

**Nathan Mileski, Certified Executive Chef**, Northern Michigan University on June 30, 2016 interviewed by Diane Kordich, Emeritus Professor

**NM:** Nathan Mileski (M-i-l-e-s-k-i-) date of birth, December 4, 1974

**DK:** Chef Nathan, where were you born and can you tell us a little about your background—your family background?

**NM:** Sure, I was born right here--in Marquette Michigan. I grew up here. I come from a family of--none of my family members were professional cooks---that's a question I am asked often. But everybody in my family always had a passion for cooking or food in general. So as I grew up, the men around my family, their gathering point was the kitchen. So, it was very natural for me to be in the kitchen. So, my father, my grandfather and my uncle--growing up, we spent a lot of time in the kitchen. We come from a family of hunters and fishermen. We did a lot of canning with my great grandmothers and my grandmothers. Gardening --all those things--were always a big part of my up bring as a child. That led into my career as a Chef. They all wanted to do that professionally but that really was never what came through in their careers. I started in restaurants when I was fifteen years old; I was a bus boy.

**DK:** In Marquette?

**NM:** In Marquette, at a local restaurant that no longer exists, "Entre Amigos" and basically worked my way up. Joe Constance was my employer and a good friend of my Dad's—and got me my first position. So, I started as a bus boy and basically worked my way up from bus boy to dishwasher, dishwasher to prep cook, prep cook to line cook, line cook to line supervisor and then basically worked my way through the entire restaurant by the time I was nineteen and I was General Manager of the restaurant.

**DK:** Now, you said your family was into hunting, fishing and that sort of thing. Did your mother or your grandmother have a garden of some type?

**NM:** Yes.

**DK:** They were also into cooking?

**NM:** Yes, it's interesting my mom and my grandmothers had their certain dish-- that they prepared and that was the standards. Yes, we have gardens at everybody's house and still today everybody is still gardening; I just put a pretty decent size garden in my own yard. But, the men in my family were really the ones that were the creative side of the culinary. So, they would spend the time in the kitchen talking about how they were going to cook venison or that piece of fish. Bread baking was a big part of my growing up. My Dad right now—its funny because—my Dad makes his own cheese, his own bread, roasts his own coffee, pickles everything,



cans everything. So I think that's his outlet, his job, his hobby; I think sometimes he does more than I do as a Chef...on the outside of it.

**DK:** All right, and you are from Polish background? Another heritage besides Polish?

**NM:** Yes, Polish, German and Irish. My mother was... my Mom's side of the family is Irish and then somewhere traced way back, a little bit of Native American. My mother's family grew up in Kentucky, so they're from the South and my Dad's family is Polish and from...came to the U.P. pretty much as far as I can go back—they've been in the U.P.

**DK:** All right, after Entre Amigos did you go to another restaurant in Marquette or did you come to Northern? Or how did that work?

**NM:** Yes, I took a couple of years off after I graduated from high school. I was running the restaurant. At the time, we tried to expand the restaurant into five locations through out Michigan and Wisconsin. I think our expansion of Entre Amigos was too fast. So, the restaurants started to...the one in Marquette was holding on...the other was not together. The writing was on the wall so to speak. Joe Constance at that point encouraged me to start the program here at Northern. I came and spoke to Ted Bogdan and David Sonderschafer about starting the program here. My grandfather, at the same time, had joined the American Culinary Federation Chapter—the U.P. Chapter and I started to attend meetings with my grandfather and became a junior member...and that's really how I meet Dave and Ted.

**DK:** What possessed him to join? He wasn't a chef?

**NM:** No, once again, I think it was he had retired from the Michigan State Police—he ran the State Police Post, Negaunee Garage--the mechanics garage, for I don't know, twenty-eight, twenty nine years. Like, I said they're passionate and their hobbies were cooking. He found this organization--which I've actually been a member since 1993 because of my grandfather.

Just fell in love with these chefs and found that would be neat for me to become involved. I remember the very first meeting I went to was at Chez Nous, or at the Jacobetti Center (at Northern Michigan University), we did pumpkin carving. Not pumpkin carving in the sense of carving out the eyes and things. This was using wood tools to actually carve faces into the skin of the pumpkin but never breaking through into the center. That was really interesting to me--and the next time we did a ginger bread house—baking and designing. These chefs were playing with all these things way back when and that was my introduction to the program at Northern.



At the time Amigos, was starting to go downhill, I enrolled here at Northern and I left Amigos and actually worked at Casa Calabria for almost a year. Then, left the Casa and found a position at the Village Café which is also no longer around.

**DK:** Where was the Village Café?

**NM:** The Village Café was on Third Street in a little strip mall...

**DK:** Oh, yes, yes.

**NM:** ...on the very end. So, I worked for Steve and Jean (Rivard) over there. They came from the Big Al's family, Big Al's (restaurant/drive-in), which was across from ShopKo and they had this little café. I worked as a Sous Chef there for a while. Then, I eventually moved on from there. I was recruited by one of the chefs from the ACF-- Don Durley who now owns Lagniappe Cajun Creole Eatery in town to come work for him at the Holiday Inn as a line cook. So, I left the café and went to the Holiday Inn while working through school and going to school here at Northern.

