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Food

It's Chili While He Waits CIA-Trained Chef Keeps Low Profile In Vienna

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Philip Abraham's heroes include Escoffier, Paul Prudhomme and Wolfgang Puck; his culinary repertoire features such classics as chili dogs and chili macs.

And though he was graduated two years ago from one of the foremost cooking schools in the country—the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.—he declines to call himself a chef just now. "I have more respect for the title," he confesses.

It was an upscale pizza and pasta restaurant that Abraham envisioned for a final class project. But it's the 26-year-old Vienna Inn, where "the food is designed to complement the beer," acknowledges Abraham, that the 24-year-old finds himself toiling today.

As a serious chef turned serious short-order cook, Abraham's biggest challenge lies in turning out anywhere from 150 to 200 meals a day—a figure that doesn't include the Vienna Inn's ballyhooed chili dogs, for which 75 pounds of chili is made daily and a ton of hot dogs is purchased monthly.

When he's not brushing the grill, flipping burgers, steaming buns or frying potatoes—seemingly simultaneously—he's mopping, sweeping, or whipping up another batch of barbecued pork, which he makes from fresh-roasted ham. Each day there are 50 pounds of onions to peel before lunch. And before the morning waitress comes on at 7:30 a.m., Abraham does double duty, taking breakfast orders in the dining room and then running back to the kitchen to prepare them. "If you can't do more than two or three things at once, you're no good at this business," says the man who has temporarily replaced his toque with a baseball cap.

Abraham is learning how to run a restaurant the hard way. The CIA taught him how to select produce, prepare sauces, carve meat and bake. But it was left to Mike Abraham, Philip's father and the owner of the Vienna Inn, to impress upon his son the realities of the business. "With 80 percent of the restaurants going under the first year, I'm not ready for my own restaurant yet," says Philip.

Besides, the son owes the father a favor. Until Philip pays back his CIA tuition, "I'm kind of like an indentured servant," he says, only partly in jest.

One of the fledgling chef's first lessons upon coming home to Northern Virginia was that the Vienna Inn clientele wouldn't be paying fancy prices for fancy meals—or a revamped kitchen. "For me to spend \$2,000 on equipment would affect what the customers have to pay," explains Abraham. So the pub-style menu, though rewritten, was left largely intact, as were the prices. Says Abraham, "It's hard to be creative when the customers don't want to spend more than two or three dollars."

But not impossible. Abraham, a preacher of "wholesome food" and "good value," is a superb kitchen manager, wasting nothing. He skips the ubiquitous parsley garnish and saves the ends of the tomatoes for his homemade vegetable soup: "That could be my raise, says Pop—and he means it."

When Abraham took over kitchen duties from and uncle, he nixed the bulk-purchased items in favor of making his own soups, coleslaw, barbecue sauce, and breakfast sausage, among other things. He took the chili recipe his father obtained when he bought the restaurant and revised it, replacing the chili powder with chili peppers, for instance. A la Cajun chef Paul Prudhomme, Abraham prepares his seasonings in bulk, having formulated distinct recipes for his spicy chicken wings and steaks. And he's figuring out how to put a one-pound lobster on the menu.

Although he says he'd "love to make everything from scratch," Abraham has had to make a few concessions along the way. The salsa proved too labor-intensive for the price so he found a good quality canned variety to replace it. Sure, he uses instant mashed potatoes. But the gravy is homemade and he claims "you can't beat the steak." Anyway, "my mashed potatoes have lumps," he says, apologizing to no one.

Every three months he reviews the bill of fare, adding and subtracting as he sees fit. "This is my baby," he says, patting a copy of the menu. Not all of his experiments work: Salads don't particularly appeal to the Vienna Inn regulars, he discovered. And his grilled turkey breast with avocado sauce wasn't received with much enthusiasm either.

"Basically, it's a chili dog mentality," he says of the eclectic assemblage of construction workers, executives, neighbors and government officials who frequent the place on Maple Avenue. (One of Nancy Reagan's Secret Service agents is said to be among them.) When he gets requests for anything other than chili dogs, "it's almost like a restaurant," he says he thinks to himself.



Fortunately, Abraham finds pride in performing the routine. "I don't need to do eggs benedict, as long as my eggs over easy are good," he exudes with the enthusiasm of a confident upstart who knows what he's doing.

Abraham goes to great lengths to personalize his homey fare. He remembers to drizzle Charlie's ham with a lattice of cheese, and makes sure to place it on the left side of the plate (a Vienna Inn regular, Charlie prefers his bacon on the right side). "I want you to think it's somebody's mom cooking back here," says Abraham, who started cooking on his own at age 13 because his mother was busy and he tired of eating his own spaghetti.

His frugality and common sense extend beyond the food itself, however. "Take the kitchen walls, for instance,

Abraham got a good deal on tile from a loyal Vienna Inn patron—never mind that the colors include a random mix of orange, aqua, purple and green. And when he redesigned the menu in an attempt to boost food sales, he not only used the blank space on the back to plug the Vienna Inn's sales of beer kegs, but received a discount from the printer by crediting his firm on the bottom. "There are things I can do here that I couldn't do at a chain restaurant," he observes, ringing a cow bell to summon a waitress.

In the past year, he claims, food sales have increased 100 percent. Which brings him to the topic of profit. "They don't teach enough CIA chefs how to make money. Otherwise, why are you going to work 14 hours a day?"

"This place can't be changed a lot," muses Abraham between lunch orders. Indeed, stability is as much a hallmark at the Vienna Inn as the chili dogs. Two of the restaurant's waitresses—sisters Erma Parker and Dolores Knisley—have been there since before Philip's father purchased the building in 1960.

And the restaurant itself is a study in well-worn design. The booths and chairs look like hand-me-downs from a beer joint. Colored tags from several years' worth of hot dog wrappers are strung across the ceiling over the bar, proof of the chili dog's popularity. Almost an entire wall is devoted to the trophies garnered by the softball teams the Vienna Inn has sponsored over the years. Another is lined with myriad beer cans. First timers are a cinch to spot, says Abraham. "They're the ones who walk in and smile a lot." A daily pilgrimage to the Vienna Inn has become such a habit for some that on the rare occasions it closes, "the guys' wives call up" to complain, boasts Abraham modestly.

Besides his parents, Abraham's uncle, Jake, and brother-in-law, Don Abraham, take part in the operation of the Vienna Inn. "He married my sister and this place too," quips the cook of his relation. "I inherited you," retorts Abraham, who has managed a number of Washington eateries himself.

The dishwasher, 14-year-old Adam Geschwinder, got himself fired from his part-time job at the local pet shop for a chance to work with Abraham in the kitchen. "Outside of family, he's the best I know," offers the teenager.

His flair for home cooking aside, Abraham has not forgotten his professional training. He manages to get away from work to dine out once a week (he's especially enthusiastic about Yannick Cam of Le Pavillon) and even cooks at home the likes of grilled red snapper with asparagus-flavored hollandaise after a day's work. And he dreams of a houseful of guests in his own country inn.

Someday, perhaps, but not right now. "I like this location," says Abraham, adding "I'll always have a Vienna Inn—as long as my chili is good and the food is wholesome."

To remind his son of his gratitude, Mike Abraham had PHILIP'S KITCHEN spelled out in tiles across a wall in the rear. Philip laughs when he notes, "I'm pretty much here until the walls fall through."