

Visiting Chef: EDWARD LEE

Chef Lee talks about his path to 610 Magnolia, and the local food movement.

BY JUDI KETTELER

As a boy growing up in Brooklyn, Edward Lee spent a big part of his childhood in the kitchen with his grandmother. He had an early fascination with cookbooks and cooking. “It wasn’t so much about the process as it was about the instant gratification of a meal. It was like magic,” says Lee, executive chef and partner at 610 Magnolia in Louisville, Ky.

Lee’s path to 610 Magnolia, a contemporary farm-to-table restaurant, wasn’t a straight shot. He graduated from New York University with a degree in Literature, and worked briefly as a literary agent. At one point, he took a break from school to help his parents turn around a struggling diner they bought. It was far from gourmet cuisine, but Lee realized that he enjoyed the kitchen atmosphere. “Also, I realized that I was good at it,” he says.

Still, his parents were quite dismayed when he announced his new career aspirations. “Being a chef wasn’t considered a wise career choice then—it wasn’t glorified like it is now,” he says.

Lee took it upon himself to acquire an education about cuisine. After working with famed New York chef Frank Crispo, he spent a year traveling through Europe and Asia. In France, a chef let him in on a little secret: The restaurants in Paris were for tourists, while the “real” restaurants, full of regional cuisine and fresh ingredients, were far off the beaten path in the countryside.

“I saw that these restaurants had a kind of freedom, and that people went out of their way to go to these places, which were often in the middle of nowhere,” Lee says. It was then he realized that he didn’t need to be in New York to be part of the “real” food scene. He continued to work in New York City for a while, opening Clay, an Asian-inspired restaurant. He poured his soul into the restaurant, all the while keeping the lessons he learned in France in the back of his mind.

The opportunity at 610 Magnolia came at the right time. “It just felt like something was pushing me toward Louisville,” Lee says. He took the reins of 610 Magnolia from retiring chef/owner Eddie Garber in 2004, and began building relationships with small local farmers to grow food for the restaurant. Lee’s philosophy is simple: “I don’t create a menu and then try to source ingredients. I get the ingredients that are available first, and then try to create the menu around it,” he says. Lee changes the menu at 610 Magnolia every week to reflect what’s fresh at that moment. The fare always has a strong vegetable element; Lee works closely with two farms, each about 30 miles away. He also tries to get as much local meat and dairy as possible.



One thing that Lee emphasizes is that local should be about quality, and that the local products need to be held to the same quality standards as everything else. “There is some local stuff that I don’t feel is good enough. In that case, I think it’s important to let the growers know, so they make a better product,” he says.

Lee’s system is working. 610 Magnolia has been featured in *Bon Appetit*, *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Saveur*, *Organic Style*, *Southern Living* and many other national publications. In addition to being a regular invitee to the James Beard Foundation (he’s also nominated for a 2010 James Beard Foundation Award), Lee has been featured on MSNBC, *BBC World News* and speaks on panels from the American Cheese Society to the Sierra Club. He is also involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance and Slow Food movement and frequently travels around the country. ■

KICK-OFF DINNER: FRIDAY, APRIL 23, 6:30 PM

Chef Lee is the featured chef Friday evening, April 23, as The Summit Restaurant at the Midwest Culinary Institute begins the 1 Night, 12 Kitchens event weekend with a special dinner.

- Wine pairings will be chosen and described by Jerry Comfort, wine educator for Beringer.
- Complimentary valet parking provided.
- Dinner can be purchased at \$125 per person (tax/tip included) or in combination with a VIP ticket to the 1 Night, 12 Kitchens event at \$300 per person. Space is limited.

AT THE EVENT Watch Chef Lee in action in The Dish Demonstration Kitchen, 6:30 pm-7 pm.

Call Chris Ohmer, 513.562.2777, for reservations or more information.