**NOTE:** A **sous-chef** de cuisine (French for "under-chef of the kitchen") is a chef who is "the second in command in a kitchen; the person ranking next after the head chef." Consequently, the **sous-chef** holds a lot of responsibility in the kitchen, which can eventually lead to promotion to becoming the executive chef.

At the Holiday Inn, I worked my way up from line cook to Sous Chef--the next in charge. Eventually, the Larson Family own, both the Holiday Inn and the Ramada Inn--and I was growing bored. So I asked them--Don had taken over both hotels, their chef had left Ramada and Don had taken over both hotels. So, I pitched to the Larsons and Don about becoming the Sous Chef—Executive Sous Chef, for both of the properties which they did do that for me. I did that for three years, driving back and forth between the two hotels overseeing the restaurants and the banquets while going to school here at Northern.

**DK:** OK. How about your relationship with Ted Bogdan? And what type of education you got through coming to the Culinary Arts program at Northern?

**NM:** Dave Sonderschafer, Ted Bogdan and even Yvonne Lee were great mentors for me here at the University. Really at the time, the program was focused more on culinary than I think it is today; today it is a little more management based. But at the time--really for me--it was the cooking and learning the purchasing, sanitation, and those types of things. So, I got almost three quarters of the way through the program when Dave and Ted, one day pulled me into Dave's office and said, "Your learning too fast. You're really good at cooking. We want you to think about outside of here. What's your next step is? I asked if you had the choice what would you do? They both replied, we would go to the Culinary Institute of American in Hyde Park, New York. "



So, I looked at the--they had brochures from the school (CIA), I looked at that—I looked at Johnson & Wales, I looked at New England Culinary Arts (Institute) they call it “NECI”. Then spring break was coming upon us and I made a phone call to the Culinary Institute and figured out I’ll just take a road trip. So, I did that. I drove out to the Culinary Institute of America and basically pulled up in Hyde Park, New York and fell in love with the school—it was love at first sight. At that moment, I knew what the two of them really had in mind for where my career was going to go--Ted in particular. So, I did the whole thing at the Culinary Institute of America. Basically they told me, I would be put on a two-year waiting list. I told the recruiter--absolutely not--I will be here within the year. She got a chuckle out of that. I got back. I did all the paperwork.

About two months later, we were in class it was towards the end of the semester, Ted came out, he said there is a phone call for you in my office. I said OK. I went into his office and it was kind of odd--everything is running through your head--what happened family wise, was there an accident, whatever, an emergency? I think Ted was probably 70 at that point...

**DK:** ...70 years old...

**NM:** ...70 years. So I remember distinctly going into the office, picking up the phone and it was the recruiter from the Culinary Institute of America telling me they had a open spot for me in August that something’s were brought to their attention and I should be in school in August. I accepted the invitation to attend the Institute. I hung up the phone; Ted had a very stern look on his face and it went to a giant smile. He gave me a hug and literally picked me up off the ground. And I say that because at seventy years old, it was kind of unexpected and it gives me goose bumps but just really a great moment in my life. Then, he went out to make the announcement to the class that I was leaving to the CIA. So, that’s how I ended up at the CIA.

I ended up at the CIA and did the two-year program at the CIA--eighteen month eh no--twenty one-month program. But there wasn’t a day that I didn’t think back to what Dave and Ted and Yvonne--that foundation that they had laid. Ted was always at the front of my mind of every day getting up and going to school and doing the best as I could. Taking as much away from that program as I could but keeping a level head--staying humble. Ted had mentioned, a lot of the people that go to that school, come out not so humble—that was always there and trying to really accelerate.

**DK:** Had Ted gone to the CIA?

**NM:** He had not. He had just visited from my understanding...

**DK:** and Dave?



**NM:** Nope.

**DK:** But they saw so much potential in you that they thought you should go. Great!

**NM:** Yes, so it was kind of crazy but I kept in contact with Ted the whole time I was in school. Ted use to say --in this industry you have to really have a passion in your heart and a fire in your belly and that was something I repeated to myself almost daily--how to push myself.

When I started Northern, I often tell the story to young students coming in every year--when I talk about the program--I wasn't the most ideal student. I had a full time job, if not a job and half working and was really into the restaurant side of it but school for me was kind of tough at first. I had enough of high school and I didn't really want to be back in school. Ted literally--it started off with a phone call every morning when I had an early class. My phone would ring in my apartment; it would be "Mileski out of bed--to class." He would motivate me that way. Pretty soon, I was showing up if I hadn't...it would just be...once the phone rang, he wouldn't even say anything or he would say my last name "Mileski" and hang up the phone that was my motivation to really focus and to become a better student. Once I became a better student, I think that was when things began to change; it was that encouragement.

