

A Fresh Look at Pastry

With the appointment of a new pastry chef to ACF Culinary Team USA, team pastry is being pushed beyond excellence.

By Kay Orde

Pastry has been good to Joseph Decker. This certified master pastry chef has built a successful career practicing the art and skill that is his passion, first in restaurants and bakery operations, then moving into research and development. Today, he's a chef-instructor at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Mich. For the past decade, there has been something missing, however: involvement in culinary competition.

That changed with Decker's recent appointment to the position of pastry chef

on ACF Culinary National Team USA. With less than a year until the team competes at the International Culinary Art Exhibition (IKA) in Erfurt, Germany, Decker is poised to bring culinary competition back into his life in a big way.

"I'm ready to get back to competition, to contribute and represent my country," he says. "I've still got that drive, and I'm going to put my heart into this."

Decker, a member of ACF Michigan Chefs de Cuisine Association, is no stranger to the international culinary-competition arena. He was on the gold-medal-winning Michigan Regional team at the 1992 IKA in Frankfurt, Germany. In 1995, he competed in the Coupe du Monde de la Patisserie World Pastry Cup in Lyon, France, where the U.S. team took third place and earned the United States its first place ever on the winners' podium.

Decker stopped competing to spend more time with his three young sons, but the boys are now grown—two in law school, and

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one a student at Schoolcraft College—and it's time for Decker to resume some unfinished business.

"At this time in my life, I'm ready for a challenge, so being named to the team is good timing," he says.

His credentials are stellar, and include being one of only 13 certified master pastry chefs in North America. And, he feels he has much to contribute. "Any time you have someone new on a team, it brings a fresh perspective and offers a different point of view," he says. "And my experience in international competition will be a benefit to the team."

A new direction

Decker joins ACF Culinary Team USA at a time when team manager Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, is taking a fresh look at the team's pastry program. The team's

three pastry chefs—Decker on the national team, and Jennifer Kopp, CPC, and Mellisa Root on the two U.S. regional teams—will practice primarily with one another, rather than with their respective teams. Leonard has designated Schoolcraft College as the headquarters for these practices.

"It's a new approach that will bring all the pastry chefs together to work, create and talk the language of pastry," Leonard says. "In the past, the pastry chef would practice with, but in an area away from, the savory chefs. There was no real synergy between the pastry chef and the savory chefs, as the two disciplines are so different. This environment will push the pastry chefs to reach a new level of excellence. They will work, sleep, eat and breathe all things pastry."

That commitment to excellence is vital if the team is to succeed in today's international culinary arena, where pastry chefs are taking their art to new heights. Leonard considers the pastry chef vital to the team's overall success at the IKA.

"We cannot win without a successful pastry course. This single course, executed by one chef, is essential to winning it all," he says. "The pastry course has become more difficult and demanding during recent IKAs. It needs to show modern techniques, various disciplines and have some complexity to it. It must demonstrate a high level of skill and have great flavors."

Leonard recalls an impressive showing by the Canadian pastry chef at the 2005 Salon Culinaire Mondial

in Basel, Switzerland. At the American Culinary Classic in May in Chicago, he says the Swiss pastry chef had a perfect dessert course—earning 99 out of 100 points—that displayed simplicity with elegance and precise craftsmanship. "The pastry chef can make or break the team," Leonard says. "A top pastry chef who can really excel and hit high 90s gives a team a great chance of winning."

All eyes on the prize

The task for team pastry chefs in the coming year is simply this: "To produce clean, elegant work that incorporates what is going on today in the pastry field,"

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Kopp

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Leonard says. “We will also lessen the theme focus a bit to ensure that the pastry piece has total harmony with the table and does not stick out like a sore thumb.

“The success enjoyed by many of the other competing countries’ teams comes from pastry that is on the same plates and has the kind of style and intricate components evident in the savory food. Pastry needs to have its own set of craftsmanship, but it also needs to be part of the team and the total look.”

Although ACF Culinary Team USA has enjoyed success at past IKAs, earning World Champion status in hot cookery at the 2004 IKA in Erfurt, Leonard stresses that current team members cannot lose the focus that will make this U.S. team the best in the world. “We need a new spirit, a mature talent, and people willing to listen and explore new concepts with total dedication and a focus on the prize,” he says. “Joe Decker brings maturity, a classical background and the hunger to be the best.”

Thomas Vaccaro, CEPC, will act as advisor and coach to Decker on the national team, adding valuable experience, talent and wisdom to the pastry effort, Leonard says. Darrin Aoyama, CEPC, will fill the same role for Kopp and Root on the regional

teams. Gilles Renusson and Ewald Notter will act as overall pastry advisors.

Commitment plus

No one pretends that success will come easily. A large measure of dedication will be required of all the pastry chefs in the year leading up to the IKA. In addition to research and development and many hours of practice, their task is to “sleep, eat, breathe pastry, have a total focus and dedication, be passionate, and practice, practice, practice,” Leonard says.

Decker knows that this year will be one of extreme commitment and sacrifice, but he also knows that he’s up to the task of leading the United States to greatness in the pastry arena.

“I’m a seasoned veteran, and ready for a challenge in my career. And my college is very supportive of my role on the team,” he says. “So, for the next 12 months, I will put all social and personal obligations aside. My wife understands and is supportive. She’s been involved when I’ve competed before. I expect there will be many late nights working after everyone else has gone home.

“I have something valuable to offer, and I know I’ll be a better pastry chef when the IKA is over. It will keep me on the cutting edge and up on trends, which, as an

Regional Team Pastry Chefs

Jennifer A. Kopp, CPC, is a pastry chef at Chevy Chase Club, Chevy Chase, Md., and a member of ACF Nations Capital Chefs Association. She has an associate of applied science degree in baking and pastry arts and a bachelor’s in foodservice management from Johnson & Wales University, Providence, R.I. She received her chapter’s Chef of the Year Award in 2005 and the ACF Northeastern Region Pastry Chef of the Year Award in 2005.

Mellisa Root is a pastry chef at River Oaks Country Club in Houston and a member of the National Chapter. She attended the baking/pastry-arts program at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, and has worked with Ewald Notter, owner of Notter School of Pastry Arts in Orlando, and Michael Joy, a master mold maker. Her culinary-competition experience includes the 2006 Ben E. Keith Food Show, where she won a silver medal, and the 2004 Mid Florida Pastry Championship, where she won gold.

instructor, is so important to me. It’s staff development times 10—or, more like, times 100. And at the end, I’m going to be a better person—physically, mentally and technically.”