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Creative meets classic

Historic Jacksonville Inn
welcomes new chef

by SARAH LEMON

photography by BOB PENNELL

It's not the delicate aroma of white-truffle polenta, the decadence of pan-fried quail eggs or the marriage of basil and strawberries that Jerry Evans remembers of his first meal prepared by chef Bill Heubel. It's the underlying, quirky touches that didn't "make the food taste any better" but, nevertheless, left a lasting impression of Heubel.

"He actually went and purchased some plates before he came in," Evans recalls. "He had to go back to his cottage because he wanted to iron his chef's jacket before dinner.

"A memorable dining experience consists of a whole lot of little details."

Longtime owner of The Jacksonville Inn, Evans knows a few things about crafting memorable dining experiences. During his

search for a new executive chef — a position that went unfilled for about three years — Evans wanted a figurehead who actually likes to cook, a hospitality professional who relates to customers on the same level as the inn's proprietor.

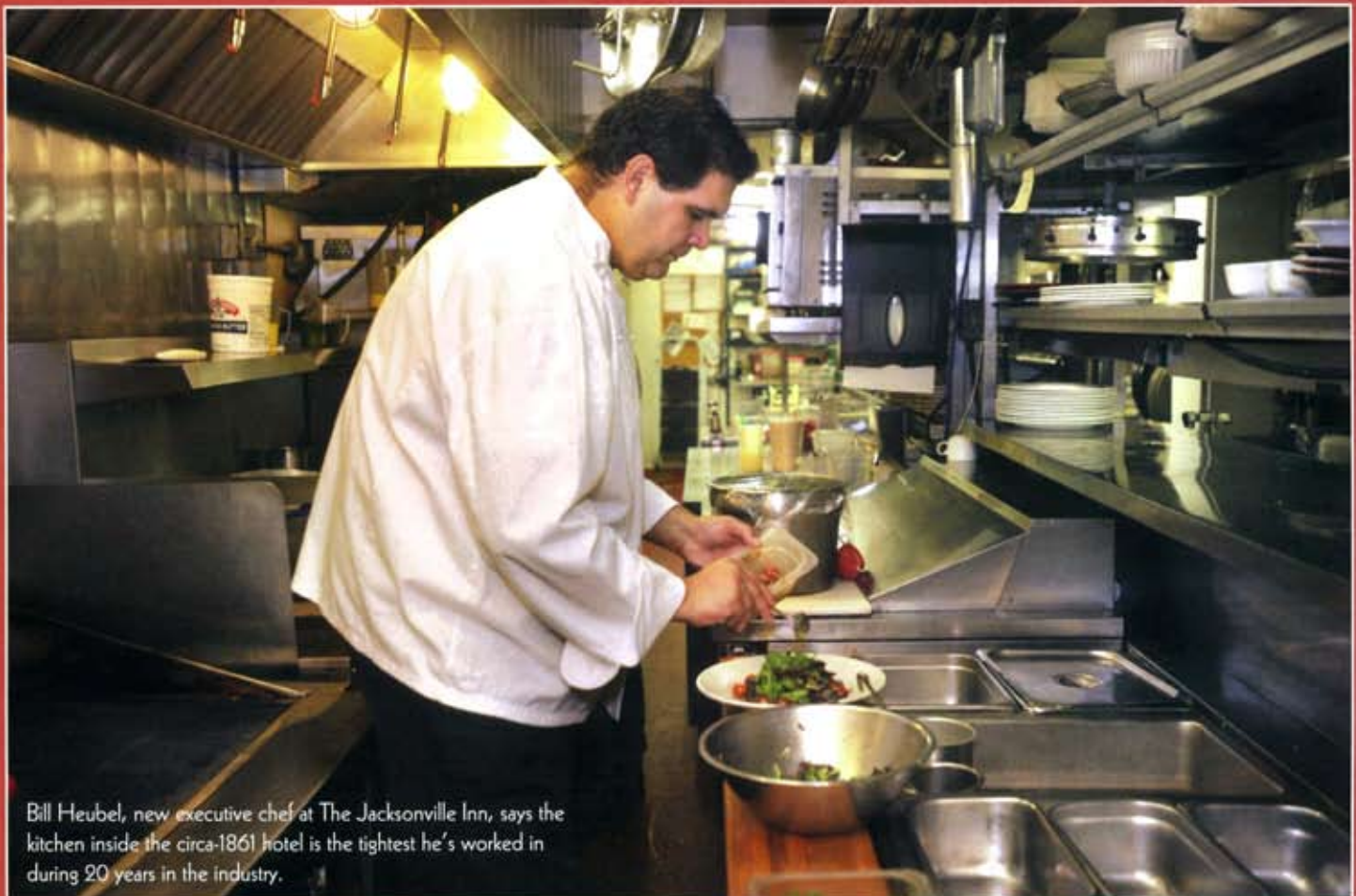
"Not every cook in the world understands that," Evans says.

