

CHEF INTERVIEW

CHRISTOPHER KOSTOW



Now: The Restaurant at Meadowood, St. Helena, since February, 2008

Then: George's at the Cove, San Diego; Le Jardin des Sens, Montpellier, France; Campton Place, San Francisco; Chez TJ, Mountain View

Kudos: Michelin, 2 stars; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 stars; *Food & Wine* magazine's *Best New Chefs 2009*; James Beard Society nomination for *Best Chef, Pacific*

Limelight: *Iron Chef* challenger, Sept. 5, 2010

Mentors: Trey Foshee, Daniel Humm, Christian Morisset, Daniel Patterson

Favorite restaurants: Sushi Mori (LA), SPQR (San Francisco), Commis (Oakland)

Age: 34

Grew up: The Chicago suburb of Highland Park

Education: Hamilton College, New York, philosophy degree

Interview by Gayle Keck

How did you start cooking?

I fell into cooking at Ravinia [the suburban Chicago music festival] as a summer job when I was a teenager. I was working the register at a restaurant there, but I realized the people in the back were having much more fun – and that's where all the wine was – so I just moved back there and started cooking. I dropped out of summer school and would come home covered in flour and my parents had no idea what to make of it. In college, I was cooking for friends, cooking for professors, reading cookbooks and getting deeper into it.

No culinary school?

I think it's a superfluous experience.

So how did you make the transition to fine dining?

I was in San Diego and I saw in a magazine that Trey Foshee had been named a *Food & Wine* Best Chef, so I kept going by and dropping off resumes and calling. Eventually he called me, and I was plating desserts and shucking oysters. It was weird. You had to wash your hands a lot!

How'd you grow your skills?

Trey took me under his wing and loaned me his cookbooks. At the time, I was making so little money that I'd go to the bookstore, buy a cookbook and photocopy what I wanted and then exchange it for another book and

photocopy that. Trey had me doing daily specials that got me really thinking about food in a more original manner. And then I went to France to get some technical foundation that I felt I needed.

Do you advise young chefs to spend time in France?

It's not necessary – there's good technique everywhere; there are people doing original things everywhere. In the high-end French kitchens, there's a certain rigor that you don't see in the U.S. It's a great experience, but I don't think it's necessary.

What quality has contributed the most to your success?

Being doggedly persistent. Never being satisfied with where things are on your menu, with your kitchen, with your staff. Just constantly progressing. We push very, very hard to evolve every day. That's what sets us apart now, and will in the future – a sheer lack of ability to be content. It's a dynamism that results from not resting on your laurels. It's a stress, certainly, but that's pretty exciting. We're down the road from some great restaurants, and that has made me a better chef. I relish the role of underdog. I think it's from my old hockey playing days.

Hockey? What's the comparison?

You have to be very aggressive, have some bravado, to really believe that what you're doing is as good or better than what other people are doing. In hockey I tended to be the smaller guy, but the guy who mixed it up more than most.

What do you look for when hiring staff?

I look for intelligence, ability to think for themselves, energy. People who aren't too fragile. This is a very, very, very hard environment to work in. I'm hard to work for. The expectations are the expectations, and I don't change them depending on who's doing the cooking. Despite that, I have almost zero turnover. My staff is very intelligent, very progressive, but they're also very nice people. We create an environment where that duality is possible.

What advice would you give job-hunters?

Persistence. You don't see that as much with kids now. Not nearly enough come by and ask to see me. We have a culinary school right here in town, but the kids today email resumes. They don't knock on the door and ask to speak to me – which would go a long, long way.

Do you have what you'd consider to be a "signature dish?"

We don't want signature dishes; we want our style to be a signature. Very light, very delicate, yet the flavors are big. We typically put three new dishes on the menu every week.

What makes a dish memorable?

It needs to be aesthetically stunning. Needs to be totally singular. Stands on its own. The true essence of the thing. Those are the dishes I remember. They are what they are, and they stand alone.

How do you develop new dishes?

A lot of it starts with food memories. Some start with flavor memories I want to evoke in the guests. That's when you really speak to your guests. I think there's a degree of shared food memory.

What are your influences?

I have Eastern European heritage, so we like things smoked and pickled and briny and cured. Dark-grain flavors and things like that. We use Scandinavian flavors quite a bit, as well. Also Spanish. I use white soy a lot, because it has this very cool, wheaty flavor. We like a little umami, and we'll use Asian products at times to achieve that – but rarely will you see us using many Asian techniques.

What do you source from the onsite garden?

Our fruit trees are amazing. We have our own chickens to produce eggs. We're able to use things from seed to flower – like the sunflower seeds, the carrot flowers. We're able to use every element of the vegetable, much of which never comes to market. We have honeybees that feed on all the flowers in the garden and then we use the honeycomb and we do a dish that incorporates all the flowers that they've been feeding on.

What about technique?

Some chefs use technique to make things as interesting as possible, we put that on its head and say, "We have all this ability and know-how, and tools. Why

don't we use technique to make things taste *unbelievably* good?" And you know, a lot of chefs don't do that. When they reach a point that they have means at their disposal, they may push it very far, but not in the direction of their guests.

Is that a slam on molecular gastronomy?

We use a lot of that stuff, but we use it in the service of making things taste good. We don't use it to shock anybody. All that stuff is just part of the pantry. People who took these things and based their world around it, I just don't quite get.

So you wouldn't describe your food as edgy?

We try to be evocative, not provocative. We're not here to shock anybody. It just tastes really good. There's a lot of finesse and a lot of technique and it's very delicate. We're not hitting you over the head with anything. So I wouldn't say it's edgy. It's thoughtful.

