

Culinary inspirations: Lawrence chefs tap resources close to and far from home for ideas

February 2, 2009

Parents: The next time you're tempted to shoo your young offspring from the kitchen when they insist on being your little helper while you're cooking, think again.

You may have the makings of an innovative, creative first-class chef right there beside you. A sampling of three such chefs working at Lawrence restaurants provides food for such a thought.

Armando Paniagua, executive chef and co-owner of Genovese, 941 Mass., says his main inspiration for cooking comes from his mom.

"She was a housewife cooking for our big family in Mexico," he says. "She was able to make very tasty meals with limited ingredients. I was the oldest of my family, so I learned to cook while helping her."

Josh Powers, originally from Council Grove, a sous chef at the Eldridge Hotel's Ten Restaurant, 701 Mass., remembers being at home all day cooking with his mom.

"I loved every second of it," he says. "Sadly, leukemia took her life when I was only 5, and my father had the responsibility of raising three young children while working as a county attorney. To this day, my father makes the best macaroni and cheese I've ever tasted."

Michael Beard, executive chef at Teller's, 746 Mass., grew up in Ardmore, Okla., and graduated from Oklahoma State in 2001 with a restaurant business degree.

"I've always loved cooked and eating," he says. "Both parents were great cooks, and I loved being able to help them."

Beard and Paniagua have both traveled around the world, fueling the sparks of inspiration ignited by their parents into a passion for the great food dishes they create and serve locally.

After graduation, Beard traveled through Mexico and most of Europe, sampling various dishes before spending 16 months in Italy. He attended Apicius Culinary Institute in Florence, learned Italian and worked in several restaurants owned by the professors who taught him.

"There's nothing like getting involved in the cooking process. You can't really learn that from reading books alone," Beard says. "Italians only eat and serve foods in season. In the (United) States today, most food products are available year 'round, which is what people demand. It's unfortunate because it causes us to lose a little of our identity and culture."

Paniagua keeps his Italian dishes authentic by using ingredients imported from Italy — olive and truffle oils, olives, cheeses, balsamic vinegar, arborio rice, wines and liquor.

Powers, unlike the other two, hasn't yet traveled outside the United States, but it's something he'd like to do one day. He's passionate about his work and says he likes the fact that food preparation utilizes all his senses.

"The sound of a nice piece of fish searing tells me if the pan's hot enough, my nose tells me it's fresh, my eyes and fingers tell me

when it's done, and my taste buds tell me if it's seasoned perfectly," he explains. "These simple principles and concepts inspire me to keep learning and trying new things."

Originally published at: <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2009/feb/02/culinary-inspirations-lawrence-chefs-tap-resources/>