kitchen line and even try her hand at prepping some food. The island resort has had a version of the table for nearly 15 years, started by chef Matthew Medure (Medure no longer works for The Ritz-Carlton, but offers a chef's counter with a bird's eye view into his kitchen at Matthew's in San Marco).

"People are getting more and more interested in how a kitchen works," Gras says. "With the Food Network, there's a fascination in what we do. I love the interaction with the guests, showing them the quality of the food and how it's prepared."

Chef's tables need space in the kitchen or in the dining room, and restaurateurs need to decide whether it makes financial sense to dedicate that space to one table instead of several or even an oven. Few independent restaurants can afford to provide the service, Gras says. Chef Toni Acireale of Giovanni's in Jacksonville Beach adopted the chef's table concept by converting a wine storage area to a private room five years ago. Up to eight people

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From above: Seat in the kitchen at The Ritz-Carlton, Amelia Island; Adventurous Palate at Azura at One Ocean Beach; Chef's table at The Capital Grille.

of the dining room, near the steakhouse's open kitchen, and can seat up to 10. The menu is no different from other guests' but those at the chef's table are the center of attention.

"Because of its location in the center of the dining room, the chef's table is an inviting spot to socialize and be seen," says Joe Zacker, general manager of the restaurant.

For chefs, the interaction with guests gives them immediate feedback about their skills and allows them to share their passion for food. Even the chefs of tomorrow are experimenting with the one-on-one chef's table experience. At FCCJ's Mallard Room (the real-life restaurant

led for the school's culinary program), professor and chef Joe Harold puts two students at a chef's table at each meal. The students are instructed to create an entirely new menu with a minimum of three courses using the ingredients that are available in the restaurant that day. The table is in the kitchen, and the meal only \$7. But guests have to be invited and are typically friends and family of the student, because the menus are not for those with picky palates or weak stomachs.

"They've got to be really adventurous eaters," Harold says. "This is an opportunity for our students to be creative." ❧

can reserve the room and enjoy a custom five-course menu, starting at \$65 a person. Acireale says he interacts with the guests, but it's the server who explains each individual course throughout the meal.

The level of interaction primarily depends on what the customer wants. For some, location is the primary selling factor. Buca di Beppo's kitchen table can be reserved for up to a group of six at lunch or dinner. The menu and service are the same, but the view is not. At The Capital Grille, the chef's table is in the center