

CUISINE NEWS

Six Southwest Florida chefs headed to James Beard House


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The Big Apple will enjoy the fruits — not to mention the vegetables, seafood and meats — of Southwest Florida, prepared by some of the region's top chefs at a dinner at the prestigious James Beard House this fall.

Norman Love, the acclaimed chocolatier, pastry chef and founder of Norman Love Confections, has put together an all-star team to present the dinner in New York City Friday, Oct. 2.

Joining him will be Fabrizio Aielli, chef/owner of Sea Salt in Naples and St. Petersburg; Harold Balink, chef/owner of Cru in Fort Myers; George Fistrovich, executive chef of The Ritz-Carlton Resorts of Naples; and Todd Johnson, chef/owner of Rumrunners in Cape Coral. Ryan Love, an up-and-coming pastry chef at Norman Love Confections, will join his father to create the desserts.

"The menu will feature ingredients that are indigenous to Southwest Florida," says Norman Love. "The other team members are longtime friends and accomplished chefs. Everyone is really excited about working together on this project."

Also playing a starring role in the meal will be the produce and meats of Rosy Tomorrows Heritage Farm, run by Rose O'Dell King of North Fort Myers. Her chicken, red wattle pork, Everglades tomatoes and mint marigold will be among the ingredients the chefs use to craft their hors d'oeuvres and six courses.

The not-for-profit James Beard Foundation maintains the Greenwich Village property that was home to the famed cookbook author and educator. Today, the house hosts culinary events showcasing chefs from around the world vying to create a meal for 80 people in this challenging performance space. The foundation's mission is to "celebrate, nurture and honor America's culinary heritage."

Mr. Aielli has experience at Beard dinners from his days as a top chef in Washington, D.C., but this is his first return trip since he relocated to Naples and opened Sea Salt.

"I'm very excited to be able to go and have fun and have people understand that they can come to Southwest Florida for really good food," he says.

Mr. Aielli will serve a savory Murray River Salt macaroon with Florida spiny lobster and foie gras as his hors d'oeuvre.

His plated course will consist of Pine Island octopus ink ravioli stuffed with Rosy Tomorrows pastured chicken, white truffle, homemade ricotta, Venus clam ragu and liquid egg yolk.

Although many people consider chicken a ho-hum protein, Mr. Aielli intends to show them otherwise. "I want to show what can be done with a simple chicken," he says. "You roast it and all the fat is removed and stuff the ravioli. We steam the clams on the chicken. The Venus claim sauce, the sweet raisin tomatoes and white truffle complement the ravioli. The clams with the chicken are absolutely wonderful."

Mr. Johnson will prepare the evening's pork dishes.

"I'll do a succulent miso belly as the first element," he says, "a second of mint marigold saltimbocca tenderloin and a third of pig shoulder confit with butternut squash. All will be on one plate."

For his pre-dinner canapé, he plans a savory sesame cone topped with red wattle pork rillettes and mascarpone mousse.

"I'm really excited to work with this group of chefs," Mr. Johnson says. "It's a true veteran chefs' crew."

Mr. Balink's starter will be Rosy Tomorrows chicken pate and port gelee with a plated course of pan-seared black grouper, Rosy Tomorrows Everglades tomatoes, crispy oyster and conch-orange butter.

Florida red shrimp spaghetti with red lettuce puree and Sarasota Mote sturgeon caviar is Mr. Fistrovich's contribution to the hors d'oeuvres. His plated course: Jackman Ranch beef cheeks, barbecued hearts of palm, charred corn cloud in the flavors of esquite (a Northern Mexican dish), boniato and preserved chop box cabbage leaves.

The father-and-son Love team will create a pre-dessert of chilled Florida strawberry consommé, crème fraiche panna cotta and lemon basil macaron glace, paying homage to the fruits of Florida while keeping it "light and refreshing," Norman Love says. "Then it will be all about chocolate for dessert," he adds about the final course called the Bittersweet Chocolate and Tropical Experience.

With a limit of 80 diners, most people won't be able to attend the dinner in New York, but the chefs are considering re-creating the meal locally afterward, most likely as a fundraiser for a Southwest Florida charity. They will be able to show video of the New York dinner at the event for an added taste of the real thing.

Tickets for the Beard dinner are expected to go on sale Aug. 1. Details and reservations are available at jamesbeard.org. ■