**DK:** So, then when you graduated from the Culinary Institute...I know a little bit about it. Where did you do your six-month experiential thing to see if you really wanted to cook or not?

**NM:** Well, when I got in to the Culinary, I had already been working in restaurants...

**DK:** Oh!

**NM:** It was a big sign for them; I really didn't have to do that because of my background. I did almost six years at Entre Amigos so they figured I was pretty well invested at that point. So, when I started school, I ended up in a class--the youngest student was seventeen and the oldest gentleman that was in our class was sixty-two years old. My class was great because we had a wide variety. When the recruiter called me, they said you can start a little bit earlier but that's when all the eighteen year olds straight out of high school are coming--this class would be a little more mixed age-wise. I thought that's more my speed. I think I was almost twenty-one when I went to school--almost twenty-three when I went to school there. The mix was great for me.

At school we had to do an internship--a three-month internship. I did that in Minnesota under a Certified Master Chef. They're only 57 Master Chefs in the United States currently. I did it under Kevin Walker at Lafayette Country Club, which is really--the oldest country clubs in the Minneapolis, Twin Cities area.



**DK:** Wow. OK. Then, when you graduated—then what happened?

**NM:** I graduated and I actually went back to Minneapolis to work with Kevin. I packed up all my stuff in New York and drove basically straight through. I took some of my roommates and classmates with me. Kevin had come up for my graduation. We had formed a pretty good bond during our friendship.

We all hiked out to Minnesota; when we got there--Kevin had taken another position in South Carolina. One of my classmates, Luke went off with Kevin to South Carolina and I ended up staying at the Country Club for almost a year under our new Chef. I helped them hire the new Chef. I became the Executive Sous Chef for the Catering Department at Lafayette (Country Club). We would do banquets up to—we had two grand ballrooms, which would hold up to 2,000 people. It was unique—the club was unique because we could cater to the public. The members were more private.

I actually got a call from David Sonderschafer about coming back to school doing an Adjunct type of —not Adjunct--is that an Adjunct? Not Adjunct, I'm trying to think what it is—where you're a student and you work with somebody...

**DK:** Internship?

**NM:** Kind of...He wanted me to come back to show me...to assist him...like a teacher's aide and then finish a degree and look at the world of education at some point. Then, unfortunately, Dave...two days before I was fully set to return—actually he was in the accident and passed away. I did come back; I spent about a semester here and just with that loss it was really tough. Ted and I had another conversation and Ted encouraged me...maybe this wasn't the best timing for this.

I took a position at Tahquamenon Falls Brewery on the edge...

**DK:** Really?

**NM:** ...it had opened a couple of years prior actually when I was in school here. Dave helped plan that facility. I went out to work for Dave Foster, as a Sous Chef out there and learned how to brew beer under Lark (Ludlow). I did that for about eight months. Then got laid off.

**DK:** Oh! Weird. Why was...

**NM:** The seasonality of it. I went back to Minnesota and worked out there for a little bit. Then Michigan Works made me put my resume online. So, I had my resume on Michigan Works and I got a call two weeks prior returning to the brewery from Drummond Island Resort and Conference Center on Drummond Island, Michigan for an Executive Chef position.



At that time in my career, I felt I was ready for an Executive Chef's position. I drove to Drummond Island with another friend to the eastern end of the U.P. I got over to the island, got lost and finally made my interview. I was interviewing...they had five candidates on property that day...and I got left by accident with the owner, Cliff Hailey in his office. There is a small airport he owned...I was left at the hangar--as they called it--with Cliff for almost three and half hours. They forgot that I was even there interviewing, which was kind of ironic because they all had to go through Cliff.

Apparently, I was the last one to meet with Cliff. Cliff and I just talked food, philosophy and growing up and telling stories similar to what we are doing now. I fell in love with that place--love at first sight—and I am going to be the Chef here. They had four other really strong candidates and much older than I was at the time. The GM (General Manager) I found out a year after being hired wanted another candidate but Cliff pulled his owner card and I got the position. That's my career at the Drummond Island Conference Center.

**DK:** How long where you there?

**NM:** I was there just a little under six years. I was the Executive Chef Food and Beverage Director at Drummond Island so we had a fine dining restaurant an ADC fine dining restaurant. I ran a bar and grill at the bowling alley...

**DK:** What is ADC?

**NM:** eighty seats

**DK:** Oh eighty seats...excuse me...

**NM:** I ran all the food and beverage for the golf course, plus all the catering on and off the resort property and I did that with interns here from Northern, as well as some other schools--Cordon Bleu in Minneapolis which I use to deal with when I was in Minneapolis and Northwestern out of Traverse City (Northwestern Michigan College/Lobdell's Teaching Restaurant in Traverse City, Michigan). I would recruit every year and bring these students that's was how I got my staff. While I was at Drummond Island Resort, we were named--by Bon Appetite and Gourmet magazines--as one of the twelve best restaurants in the State of Michigan. Many accolades from many writers in the Detroit Free Press--published in some cookbooks and some other things. It was a great growing experience for me.

