

Local chefs show unity with Made in Memphis dinner in New York

Chefs in some cities might be jealous of colleagues cooking at the James Beard House. But not in Memphis. Here we have a group of chefs so united in a common cause – spreading the gospel of Memphis food – that on Tuesday they will cook a Made in Memphis dinner together in New York.

Among the group is Miles McMath, the chef at St. Jude. It makes him the first documented hospital chef to cook in the prestigious kitchen.



Felicia Willett of Felicia Suzanne's and her famous deviled eggs.
Photos by Chris Desmond

“As far as anyone knows, that’s the case,” McMath said. “That’s pretty cool.”

The James Beard Foundation opened the James Beard House, in Beard’s West Village residence, in 1986, about a year after he died. That single dinner, attended by luminaries such as Calvin Trillin, Jacques Pepin and Larry Forgione, has evolved to a roster of about 250 dinners held annually. Dinner prices vary but are costly; the proceeds go to the James Beard Foundation and are used to support the culinary arts.

And if you don’t have a ticket to the Made in Memphis dinner, you’re out of luck. It’s a full house; guests have paid \$130-\$170 for a place at the table. But you can get a glimpse of it, as the dinner is among the first to be shown live via the JBF Kitchen Cam, launched last month. It will be broadcast on the screen at The Majestic Grille, 145 S. Main, in Memphis, which will host a watch party starting around 7:30 p.m. and offer some of the signature cocktails that guests in New York will be enjoying too. You can also watch online at jamesbeard.org/kitchen-cam.

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Chefs Patrick Reilly and Felicia Willett enjoy a break in the kitchen during the James Beard Preview Dinner at Felicia Suzanne's in Memphis in February.

"We're going to make signs to hold up so we can give some shoutout to the farmers," said Deni Reilly, who owns The Majestic Grille with her husband, chef Patrick Reilly.

He's the president of the Memphis Restaurant Association and said he hopes this dinner, the unusual collaboration of chefs from the same city cooking together at Beard, is just the beginning.

He starts to explain: "From my standpoint, from the MRA, this is the first of many."

But Felicia Willett, chef-owner of Felicia Suzanne's, quickly interjects.

"I see it differently," she said. "The way I see it, next year you do your own dinner."



Chef Ryan Trimm presents his stone crab and shrimp pirlau during the James Beard Preview Dinner.

It's playful banter, fun between friends who are part of a restaurant community they believe is singular in its citywide camaraderie.

"We're friends," Willett said. "We're not competitors. We're neighbors."

If I run out, I send someone to McEwen's (restaurant) to borrow a cup of sugar." She gestures to the clothing stores across the mall from her restaurant. "I wish Murray's and Jerry's were restaurants. The more the merrier."

It's part of the story of Made in Memphis. Eight chefs representing six restaurant groups – Reilly; Willett; Ryan Trimm of Sweet Grass, Next Door and Southward; Andy Ticer, Michael Hudman and Ryan Jenniges of Andrew Michael Italian Kitchen and Hog & Hominy; Jonathan Magallanes of Los Tortugas Deli Mexicana; and Miles McMath of St. Jude and Kay Kafe. Michael Hughes of Joe's is coordinating the cocktails and wine for the dinner, and almost all the winemakers have a Memphis connection.

Ryan wanted to use Argyle, so we put on the program that they wish they were from Memphis," Patrick Reilly said.

Willett has cooked at the Beard House several times, when she worked for Emeril Lagasse and then in 2012 representing her own restaurant. Ticer and Hudman have also cooked there, but it's the first time for the others. When Willett returned from her 2012 dinner, she and Reilly started talking about a collaborative dinner.



Sun Feb 16, 2014 – Chef Patrick Reilly begins preparations during the James Beard Preview Dinner at Felicia Suzanne's in Memphis Sunday evening.

Beard dinners are expensive for the chefs – this one will cost about \$20,000 – but that wasn't the reason they decided to pitch in and share the kitchen. It was to convey the message of unity among the Memphis chefs, and to show that the city's culinary scene is as interesting and storied as its musical history.