Heubel brings all that and more to the table, says his new boss.

"He was just a genuinely nice guy,"

Evans says.

The 36-year-old chef distinguished himself from more than 350 applicants vying for the post of executive chef at the historic inn known more recently for hosting President George W. Bush in 2004. Heubel admits that he didn't know much about the inn's reputation or accolades before applying. His main goal was moving closer to his native San Francisco Bay Area. Once he



Bill Heubel, new executive chef at The Jacksonville Inn, says the kitchen inside the circa-1861 hotel is the tightest he's worked in during 20 years in the industry.

embarked on some online research, though, it was clear his destination benefitted from a thriving local food movement awash in high-quality fruits and vegetables, artisan products and an up-and-coming wine industry.

“You throw the wine producers on top of that, as well — there’s just so much out here,” Heubel says.

He made good use of regional specialties during his three-year tenure at Old Edwards Inn and Spa in Highlands, N.C. There, Heubel marveled at the availability of unmatched ingredients, such as grains that were not only grown locally but custom-milled by the same family for generations. Yet the chef yearned to return to the West Coast and its interpretation of Mediterranean cuisine, his passion.

“It doesn’t make much sense to

cook Mediterranean food in the South,” Heubel says. Nor did the style fit the Southwest or Hawaii, where Heubel had worked since leaving California a decade ago. A graduate of the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, Heubel learned the chef’s trade at the Ventana Inn and Spa in Big Sur, Calif., and Pacific’s Edge Restaurant in nearby Carmel.

“You always want to get back ... (to) the style of food and the places I’m most comfortable with.”

The Jacksonville Inn did force Heubel from the comfort zone he found in corporate climates. Every other establishment he’d worked in had been part of a larger hotel chain. The Jacksonville Inn was the first restaurant that promised Heubel an independent and hands-on owner.

“You could always hide in a big,

corporate environment,” Heubel says.

Landing an interview with two other applicants in April, Heubel had no intention of blending in. The five-course menu he prepared for Evans — paired with wines from the inn’s list of more than 2,000 — featured all-new dishes. Not one to fall back on the familiar, Heubel conceived each plate to showcase his skills handling ingredients such as scallops, lamb and quail eggs, as well as peak-season produce like peas, asparagus and strawberries.

“It was spectacular,” says Evans.

Although impressed, Evans had no intention of making over the inn’s mainstay menu of some 15 customer favorites, including prime rib and veal scallopini based on a 50-year-old recipe. Heubel’s contribution to the menu is a new section of three

Potato-wrapped Pacific snapper with a salad of charred cherry tomatoes and field greens is a signature dish of Jacksonville Inn executive chef Bill Heubel.



“chef’s specialties.”

From these specialties, diners can choose pan-seared salmon with Dungeness crab-filled ravioli and a sauce of caramelized fennel and chardonnay for \$28.95; crispy potato-wrapped Pacific snapper with a salad of field greens, charred cherry tomatoes, basil and olives for \$21.95; and a vegetarian dish, that Heubel likes to call a celebration of Rogue Valley vegetables with its grilled corn and pineapple salad, citrus couscous and a chevre croquette, for \$18.95.

While weekly specials such as sesame-crusted ahi tuna with a salad of black beans, ginger and lemon will rotate into the chef’s specialties section based on customers response, Heubel says he admires the inn too much to advocate drastic change.

“It has such a great core menu,” he says. “I just love older places ... that

have a real sense of character behind them.”

Charming to most, the circa-1861 inn may prove somewhat challenging to the 6-foot-9-inch Heubel. Hunching over to avoid a thick ceiling beam in the inn’s cellar-level lounge, Heubel calls to mind a bear in its den. The kitchen is a bit of a squeeze, too, he says.

“The quarters are much tighter than anywhere else I’d worked, for sure.”