Then one day, I got a phone call from my grandfather who had recently been diagnosed with cancer and followed up by a phone call—he called to tell me that Northern was hiring a Senior Chef. I didn't know what that was--and sent me the newspaper clipping, when I was debating if I wanted to come back to Marquette. He would send a letter everyday or a postcard with that attached to it. That was before e-mail and everything really...



**DK:** Oh, no...a postcard a day--that's what did it.

**NM:** So, I applied. I came up; I did the interview here at Northern. It was the first Chef position at Northern was looking for--under a new Director, Andre Mallie--so from taking basically what was a Director's position and creating a Chef position for the unit in the Wildcat Den and assisting with catering. I don't know how it happened but I was a successful candidate—it was a pretty grueling interview. It was the first time I interviewed with multiple people at one time. But I came to Northern walked through the facilities and was very impressed. Yearned to get home to be with my grandfather in his last couple of years and my family. At that point, I was working a crazy amount of hours at the resort. Sometimes sleeping in my office and just the seasonality business was crazy--does not offer much stability in my life. I was lucky to be the successful candidate. I've been here now almost—this going on my ninth year—coming into my tenth year.

**DK:** And what did you learn from Chef Andre? I mean--you've had all this varied experience. I had a cooking class with him. I thought he was just out of his mind. He loved cooking and wine so much. I was just wondering from all your mixed experience what you kind of learned from him?

**NM:** Yea, I was here very briefly with Andre. Andre was maybe three months with me. Andre and I—it was interesting—we kind of once again had this instinct—a kind of a connection. I had worked for hard-working European chefs and understood their ticks. He was very much that—that guy. Like you said, loved food, loved wine, loved entertaining, loved the grand parties and grand scheme of things.

So, he would--all these white boards (dry erase boards) this carries over—this white board behind you actually carries over from Andre. Andre put white boards in everybody's' office. He would run in and say, OK, Nathan—I need you to make a white chocolate mousse. Here are the ingredients I want—and no amounts. It was very much like Kevin was at the Club. We never had ingredients; we would just have concepts. Then, we would have to work out those kinks as chefs. Andre was very much like that—so our white boards would be anything from layouts for banquets, to recipes, to menu ideas and he taught me to think very fast on my feet. If he wanted something—how do we make that happen or if a guest wanted something how do we do it.

He gave me more of that bridge--of the front of the house and the event planning side of things in the brief time he was here. Yet he knew food—he knew great food, very well connected--lots of connections through him in that very brief time. He gave me the insight into college and university food service and how it was about to change. He was right on the forefront of all those things when he was here. I think Northern was fortunate—for his brief window of time here—to really change how dining--dining was already on that path. Andre was just the guy to push it over. I think he had a solid team in place when I arrived. I think he knew where we were going to go after he left. I think he was very good at that—about vision of what



dining was going to becoming for Northern—for our industry—for colleges and universities as a whole.

**DK:** Right, I can remember being with him and we were in teams of four. And all of a sudden we were—or teams of six—and all of a sudden were teams of four. Then we are in teams of two—then all of sudden we are making—every one of us is making sort of a different recipe and eating all this at ten o'clock at night...it was like...Oh my goodness you just couldn't do it. So he would have boxes and we could take home whatever we made or somebody else had made. You had dinner for two nights after that.

**NM:** It's funny 'cause I was fortunate enough last year to finally...I was offered an Adjunct Position in the Hospitality to teach HM 315 which is Multicultural Cuisine (Multicultural Foods) or International Cuisine so I jumped at the chance because it is a full circle thing for me. Hopefully (knock on desk), Chris (Kibit) is saying that I will be able to teach again...

**DK:** Oh, good.

**NM:** ...coming up this winter. But that was kind of the same style, of what I did when I taught—I think it's a chef thing--we started off in large groups and scaled our way back into smaller groups. Then, have tons of food obviously to taste. I think in the class I taught, we cooked three hundred and twelve dishes over the course of the semester from all over the world. Sometimes, it is the first exposure. For me I can look back at that and watch them—I made them eat things that they did not want to eat and to learn. But that's what...Dave, Ted and even Yvonne had done for me here-- is to give those experiences and those light bulbs to go off in my head.

I remember one of the first things, Ted had me make was Basil Pesto and at that time, pesto was just coming onto the scene and now very, very...

**DK:** Ordinary, common.

**NM:** Common...but at the time it was cutting edge. I remember Ted standing over the Robot coupe (a brand of commercial food processor) machine and making the pesto, him explaining the whole thing and tasting it. The light bulb went off and how delicious it was. So, I got to see that this year. The same thing with Dave--I have that thought everyday when I went into teach, that I get to give something back to the program that gave me so much years ago.