You have a philosophy degree. Does that show up in your food?

We all have our life philosophies, but I don't sit there and contemplate Kierkegaard before I put a dish together.

Ha! "Being and Nothingness."

That would be a very easy menu.

Seriously. "You're having nothing." [LAUGHS] We once did an event where we ran out of food really early, and everyone's asking, "Where's your food?" And I said, "We decided that the actual cooking would get in the way of the message." It was a very philosophical response!

Is food emotional or intellectual?

It has to be both. There's things being evocative, pleasing, fun – all those things are emotional. But from a conceptual level, there's some dependence upon the intellect.

Give us an example.

We do Veal Black & White, a veal shoulder we get from Four Story Hill Farm in Pennsylvania. It's a play on *blanquette de veau*. So we take that as an opening point. We clean up the veal shoulder really well, taking out all the connective tissue and fat. It's very, very tender. And we serve it with black and white elements – so there's a ribbon of rice that's been infused with white corn milk and steamed; there's glazed white onion petals, white turnips, white corn and white carrot flowers. It's all served in a black bowl, with black morels and black truffle puree. Then at the table it's finished with a white blanquette sauce. You have all the intellect there. It's esoteric in its approach, but you eat it and it's very homey.

How do you put together your menu?

We spend a lot of time thinking about the evolution of a meal. And the tasting menu is the culmination of that. We give a great deal of thought to how it moves, in terms of temperature, in terms of texture, in terms of

flavors, in terms of acidity, in terms of even the size of the dish, the richness of the dish. It's very important to me that it makes sense as a whole. I have certain benchmarks that I want to work with. I want caviar to start. Being in Napa, I have a very, very big red wine-friendly last, savory course. And I tend to do a cheese course that is red wine-friendly as well.

Some chefs (David Chang, for one, with his "figs on a plate" comment) have criticized Bay Area chefs for being too simplistic and ingredient-driven. What do you think of that?

I think most chefs should just put figs on a plate. I'm fine with it – if it's a good fig. In the hands of almost all chefs, I'd rather just have the fig.

What trends do you see developing (good or bad)?

There's a *garagiste* mentality out there that can potentially lead to very individual, original voices and food. The downside is, there sometimes tends to be too much emphasis on style and not on actual food. There are a lot of new casual, very hip restaurants that pop up, with a lot of cool ideas, but I just don't see the food being done very well – and that's not a knock because these places aren't fine dining. Maybe there's a lack of diligence sometimes.

What's your "last meal?"

Really, really, really, really good sushi – like at Sushi Mori in LA. It's ridiculously good sushi. His fish is just unbelievable; his technique is just unbelievable. Chef Morihiro grows and harvests his own rice, even makes his own plates.

If I came back 25 years from now, what would you tell me you were proudest of among all you have done?

Ideally, that I taught people. As a restaurant, as a chef, when you're successful, you create really good opportunities for people. These kids who work for me are going to go out and do what they want to do, because they worked here – just like I was able to come here because I worked for other people who were successful. So hopefully, I created opportunities for people; hopefully I taught people the right way to do things.

And also, that I brought joy to a lot of people. At the end of the day, guests are not going to remember the dishes. They're not going to remember the taste. They're going to remember the flavor of the experience. The vibe. The spirit of it.

SMOKED SPANISH MACKEREL WITH "ASHEN" POTATO, ESCABÈCHE, CRÈME FRAICHE ICE CREAM

INGREDIENTS

1 Spanish mackerel
Salt to cure
1 sourdough, sliced
1 gram (less than) Activa RM
1 garden radish, sliced, blanched
1 baby carrot, sliced, blanched
1 pearl onion, quartered, blanched
1 celery stalk, cut into batons, blanched
Escabèche liquid (recipe follows) to taste
1 scoop crème fraiche ice cream (recipe follows)
10 grams vegetable ash (recipe follows)
1 potato cylinder, cooked in a sous vide bag until tender

[Garnish]
Celery leaves
Fennel tops
Carrot tops
Pizzo leaves

[Escabèche liquid]
3 1/2 cups white wine vinegar
1/2 cup water
3/4 cup sugar
10 sprigs thyme
1 Tbsp allspice, crushed
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 tsp coriander seed
1 tsp fennel seed
1 tsp mustard seed
1 tsp white peppercorn
1/2 habanero

METHOD

Combine all ingredients. Bring to a boil. Let sit overnight.

[Crème fraiche ice cream]
80 grams sugar
2 1/2 grams carrageenan
1 3/4 grams guar gum
80 grams glucose syrup
300 grams milk
3 1/2 grams mono dyglyceride
250 grams crème fraiche

METHOD

Dissolve glucose into warm milk. Combine sugar with guar and carrageenan. Pour powders over milk in a blender. Bring up to 80°C and dissolve the dyglyceride. Cool down and add crème fraiche. Season with salt and lemon. Freeze.

[Vegetable ash]
100 grams fennel tops
100 grams celery leaves
100 grams parsley leaves
100 grams tarragon
100 grams chives

METHOD

Take all herbs and dry overnight in a low oven.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEADOWOOD NAPA VALLEY

Once dried, blend all ingredients in a blender and pass through a tamis.

ASSEMBLY

For the assembly of the fish, portion into bullets, cure in just salt for 20 minutes, then rinse. Cold smoke for 15 minutes and cool, dry. Dust with Activa, lightly and place the sourdough on top.

Dress the vegetables and place on top of the fish, arrange the potato coated in ash in the middle and garnish with herbs, then quenelle the ice cream to finish.

**Executive Chef
Christopher Kostow**
Restaurant at Meadowood
St. Helena, CA