The inn looks to its kitchen staff to ameliorate any of the facility’s shortcomings. Heubel says he found his co-workers’ level of skill and knowledge “surprisingly high.” Many employees have been with the inn for a decade, some longer.

“We’ve had the same group of line cooks in the kitchen for many years,” Evans says. “So it’s not that we were in a bind.”

Since chef Tim Keller left the inn for the Carriage House Restaurant at Nunan Estate, also in Jacksonville, Evans saw a lapse in culinary creativity. Evans says he also wanted to tighten controls on purchasing, even more necessary in this demanding economy. Secure in the knowledge that the kitchen was in good hands, the 73-year-old owner could take a few more hours off every day.

Heubel, Evans says, has surpassed his expectations, first driving for three days through “horrible weather” with the goal of arriving in Jacksonville to work on Mother’s Day. The chef has since worked 15 hours a day, seven days a week, Evans says, “with a smile on his face.

“That can be contagious.” ♦

IF YOU GO

The Jacksonville Inn is located at 175 E. California St., in historic Jacksonville. The restaurant is open seven days a week, serving its bistro menu on the patio starting at 4 p.m. and dinner in the main dining room at 5 p.m. Lunch runs from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday. Breakfast hours are 7:30 to 10:30 a.m., with Sunday brunch from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Browse menus, specials and the wine list online at www.jacksonvilleinn.com. Call 541-899-1900 for reservations.



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Valley's Culinary Institute of America to teach in the Rogue Valley is a bit of a culinary coup, she adds.

"He looks at food in a different way than almost anybody I know," Dowling says. "He's going to have an unusual take on the traditional Thanksgiving."

But 40 years of experience in the kitchen has taught Ash that even expert chefs must live up to guests' expectations.

"It's always a little dangerous to play with Thanksgiving because people are so traditional about it," Ash says.

Although reinventing the classics has its rewards, Ash advocates adhering to the general theme rather than getting "too crazy" with ethnic foods like Thai. Preparing turkey breasts instead of the whole bird is one way to change the presentation while preserving the holiday's essential flavors, he says. Ash also

favors techniques that free up the cook for interacting with guests, not just the food.

"On the day of Thanksgiving, you're really just finishing things," Ash says. "Desserts and breads can all be made ahead of time.

"Use techniques like slow-roasting," he adds. "Timing isn't so critical."

And don't be so invested in the meal that you're stoically shouldering all the responsibility, he says, adding that for the past 35 years he's asked a group of friends who cook to each bring a dish.

"Do it as a potluck."

Yet the holidays' sheer variety of foods, not to mention the diverse offerings of a potluck, present a wine-pairing challenge, Ash says. He'll reveal some strategies for successful pairings at his Willows classes.

It may sound obvious, Ash says,

but choose wines that are considered "food-friendly." Whites that fall into that category are crisp, clean and straight-forward, he says, not heavily oaked. Reds should be fruit-forward with lower levels of tannins, he says. If pairing just a single wine with the entire meal, a dry rose surprisingly complements just about everything, as does sparkling wine.

"They wrap themselves around," he says. "You can throw everything at them, and they work well."

A focus on fine food and wine can create memorable holidays, but slowing down and allowing for the unexpected can make the event more enjoyable, Ash says.

"Don't worry about it too much," he says. "If you have good food and good wine, how bad can it be?"

Consider Ash's recipes for your holiday table, as well as others from local restaurant chefs. ♦

Honey-Hazelnut-Crusted Salmon or Steelhead Over Warm Spinach, Pear, Oregonzola and Roasted Potato Salad

Makes 6 servings

Ingredients:

2 cups chopped Oregon hazelnuts
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
3 tablespoons local honey, divided
Salt and pepper, to taste
1/2 cup red-wine vinegar
2 cups fresh blackberries
1 tablespoon Dijon-style mustard

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for roasting potatoes
3 pounds Klamath small red potatoes
1 teaspoon minced garlic
1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme and oregano
6 (6-ounce) salmon or steelhead fillets, skin and pin bones removed
1 pound baby spinach leaves
2 Rogue Valley comice pears, sliced
4 ounces Rogue Creamery Oregonzola cheese

Directions:

Combine the hazelnuts, butter, 2 tablespoons of the honey and salt and pepper, to taste. Set aside.

In a blender, combine the vinegar, blackberries, mustard, remaining tablespoon honey and additional salt and pepper, to taste. Run blender on medium speed until ingredients are incorporated, then slowly add the olive oil to emulsify vinaigrette.