**DK:** Yes, it's wonderful. Can you talk a little bit about your philosophy of food? You came from a background where you really ate what was indigenous to the Upper Peninsula...a lot of it...and if you live in Detroit your not going to eat deer, elk, or moose or even rabbit—and some of these things. That is one thing that sort of colors your cooking... is there other philosophies that came in there? Or do you have just one...over general philosophy of how its done?



S SOUTHWORTH

**NM:** It's interesting that you bring that up. Growing up we did all those things, now those are gourmet ingredients. Still, even now, they are pretty common ingredients here. Sometimes people struggle with a lot of those things like morels and ramps (wild onion). Fiddlehead ferns, we use to eat growing up; then, venison is tricky--or any wild game—partridge or whatever is happening. Really, it taught me growing up to be gentle and to cook those things a bit differently than I think most people. Even with professional chefs in the kitchens, when I do something generally —my food comes out much different because I have had experience with it.

My philosophy, I was very heavily influenced by obviously Polish, German and Irish. Then, my Mom being from the South, so we ate a lot of Southern food—grits, fried chicken and biscuits and those types of things. It was all over the board. Now, I generally--this class that I teach is almost perfect for me because—I'm all over the board--meaning I get a chance to cook a wide variety of cuisines (world and American regional), which I enjoy.

My training at the Culinary Institute of America is primarily French and Italian—that was really the basis--leaning more to the Italian side than the French side. But, I always liked the Asian classes. Then once I left there, I started looking at Indian cuisine and Latin cuisine. Those are probably my top-two right now and still really focused in on Asian cuisine. It used to be primarily Chinese and Thai. Over the last couple of years, I really focused in more on Korean and Vietnamese cooking. Taking also those indigenous ingredients and making them a part of...its what is on trend right now, anyways.

But my cooking philosophy is just cooking great simple food. There really is nothing better than a perfectly roasted chicken. Or a vegetable that's cooked in very minimal ingredients--finding the right ingredients—cooking in the right season--if you can't cook them in the right season, how do you can and/or preserve that so when you get that ingredient out of a jar. It's as good as it was when you picked it from the tomato plant, for example. You have a great tomato, and then take care of that tomato through the canning process to do what you're going to do later on.

This weekend, I had some friends over, there is a company out of South Carolina that is bring back all these heritage grains and rices. This non-GMO (genetically modified organism), very organic but they have blue grits. When we think of grits, we really think of something almost like cornmeal. Grits in the South was just pulverized dry corn. So we have this ancient blue corn grit and all I did was simply made a very basic kitchen stock...

#### **END OF SIDE A**

**NM:** Simply, these corn grits—these dry grits and chicken stock and that's it.

CONNOISSEUR



**DK:** No butter, no salt, no nothing...?

**NM:** Maybe, a touch of salt and I almost add butter but at the end when I tasted it--it was creamy enough. I did top it with something's that were cooked in a little butter but the grits are good on their own. I think it was the perfect example. It was absolutely incredible. It tasted like corn that was picked that morning. You have this nuance of the chicken stock and just a little bit of salt and the creaminess that it created. I had some other stuff but that's all you really needed.

So, before I put all the other things out--my eight year old and my four year old were in the kitchen—my boys—I had them both try it. They kind of looked at me and I think they're picky eaters. Oh, Dad that's really good creamed corn. Well it wasn't creamed corn it was true grits. There was no cream, no butter it was stock and corn. Vegetables can do awesome, amazing things if we let them do it at the right time. So that is my philosophy.

As I get older, I joke with lots of my friends--and talking to my Dad, I cook with less ingredients I take care of the ingredients more. I don't try to weight them down as heavy as I did years ago and have nineteen components on a plate. Now, I really want to really focus on a great protein, a great starch and a great vegetable or maybe its not a combination of those three things, maybe its a vegetable and a protein or maybe there is no protein on a it or a great vegetable and a great starch. I think that philosophy of cooking, when you start with that—when you look at other food cultures and cuisines that is really the bases of a lot of it.

**DK:** Well, I don't mean to interject my own stuff. I think what happens is, we come from an Eastern European background like you do and they didn't have much. So what they had, they had to deal with it in a more simple way. Yet it is very delicious and sustaining. Then, I think, its passed on down the generations; people tweak it and say if I put this in, it will be a little bit better, if I put this in...by the time you get that recipe on the third generation, its nothing like the simple ingredient that your great-grandparents or grandparents had. That's the idea: the idea is...its delicious really...almost all by itself with very few tweakings to it. The Cuisinart and the this tool and the that tool I'm saying they never had any of those things, why are we going to all this extreme to screw up a really good thing.

**NM:** I agree 100%. One of the biggest things I took away when I was at the Culinary Institute of America, there was a Dean Fritz Sonnenschmidt is his name. Fritz is this little old German guy. He stands about five feet tall and is round as round could be and German through and through. He taught Charcuterie.

