



Clifford Pleau Culinary Director Bio Seasons 52

Clifford Pleau, Corporate Executive Chef for Seasons 52, is quick to tell you he doesn't believe in looking back. "Yesterday is not the focus," he says. "What's next is what matters."

Choosing his career is an example of one of those moments in which he made a decision and then focused on the future. "I had lots of jobs in high school, including working at a grocery store, running a paper route, landscaping, picking tobacco and working in a mom-and-pop pizza restaurant," he says. He always had an interest in cooking though, and had considered becoming a professional chef.

A trip to the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) for a career day confirmed that interest. He started at the CIA the day after he graduated from high school.

After graduating from the Institute, Pleau went to Boston, taking just the clothes he could fit in his backpack. After getting a room at the local YMCA, "I walked two blocks down to the Ritz-Carlton and got a job right away, starting at the bottom of the culinary brigade," he remembers.

"It was a classical brigade, almost military in structure," Pleau says. Even then, he was driven to learn more and look ahead. "Saucier was the position you wanted to get to," he says.



He eventually became saucier at the Ritz-Carlton, and did an apprenticeship with the SBM Hotel Group in Monte Carlo. He left the Ritz-Carlton to become the sous chef at the Claremont Resort in Berkeley, CA. At the time, the California culinary scene was the vanguard of a movement focusing on fresh, locally grown produce, herbs, simplicity and quality. "It was a great place to be in the '80s," Pleau says. "So much was happening in California at the time."

His California experience built on his foundation of classical culinary training and gave him a vision of where the culinary profession could go in the future. "I wanted to work with chefs and leaders who were mentors, inspiring people who were orchestrating the future of our industry," he says. "I'm a very curious person, an eternal student, constantly wanting to learn more."

After several years on the West Coast, Pleau moved on to other positions with luxury hotels, including stints as executive sous chef at the Boca Raton Hotel & Club in Florida and executive chef at the Mayfair Regent Hotel in Chicago.

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In 1991, Disney tapped Pleau to work at Euro Disney. He was part of the opening team and helped open the Disneyland Hotel in Paris and the first version of the California Grill. "It was an amazing experience," he says. "We opened 65 different restaurants, each with a different theme, with a staff of people from all over the world ... and we did it all on the same day!"

When he left Euro Disney, Pleau went to work at Bradley Ogden's Lark Creek Inn in Marin County, CA. "I really wanted to get back to California, which I loved," he says. His return to the West Coast solidified his interest in focusing on pure ingredients of the highest quality and freshness. He worked directly with farmers and suppliers, which prepared him well for what he's currently doing at Seasons 52. "When we served lamb, it was lamb bought from the farmer that morning," he says. "I went to someone we called 'the forager' for fresh fish. I got to know the people who grew my produce." He created dishes based on fresh meat and seafood, and produce picked at peak ripeness. "Nothing ripens like the sun," he says. "That's kind of my motto."

In 1994, Pleau returned to Disney to help create the award-winning California Grill at Disney World in Orlando. The restaurant was wildly successful and earned raves from food writers around the country. Although he's proud of California Grill's success, he's not one to bask in yesterday's glory. "Euro Disney was like a master's degree and California Grill was the thesis," he says. "But it doesn't matter what you did yesterday." One of his favorite sayings is "The best dish you've ever made just might be the next one."

Pleau's sense of possibility and creative drive make him a gifted teacher and mentor to those coming up in the profession, which is one reason he's enjoying the process of developing the menus at Seasons 52.

"This brings together everything that's been in my blood for the last 20 years," he says. "I have so much in my mind now that I want to share it with others, and I learn more every day." He says it's fun to watch others grow and to challenge them to be the best they can be.

Pleau is passionate about the idea of "letting the product do the work" by using only high-quality, in-season ingredients (where possible), and he sees his job as Seasons 52's creative chef as that of an educator. "It's what I was put on the planet to do — teach people about the basics of good food and inspire people, whether they are consumers or chefs in training," he says.

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