

Aaron McCloud's sky high cooking

BY ALEXANDRA GREELEY | JULY 24, 2012 AT 4:40 PM

Down a flight of stairs off Penn Quarter's E St., Cedar restaurant mirrors a woodsy atmosphere, just like its name. Executive chef Aaron McCloud is tasked with coming up with outdoorsy dishes -- read fish, game, and "forest forage" such as mushrooms and berries -- that reflect a natural and rural setting but have a contemporary spin. Looks like McCloud is up to the task.

A native of Ann Arbor, Mich., McCloud worked in restaurants starting in his early teens, but back then, he didn't cook, he played the violin. "I had gigs in restaurants," he said, "and I was in a professional orchestra. One of the gigs was playing at the Gandy Dancer restaurant in Ann Arbor."

From violinist to dishwasher at the restaurant was not such a huge step he says, and it was a way to earn money. Although he had no interest at that point in cooking as a career, the restaurant chef lured McCloud into the kitchen by offering him a chance to prep and to become the line cook who made the omelets. By that time, McCloud's interest in becoming a chef began to emerge.

If you go

Cedar

Where: 822 E St., NW

Info: 202-637-0012

Hours: Mon.-Fri., 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Sat., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Sun. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Mon.-Sat., 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

After high school, he considered attending several colleges, but wound up at the University of Massachusetts, working toward a business degree. To earn cash, he cooked in several local restaurants.

After graduation, McCloud moved all around the country, cooking in restaurants from Vermont to Florida. There, McCloud worked as the saucier at the award-winning Victoria & Albert's restaurant at Disney World. McCloud worked as executive chef at The Inn at Perry Cabin on Maryland's Eastern Shore before heading back to D.C. for his job at Cedar.

As he reflects on his career to date, this young chef attributes his passion for restaurant cooking to how he was raised. Dining was important, he says, and both his mother and grandmother loved dining in restaurants and the whole restaurant experience. "My love of fine food comes from our restaurant experiences, from the theater of it," he said.

As for the violin, he still plays occasionally, but adds that he has "fallen in love with this bizarre business" -- that is, cooking -- either at the restaurant or at home. "I can always pick up an instrument," he said. "But the level of cooking I want to achieve, I don't do it half time."

Q&A

What is your comfort food?

A big bowl of pasta, like a big serving of lasagna, or mom's beef Stroganoff.

What's in your fridge?

A lot of condiments, leftover Chinese food, and odds and ends of breakfast food.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

Bistro du Coin; it has the best foie gras and the best steak tartare.

What was your luckiest moment?

When the omelet cook didn't show up one Sunday morning. I didn't wash dishes anymore.

What is your must-have ingredient?

Butter. If there is one thing, it is butter.

Recipe

Poached Roulade Of Chicken With Grilled Watermelon and Ricotta Salata

Serves 4

2 tablespoons olive oil

4 ounce Swiss chard leaves, coarsely chopped

2 large shallots, thinly sliced

2 large chicken breasts, preferably organic

2 pinches ground nutmeg

2 pinches chopped thyme

2 pinches sliced chives

Kosher salt and black pepper to taste

1 baby watermelon

4 ounces ricotta salata

2 ounces arugula

2 ounces very fine extra virgin olive oil, preferably Sogno Toscano from Tuscany

1 very fine balsamic vinegar, such as 12-year-old vinegar from Modena

Maldon sea salt to taste

Pink pepper to taste

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat, and saute the chard and shallots until the chard is wilted. Season with salt and pepper while they cook. Set aside to cool.

Butterfly the chicken breasts and pound out thin. Season with the nutmeg and herb mix. Place the chard and shallots on the pounded chicken. Roll them to create a pinwheel effect. Roll the chicken rolls in plastic wrap and then aluminum foil so they are very tight.

Poach in simmering water for 8 minutes and then plunge them into ice water. They'll be ready to unwrap and slice in about 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, peel and slice the watermelon about 1 1/2 inches thick. On a very hot grill, grill each side of the melon. You don't want to "cook" the melon. You simply want to caramelize and pick up some grill flavor. Chill the melon. Thinly slice the cheese and toss in a little olive oil. Toss the arugula in oil and season with sea salt and the pink pepper. Slice the chicken and assemble on a plate with the rest of the ingredients. Drizzle with more olive oil and the balsamic vinegar.

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