**NOTE:** Charcuterie a delicatessen specializing in dressed meats and meat dishes; the products sold in such a shop.



He eventually became the Dean of the program I was in at the CIA but we were talking to Chef Sonnenschmidt...two things he said...one was when you address me—I'm not a Chef—I'm not in charge of the kitchen. The Chef is truly the individual (leading and managing the kitchen). As of today, I am just a cook like you--and I thought Holy Cow--here is one of the first Certified Master Chefs in the country, he is a Global Certified Master Chef and he is referring to himself as a cook. That was the humbleness that I was seeking at the CIA.

The second part of what he said was, you are going to come in here—it was the time Charlie Trotter's was blowing up—there was once again 1920's, 1930's components on the dish. You will truly know you are a good cook or a good chef when you look at a dish and focus on the dish and you think about not what else can I put on that dish but what can I take off of it to make it better. So, throughout my career, I ignored that—the Drummond Island segment of my life--and even towards the end of Drummond Island I got better at that.

It wasn't truly until I came to Northern, that I really focused in on the food. I went from fine dining to getting back to basics—and taking things away--making food delicious for what it is. I think more a part of that in my career, then, I was putting up fancy dishes with nineteen things on them.

**DK:** Right. You've won awards for Northern and you've won awards for yourself. Can you describe a few of those?

**NM:** Sure, so part of the biggest year I've had since I been here is 2009. In 2009, we had a new Director (Director of Dining Services); Gregg Minner was his name. Gregg came to me one day, and said would you be interested in competing. I said, absolutely, what does it entail? He explained it. The National Association of College and Universities Food Services or NACUFS--as everyone refers to it--has a Regional Conference. There are six regions, so we are in the Midwest obviously—so Midwest was having a culinary competition. You had to submit a recipe. I'd be selected and I was competing against eight other chefs. My recipe was selected; I went back to my German background. It was in Milwaukee; I thought it was fitting. The ingredient was trout—so I created a trout schnitzel (a thin slice of veal or other light meat, coated in breadcrumbs and fried) with spaetzel (traditional German dumplings) and mohrengemuse carrots— mohrengemuse means basically very tasty but not very healthy-- carrots that are done in butter and cream—and sugar. Then I did a play of pickled beets salad--celery root, beets, and apples. I created this schnitzel dish.

So, I went and competed; I took first place in that, which moved me on to National, which again happened to be in Milwaukee by some fluke, so I felt very comfortable that I have home field advantage. Everybody from the regions that competed then comes together at the National and competes. I competed against five other chefs. I won the National with the same dish.

**DK:** And what year was that?



**NM:** 2009. During that time, I was also working on my certification for Executive Chef through the American Culinary Federation (Upper Michigan Chapter), which I talked about earlier with my grandfather. David Sonderschafer was actually the first Certified Executive Chef in the U.P. His coat is still hanging on the wall (Jacobetti Center) with the CEC on it, as we refer to it as. The next level after CEC is Master Chef. It is a pretty big achievement even to get a CEC. So, I worked on my CEC that year as well and was able to achieve my CEC which is a hundred question written test which wasn't that bad but its a 3 hour cooking practical--blind...kind of a blind thing. I went to Fox Valley Tech, which was the closest testing site—to be soon—Northern, we need to certify the program here. I am now in the process of getting certification to certify people here at Northern but at the time Fox Valley—was the only place—the closest place to do that. In the middle of these two competitions I was able to get my CEC. So, that was a big year.

Then, we also went to the University of Massachusetts or U-Mass and asked to do a chef culinary competition--a four person team competition. I was able to take a team out there. That year we also won gold.

It was interesting because there were only three teams—Harvard, UMass and Northern Michigan University. When we were talking through these—there are seventeen universities that compete from all over the country and even through Canada. But it was interesting because it was like--gold goes to Harvard and everybody claps, UMass and everybody claps and Northern Michigan University—then its silent—where is little Northern Michigan University on that map of all these giants. But now we are known, when we go to these competitions. Since then, we have taken three silvers and a bronze. We were one point off a gold this last year. But we will be back, we ended up getting two golds—we had two golds at UMass, three silvers and a bronze.

But I take different team members. A lot of these teams that compete at these competitions are the same team year after year. I think its good experience for our cooks and culinarians. So, I build a new team every time we go. I am the only core person in it. It all depends on what happens--sometimes you have a good day and sometimes you have a bad day but we have taken quite a few awards away from that.

**DK:** Great! You're still entering the school in the theme-type—I don't know--the day you have dinner or something? What is that all about?

**NM:** Yes, NACUFS does another thing--where they have different awards for different things. It can be an event that's in the residents dining facilities. We entered one last year (2016) for Valentines Day; we got an Honorable Mention.

You can do concepts. So, we entered our new concept, which is Sunday our organic/health—market, small market—you can't call it a co-op. It's much like the



co-op in town. We took an award for that this past year. Tamaki and Tea, our Asian concept we've taken an award for that same thing. Melted our gourmet grilled cheese concept--which is my baby, also got an award a couple of years ago. We have taken awards for some of these theme dinners—from gold to silver to bronze. We'll try again this year. I really haven't started planning yet but we will come up with something really cool.