Cut the potatoes into bite-sized pieces and toss with the garlic, herbs, salt and pepper, to taste, and enough olive oil to lightly coat. Bake in a 400-degree oven until browned and tender, about 40 minutes

Fifteen minutes before potatoes are finished, arrange the fish fillets in a baking pan, top with nut mixture and place on oven's upper rack. For moist fillets, remove from oven while fish is still translucent in center (fish will continue to cook after being removed from oven).

Toss the spinach, pears, cheese, vinaigrette and warm potatoes together. Divide between 6 individual plates or pasta bowls and top each with a fish fillet.

— Recipe courtesy of Porters Dining at the Depot, Medford

Photo by Jim Craven



Don't want to cook?

Let these restaurants feed your family for the holidays

ARBOR HOUSE, in Talent, will serve Thanksgiving dinner from 3 to 6 p.m. Price is \$24.96 per person for a full meal; cost for children varies by age. Diners can choose from a traditional turkey dinner, fresh fish, leg of lamb and a vegetarian option with "all the fixings," including pumpkin soup, homemade biscuits and garlic bread. Arbor House is located at 103 W. Wagner St., Talent. Call 541-535-6817 for reservations. See the Web site www.arborhouserestaurant.com for more information.

CALLAHAN'S SISKIYOU LODGE, near Ashland, will serve Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Prices are \$26 per person, \$13 for children 12 and younger. The menu features turkey, ham, apple-cranberry stuffing, maple-glazed carrots, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, gravy, Caesar or garden salads, minestrone soup or fruit salad. Callahan's is located at 7100 Old Highway 99 South, Ashland. Call 541-481-1299 for reservations. See the Web site www.callahanslodge.com for more information.

LARKS HOME KITCHEN CUISINE, in Ashland, will serve Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners from 1 to 6:15 p.m. Prices are \$32 per person for a three-course meal, children 8 and younger, \$16.

The Thanksgiving menu features a starter course of Kabocha squash bisque, salad of apples, arugula, Belgian endive, blue cheese and toasted hazelnuts or shrimp fritters with caper-dill aioli celery-root slaw; entree of turkey with andouille-cornbread stuffing, buttermilk-sage mashed potatoes, gravy and cranberry sauce, Oregon cod with cauliflower puree and salad of bacon and Brussels sprouts, pork loin stuffed with apples, figs and onions with sweet-potato gratin and almond green beans or wild mushroom, onion and spinach stroganoff over fettuccini; and desserts of pumpkin pie with maple whipped cream, pecan pie with bourbon crême anglaise or chocolate-coffee gingerbread cake with pear compote and hazelnuts

The Christmas menu features a starter course of potato-leek soup with truffle croutons, pear, pecan, onion and goat cheese salad atop organic field greens or terrine of house-smoked steelhead and spinach; entrees of prime rib with horseradish-scented mashed potatoes and grilled asparagus, duck breast with sharp cheddar polenta and Brussels sprouts sauteed with house-made andouille sausage, escolar fillet with walnut-cranberry couscous and celery-root slaw or winter vegetable tourtiere with a potato crust, wild mushrooms and sautéed spinach; and desserts of pomegranate cheesecake, eggnog-bourbon pudding or orange-chocolate ganache tartlet.

Larks, at Ashland Springs Hotel, will offer six seating times. Call 541-488-5558 for reservations. See the Web site www.larksrestaurant.com for more information.

PINEHURST INN, near Ashland, will serve Thanksgiving dinner and a New Year's Day brunch "pajama party." Prices are \$25 per person, children 12 and younger, \$10.

Seatings on Thanksgiving are at 1 and 5 p.m. The menu features English muffin bread, marinara bisque soup, salad with vinaigrette and blue cheese, green beans with caramelized onions and toasted almonds, baked sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry-orange sauce, turkey with sage stuffing and pumpkin pie.

New Year's Day brunch is from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The menu features scrambled eggs, bacon, oven-roasted potatoes, pancakes, fresh fruit, orange-cranberry scones with white chocolate, yogurt and all-you-can-eat prime rib, as well as juice, milk, sparkling cider, coffee and tea.

Pinehurst Inn is located at 17250 Highway 66, Ashland. Call 541-488-1002 for reservations. See the Web site www.thepinehurstinn.com for more information.