"Memphis is revered," Deni Reilly said. "Bono has a daughter named Memphis."



Veal breast, celery root, ricotta, carrots, and sunchokes by chefs Andy Ticer, Michael Hudman and Ryan Jenniges were among culinary highlights of the preview dinner.

Long known as home of the blues, a solid argument can be made for Memphis also being the home of jazz and of course, rock and roll.

"They didn't necessarily originate here," Patrick Reilly said. "But Memphis is the city where it all fed, from the Delta, from Arkansas, from all around the area."

He's evangelical with his message that Memphis isn't just an incubator for music known around the world, but a culinary crossroads too.

There's barbecue, of course. It's the food that defines the city to outsiders and a source of pride. But the diverse population of Memphis means it's a city where our native cuisines – soul food or home cooking, call it what you prefer – and barbecue meet up with fine dining, Mexican food, Creole and Cajun, Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese, Italian, Indian, Ethiopian and a slew of other ethnic cuisines cooked and served in restaurants around the city because there's a population that demands it.

And the city draws people to it. Patrick Reilly is from Ireland, but owns a restaurant in Memphis. Jose Gutierrez, chef-owner of River Oaks Restaurant, is French. Dane Erling Jensen has been here since he came to La Tourelle many years ago.

"There are people here who could be anywhere, but they want to be here," Reilly said.



Sun Feb 16, 2014 – Creole bronzed lemon fish with soft-shell crawfish, butter-bean farrotto and sauce ravigote by Chef Miles McMath will be the first course at Tuesday's dinner.

"But then he said 'No, this is not for me,'" Deni Reilly said. "He went to culinary school." And by that time, he'd learned to love the food of South Carolina's Low Country, so he came back to Memphis to open Sweet Grass and introduce the city to the spicy, flavor-packed dishes.

The chefs cooked the dinner in February at Felicia Suzanne's, a trial run that also offset some of the costs of the trip.

On Tuesday in New York, guests (including Mayor A C Wharton, who is invited and expected to attend) will not only dine on some of the best the city offers,

but will do it set to a soundtrack of local music by performers such as Amy LaVere, the Bo-Keys, Impala and Magic Kids, among others.

"This is a huge honor and opportunity for our city, and I am extremely proud of all of the chefs involved," Wharton said in an e-mail. "Having had the opportunity to eat food prepared by the hands of these talented personalities, I can say that New York is going to love Memphis all over again. They loved us on Broadway, and they are going to love us around the dinner table as well."

"And look at all the people who have gone away and come back," Deni Reilly added.

The tale of Ticer and Hudman learning to cook Italian food through a cooking tour of Italy is a well-told one, but there are other stories.

Willett, from a small town in Arkansas, ended up in Memphis after years of cooking for Emeril restaurants in New Orleans. Reilly came as a chef for Gibson Lounge. Trimm, like Restaurant Iris and The Second Line chef-owner Kelly English, planned to be a lawyer.



Sun Feb 16, 2014 – The chefs and staff stay busy working together to prepare their specialties during the James Beard Preview Dinner at Felicia Suzanne's in Memphis Sunday evening.

Tiffany Langtson, online content and public relations specialist for the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau, which is helping sponsor the dinner, has invited national media and will be making the rounds across the city, spreading the good word.

“Call it a media blitz, but what we’re doing is getting people interested in Memphis,” she said. “What we want is to pique their interest and then get them to come down and see the city for themselves.”

Menu

To start:

Braised pork shoulder

Donnell Beef tartare

Crispy fried mushroom tacos

Chowchow deviled eggs & Flo’s Tomato Jam

First Course - Creole bronzed lemon fish

Second Course - Shrimp pirlau

Third Course - Pollo en mole verde

Fourth Course - Tennessee pork

Fifth Course - Veal breast

Sixth Course - Classic butter roll

Take Home Course - Petite jugs of Flo’s New Orleans Milk Punch with homemade cookies