**DK:** What were some of the themes in the past?

**NM:** We've done—the one that took gold was a Lumberjack brunch. We did U.P. things. We've done one we called "Born to Dine" where basically it was journey from the tip of the U.P. down 75 to Florida and points along the way. So we went through the states and we did every station—Florida—there was a station for Florida, Michigan...

**DK:** Ohio

**NM:** Ohio. We've done that. We did a Carnival theme a couple years ago and did fairly well with that event. To our surprised, that was one that the students talk about still. We do one that I think we want to enter. We do a Bizarre Foods Day upstairs that was the brainchild of some of the students. It's fun to watch them. Last year, we did beef tongue tacos and had some different vegetables from Asia brought in. Some things they don't see very often—different fruits and vegetables. Then we did a turtle soup and some clams--some things that they usually don't see--raw oysters. We prepare them in odd ways and they tend to enjoy that Bizarre Foods Day. I think that's one of things we've talked about entering, just because it's so unique.

Then, this last year, we do a Valentines Day. We do a four course--sit down meal. Our catering staff actually comes and does the service for it, which is unique because most of these dinners—I think, it threw the judges off actually—because most of these dinners are buffet style and this was served. I don't think they knew how to judge it. But it's very unique. What we're doing.

**DK:** Great. Great. Well is there anything else you might want to add?

**NM:** No, I appreciate the opportunity.

**DK:** Me too. Let's hope it works this time.

**NM:** (Laugh) **DK:** OK...I'll wait a minute or two in case you think of something

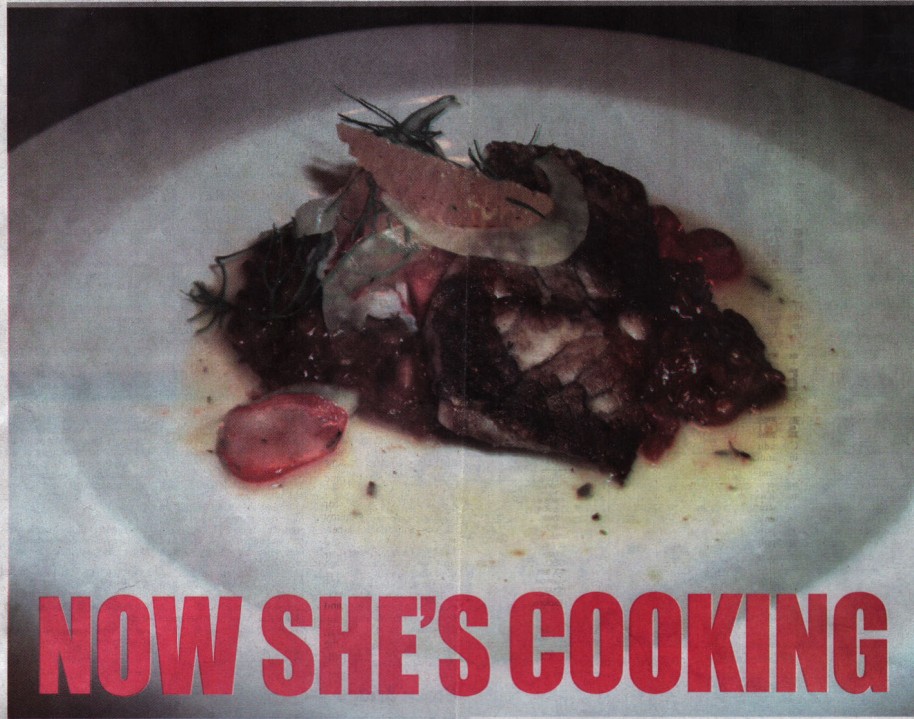
**NM:** No. No. **DK:** No. All right. Then, thank you very much for doing this again.

**END OF SIDE B**

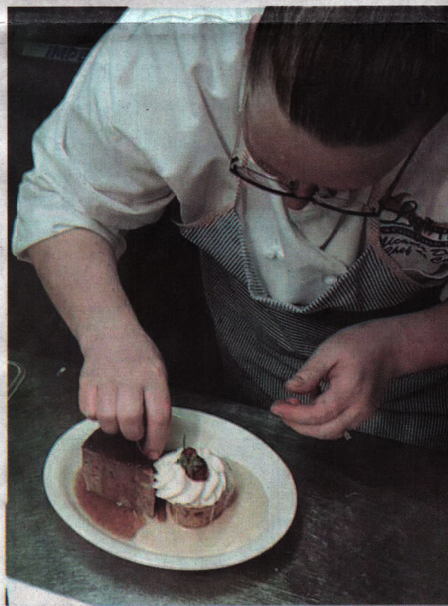


Please, put with Nathan Mileski local interview  
NMC exec. chef

# Great food & Drink



## NOW SHE'S COOKING



At left, Chef Nichole Durley-Rust plates a dish at Lagnappe Cajun Creole Eatery during her Chef of the Year dinner in 2015, an honor she was given by the American Culinary Federation Upper Michigan Chapter. Durley-Rust, chef de cuisine at Lagnappe, on Monday completed her testing through the ACF becoming the first female certified executive chef in the Upper Peninsula. Above, One of the dishes Durley-Rust made for her practical exam was a pan-seared barramundi over a saffron lobster risotto with a roasted tomato beurre blanc and a fennel orange garnish. (Photos courtesy of Nichole Durley-Rust)