PORTERS DINING AT THE DEPOT, in Medford, will serve Thanksgiving dinner from 2 to 7 p.m. Prices for the three-course meal to be determined, with turkey dinner for children 12 and younger half price, free for children under 5. The menu features butternut squash bisque, baby greens, Caesar salad or wilted spinach with pears, hazelnuts and blue cheese; roast turkey, pork tenderloin, prime rib, filet mignon, chicken, steelhead or vegetarian entree, all served with "traditional trimmings"; pumpkin pie, brownie or apple-cranberry cake.

Porters is located at 147 N. Front St., Medford. Call 541-857-1910 for reservations. See the Web site www.porterstrainstation.com for more information.

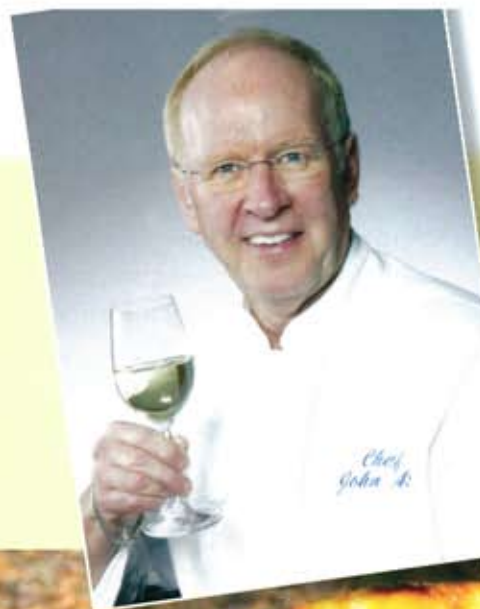


Photo courtesy of John Ash

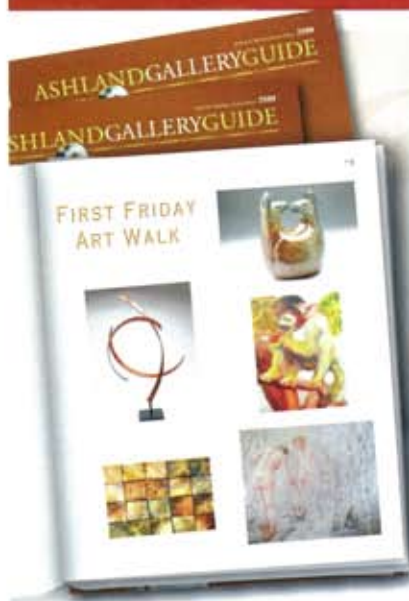
If you go

WHAT: "John Ash Cooks Thanksgiving Dinner,"
a cooking class at The Willows Cooking School.
Cost is \$85.

WHEN: 6:30 p.m. Nov. 3.
Repeated on Nov. 4 and 5.

WHERE: The Willows, 3347 Old Stage Road,
Central Point.

For information and to register:
Call 541-665-3020 or see the
Web site www.cookatthewillows.com



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DIVER SCALLOPS
WITH CAPERS AND LEMON

Pear Cobbler With Gingered Biscuit

Makes 7 to 8 servings

Ingredients:

6 pounds comice pears, peeled, cored and seeded
1/4 cup lemon juice
1/2 teaspoon allspice
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
3 tablespoons cornstarch
1/2 cup brown sugar
3/4 cup, plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar, divided
2-5/8 teaspoons vanilla, divided
3/8 teaspoon, plus 2 pinches salt, divided
1-3/4 cup flour, divided
1 to 2 bottles ginger ale (depending on how ripe pears are;
for greener pears, add more ginger ale)
3 tablespoons cornmeal
3/8 teaspoon baking soda
3 ounces butter, melted
1/2 cup buttermilk
3 tablespoons peeled and grated fresh ginger

Directions:

Heat oven to 375 F. Toss the pears with the lemon juice, allspice, cinnamon, cornstarch, brown sugar, 1/2 cup of the granulated sugar, 2 teaspoons of the vanilla, the 2 pinches salt and 1/4 cup of the flour. Mix to combine, then pour in the ginger ale as needed to create a syrup.

Scoop 2 cups filling into each of 7 to 8 ramekins. Bake until bubbly and thick.

While pears are baking, mix together in a stand mixer the cornmeal, baking soda, remaining 3/8 teaspoon salt, 1 1/2 cups flour and 1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar.

Just before pears come out of oven, whisk together the melted butter, buttermilk, fresh ginger and remaining 5/8 teaspoon vanilla in a small bowl. Stir into dry ingredients until just combined.

