

## Meet four successful local chefs who said 'no thank you' to the culinary-school path

By Laura Hayes, Updated: April 3 at 11:22 am

If Jennifer Nguyen has 10 free minutes at work, you won't catch her texting with pals. Instead, the executive chef of Zentan, a modern Asian restaurant in Thomas Circle, is likely leading an impromptu lesson on slicing sashimi as inquisitive sous chefs look on.

Nguyen finds every teachable moment because, as a chef who never attended culinary school, she knows the importance of curiosity in the kitchen.

Like Nguyen, other notable D.C. chefs — including Bradley Curtis of Flight Wine Bar, Aaron McCloud of Cedar and Matt Kuhn of Ardeo + Bardeo — have found success without a formal degree.

"It sets us apart because we're a little more driven," Nguyen says. "We don't have the advantage of a piece of paper. We have will."

Michael Babin, founder of the Neighborhood Restaurant Group (which oversees 17 local restaurants including Iron Gate, Red Apron Butcher and ChurchKey) estimates that he's interviewed more than 500 chef candidates in his 17 years of experience. He says a culinary degree is not a prerequisite, though it doesn't hurt.

"With a culinary degree you're learning principles, ideas and technique, but learning those things in a busy kitchen is a different thing," Babin says. "You're getting a real-time reaction of your peers, your boss and the guests. That experience molds you much more quickly than culinary school."

In her teens, Nguyen took orders at a Chinese restaurant in Lancaster, Pa., but spent more time stealing peeks of cooks working the woks. She began honing her skills at a small Thai restaurant in Philadelphia under chef Kamol Phutlek. Her big break came when she was promoted to executive sous chef at Morimoto, an Asian fusion restaurant in Philadelphia.

"I worked three times as hard because I didn't have the advantage of going to school," Nguyen says. "It gives you a special humbleness." She also credits nurturing chefs like Phutlek for her strong foundation of skills. "If you can take something from each chef you work with, you're already ahead of the curve."

Nguyen had the benefit of working for big-name chefs in major cities, but that's not the only recipe for success.

Flight executive chef Bradley Curtis "mom-and-popped" at a Maine pizza place when he was 14, and later at a small Moroccan restaurant in New York. It was there that he met his mentor, Russ Catalano.

"He was rough on me," Curtis says. "But he saw something and pushed me. I learned how to handle stress. That's not taught in culinary school."

Catalano's influence can be seen in the touches of Moroccan flavors that come through on Flight's menu, like the bronzino dusted with sumac and za'atar pesto.

Other chefs inched into the kitchen after front-of-the-house gigs. Take Aaron McCloud. Before he began serving garden-rich dishes at Cedar in Penn Quarter, McCloud serenaded diners with his violin in his early teens at a fine dining restaurant in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"The idea was to make millions as a concert violinist and buy a restaurant," McCloud says. Instead, he traded his bow for a dishrag and never looked back.

"I didn't have anybody telling me, 'You're going to go to school and when you get your diploma you'll be a chef.' I had people kicking my ass."

McCloud earned an undergraduate dual degree in marketing and hotel, restaurant and travel administration. At 23, he became the chef de cuisine at a Florida hotel. The move that catapulted his career, however, was serving as saucier at the AAA Five Diamond Award-winning Victoria and Albert's restaurant in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. District residents can thank that stint for the bacon vinaigrette sauce atop the Texas wild boar dish at Cedar.

Like McCloud, Matt Kuhn, the executive chef of Ardeo + Bardeo, was lured by the call of the kitchen and changed his plans.

"When I got to college I was going to major in marine biology, but then found out they had a restaurant management program," Kuhn says. In an era when chefs are expected to manage people, inventory, the kitchen facility and more, the degree gives Kuhn a leg up.

Throughout school, Kuhn worked at The Gourmet Shop in Columbia, S.C., where he'd open the café at 5 a.m., escape to class in the afternoon and return to the helm as kitchen manager.

"Real-world experience is faster than going to culinary school," Kuhn says. "Every day you work you learn over 20 new things."

### Don't Rule Out School

All this is not to say that you should drop out of culinary school and start tossing pizza. Patrice Olivon, the director of culinary arts at the top-ranked L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg, Md., sees culinary school as a fast track into an increasingly competitive industry. (Notable grads include Katsuya Fukushima of Daikaya, Shannon Overmiller of The Majestic, and Carla Hall.)

"Of course anything is possible, but outside of culinary school, you only learn a new thing every so often because busy chefs don't have time to teach, making progress slower," he says. "Culinary school shoots you to the top."

Olivon described a recent graduate's promotion to sous chef at Vidalia with great pride. It took only nine months after he handed her a diploma, and she didn't have to start out on dishwashing duty.

Another perk of that diploma is the unmatched peer network you gain, as well as the recognition. It's not uncommon for fellow graduates to put in a good word for one another, or look to hire alumni of the same program.