### Durley-Rust is first female certified executive chef in U.P.

By RYAN JARVI  
Journal Staff Writer

MARQUETTE — The Upper Peninsula has its first female certified executive chef, Nichole Durley-Rust, the chef de cuisine at Lagnappe Cajun Creole Eatery in Marquette. Durley-Rust on Monday completed her practical exam through the American Culinary Federation at Northern Michigan University's Jacobetti Center, which last year was approved by the ACF as a testing site for the certification program. Monday's evaluation was the first held at the Jacobetti Center.

In order to pass her exam, Durley-Rust had to showcase four different technical knife cuts, along with four specific cooking methods, such as roasting, braising, poaching and steaming. In addition, she had to know how to properly break down two live lobsters, cook an artichoke, filet a fish, and a break down a chicken.

"For certified executive chef, part of the thing you have to do is write ... a three-course menu," Durley-Rust said. "It's open to you how you want to cook them, you just have to use certain ingredients that ACF says."

She had three hours to prep and cook, and 15 minutes to plate the dishes, one of which included a pan-seared barramundi over a saffron lobster risotto with a roasted tomato beurre blanc and a fennel orange garnish.

"For the salad course, you also have to make a homemade emulsified vinaigrette by hand, so I did an artichoke salad with a honey Dijon vinaigrette, bacon, red onion, Granny Smith apples over frisée lettuce," she said. "Then the third course you have to showcase cooking a chicken two different ways, so I did a chicken duet. I did a braised chicken thigh and a Swiss chard wrapped chicken mousseline over skin on Yukon gold mashed potatoes with glazed carrots and a roasted chicken jus."

Durley-Rust was recently chosen as the keynote speaker for the May 20 graduation ceremony for The Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, a Le Cordon Bleu of Culinary Arts program she graduated from in 2007. She said her father, Don Durley, owner of Lagnappe, has been involved with the ACF Upper Michigan Chapter since it started in 1989 and has been a driving force behind her culinary career.

"He's really pushed me to advance my career, test my skills and kind of push myself, so ... completing this test was a huge accomplishment," she said. "It really tests your skills, it tests your race against the clock — you can technically prepare things right, you can technically cook things right and it really asserts your value as a chef in the American Culinary Federation community."

With last year's approval of the Jacobetti Center as a test site, NMU professor and Chef Christopher Kibit said it will provide a closer option for people in the U.P. who want to be

ACF certified. Chefs before had to travel several hours, bringing along their own food and sometimes equipment, to places like Minneapolis, Appleton, Wisconsin, or downstate Grand Rapids.

He also said chefs will be able to also use the NMU facility for training. "I have the space that they can use, and what it does is my students see them practicing and fine tuning their craft, and it inspires them," he said. "They're always over here watching them. ... Every time Nichole was here I said I love that because now the female students are going to see that, you know? Kind of inspiring for the culinarians we have in our program."

During the exam, Durley-Rust was assessed by three evaluators and two apprentice evaluators, one of whom was Nathan Mileski, executive chef and director at NMU's Simply Superior Catering & Events.

Mileski went through the ACF's certified executive chef program in 2009. Since then, he completed a two-day seminar on becoming an evaluator, with Monday's test being the last of his three apprenticeships.

"So now, because I've gone through the process and I've been certified for enough time, I can now be on the other side of it and certify," he said.

Jeremy Pomeroy is also now able to act as an evaluator for ACF certifications. Pomeroy, a member of the ACF Upper Michigan Chapter, formerly worked at the Island Resort and Casino near Escanaba, and is the current chef at Palette Bistro in Petoskey.

Mileski said with the Jacobetti test site being approved, other U.P. chefs have a better opportunity to become certified, as do students coming through NMU's programs.

"Sometimes testing sites only offer it every so often, so it might be a way for us to draw in those folks from Wisconsin or lower Michigan or wherever," he said. "When I ... was apprenticing in (Appleton), they had folks that drove up from Iowa to take the test. So it's a big deal for these sites."

Since he took it, Mileski said the ACF test has changed from having less of a competitive feel, to one that sets participants up for success.

"It's not like a cooking show competition where they're trying to throw you a curveball," he said. "This is very straightforward and it really comes down to the basic techniques. Certification to me means a lot and it's great to see a lot of people in the U.P., the chefs over the last couple of years, getting through this and achieving it. It only strengthens what we do as chefs, and it's kind of this really cool thing to have certified executive chefs in the U.P."

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