Divide dough evenly over dishes of baked pears. Bake for about 15 minutes or until tops begin to brown. Remove cobblers from oven and cool slightly. Serve.

— Recipe courtesy of executive chef Damon Jones, Larks Home Kitchen Cuisine, Ashland



Sweet Corn Pudding

Makes 10 servings

Ingredients:

1/2 tablespoon butter
3 tablespoons panko
4 ears roasted corn, kernels cut from cobs
1 cup diced onion
1/2 cup diced red bell pepper
1/2 tablespoon salt
1/2 tablespoon pepper
1/2 cup grated Parmesan
1 tablespoon garlic powder
1 tablespoon onion powder
2 cups heavy cream
1 cup milk
6 eggs
1/2 cup cornmeal

Directions:

Grease a 9-by13-inch baking dish with the butter and coat with the panko.

Saute the corn, onion and bell pepper until slightly wilted. Add the salt, pepper, cheese and garlic and onion powders to sauteed vegetables and let cool.

Combine the cream, milk and eggs in a bowl and whip until frothy. Mix liquid ingredients with cooled, sauteed vegetables; mix well. Fold in the cornmeal and pour mixture into prepared pan. Bake for 1 hour at 375 F or until golden brown.

— Recipe courtesy of executive chef Damon Jones, Larks Home Kitchen Cuisine, Ashland



Green Bean, Fennel and Chanterelle Casserole

Makes 4 servings

Ingredients:

2 slices rosemary-flavored bread
4 tablespoons butter, divided
Pinch salt, plus more to taste and for cooking water
1 pound green beans, trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces
1/2 sweet onion, chopped
6 ounces chanterelles, cleaned and sliced
1 bulb fennel, very thinly sliced
1 tablespoon minced garlic
1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1/2 cup chicken stock
1 cup heavy cream

Directions:

Pulse the bread, 1 tablespoon of the butter and the pinch of salt in a food processor until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Set aside.

Bring a pot of salted water to boil. Drop the trimmed green beans into boiling water and cook for 4 minutes. Remove beans from water and immediately plunge into ice water to stop cooking action. Drain and let dry.

Melt the remaining 3 tablespoons butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Sauté the onion, chanterelles and fennel in butter until soft. Add the garlic, thyme and salt and pepper, to taste, cooking for 1 minute. Add the flour and cook for 1 minute more. Add the chicken stock and reduce heat to medium. Stir in the heavy cream and gently simmer until sauce coats back of a spoon.

Toss warm vegetable-sauce mixture with blanched green beans and place in an oven-proof baking dish. Top with prepared bread crumbs and bake at 375 F for 15 minutes or until top is golden brown and bubbling around edges.

— Recipe courtesy of executive chef Damon Jones of Larks Home Kitchen Cuisine, Ashland



Photo by Jim Craven

Wild Mushroom Pate

Makes about 3 cups

Ingredients:

5 tablespoons butter
1/2 cup chopped shallots or green onions (white parts only)
1 1/4 pounds thickly sliced fresh, wild or exotic cultivated mushrooms (see note)
2 teaspoons finely chopped garlic
2 teaspoons curry powder, or to taste
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1 cup toasted, preferably unsalted, cashews
2 tablespoons toasted nut oil, such as walnut or olive oil
2 tablespoons finely chopped, mixed herbs, such as parsley, chives or basil
2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Directions:

Heat the butter in a large sauté pan over moderately high heat. Add the shallots, mushrooms, garlic, curry powder and cumin and sauté, stirring, until mixture is just beginning to brown and all liquid has evaporated.

While mushrooms are cooking, add the cashews to a food processor and process until finely chopped. Add the oil and continue to process to make a paste or butter. Add mushroom mixture and process until smooth.

Stir in the herbs and zest and season to taste with the salt and pepper. Transfer mixture to a 3-cup pate mold or other ceramic dish. May be stored, covered and refrigerated, for up to 3 days. Allow to come to room temperature before serving. Serve with crisp little toasts or crackers of your choice and, as the French do, with some little cornichons and grainy mustard on the side.

NOTE: Use only wild mushrooms that you are certain are edible. If you are not an experienced forager, you can substitute wild or cultivated mushrooms found in markets, such as chanterelle, shiitake, cremini, portabella, oyster, etc.

— Recipe courtesy of chef, author and cooking instructor John Ash

online

see more recipes at
DistinctlyNorthwest.com

