

SE 1 EP 2 Hospitality and Culinary with Chef William Vena

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SPEAKERS

Jessica Prugh, Chef Vena

J Jessica Prugh 00:02

Welcome to CLC connects the podcast where we connect College of Lake County faculty and staff experts with you to give opinion advice or tips on anything that interests Lake County. It's like a taste of the college experience with no enrollment required. Today we are joined by Chef William Vena, CLC co chair of the hospitality and culinary program, Chef Vena brings his decades of kitchen expertise to this episode, we'll talk about how to save money on your grocery bill and how the restaurant industry is changing. We'll also get a preview of what's going on at the old Brae Loch Golf Club in Grayslake. And Chef Vena will share a recipe for all those tomatoes pouring out of your garden. Stick around. Chef Vena, welcome to CLC connects.

C Chef Vena 00:44

Glad to be here.

J Jessica Prugh 00:46

Can you tell us about your own culinary journey?

C Chef Vena 00:48

I got into the hospitality business when I was 16. The family stories are that I was always watching my mom cook when I was little and watching my grandparents cook when I was little. So I guess it's kind of in my blood. But at 16 I got introduced to the culinary world through a friend of mine that I went to high school with and it was supposed to be a side job as a dishwasher at Ravinia festival. And my passion and love for the kitchen and the action and the

flavors and the smells. Took me to where I am today here at CLC. And it's been 36 years doing everything in the hospitality business again from banquet chef to sous chef, Executive Chef, dishwasher line cook catering. And now as professor, Chef Instructor at CLC.

J Jessica Prugh 01:37

You studied at the California Culinary Academy, which is a top culinary program in the United States. What lessons have you brought from that program into the kitchens at CLC?

C Chef Vena 01:45

Well, the advantage I had when I went to culinary school I got my bachelor's degree in photography at the College of Santa Fe and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Though when I went there, you know had no idea this is what I was where I was going to end up in the hospitality business. I got a photography degree a bachelor of fine arts. From there, it led me to go into culinary school. And I was always cooking in restaurants and doing side gigs. You know in in the area. I ended up going out to the Bay Area went to culinary school at the California Culinary Academy. It was a two and a half year program. And from there, I was lucky enough to go into that program with experience. A lot of students didn't have experience. So I kind of knew what I was walking into the action, the stress of being in the business. So I already knew that. So I really absorbed what the chef's taught me there. And I was you know, I was a sponge for two and a half years I worked at some top restaurants in San Francisco, worked with some great chefs, Gary Danko. Mark Johnson, you know, I lived out in the bay area for about four and a half years. And then it was time for me to you know, come back to the Midwest where I was born and raised and start working in Chicago and in the suburbs and got married and started a family and the rest is history.

J Jessica Prugh 02:55

So it's always nice when people bring that West Coast experience back to the Midwest. Because I think that we have really great food here in the Midwest with all of our farms and everything. You said that you received your BFA in photography, people say that athletes and artists are born with natural talents. Do you think that this applies to chefs too?

C Chef Vena 03:12

I learned a long time ago from a general manager that I worked for one of my close friends today who I still talk to a mentor. But he told me, you know, simple thing that he used to always tell the staff but he always used to tell me at the end of each kind of team building, meaning that we would have weekly was, you know, life short, enjoy what you do. And it's always stuck with me. I know, it's, you know, kind of a simple saying, and a lot of people say it, but life goes by super fast, you really got to embrace what you're doing the hospitality business is amazing. It's fun, but you really have to be all in. Either you love it or you hate it. And there is no in between. Because the hours are long. You really don't have a life. When you start off, you're working at a high level, a stressful level. There's a lot of you know, unfortunately, divorce rates in this business, there's a lot of addictions, that's all the negative, but you really,

you really have to channel it. And if that's what you really want to do, it takes a select few I kind of joke with everybody that I know in the business. In order to do this, you got to be a little you got to be a little crazy on some level, because it's not a normal job. When I started off, you know, 16 1718 years old, I you know, I didn't know this is where I was gonna end up. By the time I got into my mid 20s I was graduating culinary school living in the Bay Area. You know, you're working long hours, you're working every single day. You're going out late at night, you're eating weird hours, and it's not for a normal person. But I always looked at it as a you know, I knew that's what I wanted to do. It was a passion for me and I was all in kind of early on but then I really had a drive to be successful. And my goal was to be an executive chef and multiple places and I did that and You know, I credit a lot of people I've worked for credit, a lot of people that I've met along my journey.

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Jessica Prugh 05:07

How do you think that the culture has changed in the last couple of years,

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Chef Vena 05:11

it's changed a lot in the last, I would say 10 to 15 years, you know, I, I look at myself, as an old school chef, put your head down, keep your mouth closed, and Yes, chef, no chef and get the job done. Try to improve wherever you're working, always respect the chef, whether you like him or not, because you really never know if you're going to cross paths with him again, or if he's going to lead you to another maybe, you know, establishment or another outlet that you could go to, so never burn a bridge. But at the same time, you know, it's, it's, it's, it's changed a lot, because I had chefs, you know, back in the day throw pans at me, I had shows told me to, you know, get the bleep out of the kitchen and don't come back, I had chefs throw me in the dish room for hours, you know, to finish the shift, because I burnt the steak, you know, that's an old school mentality, there was a lot of screaming that went on in the kitchens that I learned. And, again, you really can't do that. Now it's changed a lot. You have to try to, you know, nurture the employee, you nobody wants to get yelled at. So those days are kind of over even though there's a little bit of old school still in me, especially now at a, at an educational level. You know, I'm here to mentor these students, I'm here to get them down the right road, something I didn't have early on in my career. And I think that's the advantage. That it I don't want to say that professions got softer, because it's gotten extremely popular from the Food Network and all the food shows and shopped and it has gotten extremely popular. And there's a lot of movies now coming out about, you know, the hospitality business and cooking and chefs. But at the same time, you really do need to nurture your employees or your students or, you know, whoever is working with you. Number one, you want to grow a good team, you want to be a good leader. And in being a good leader, you know, set the example set the tone. So it has changed quite a bit since I walked some kitchens with some fresh French chefs that were there pretty intense.

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Jessica Prugh 07:15

Um, as you know, we're still in the middle of a pandemic, restaurants have taken a hard hit in the last few years, and a lot of people have left the industry. What's the argument for bringing people back into kitchens?

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Chef Vena 07:25

Um, you know, the pandemic turned the world upside down, not only the culinary world, but everybody in the hospitality industry really took a hard hit. You know, what I can tell everybody now is we are we are hopefully on the turn on demand, getting better the world's kind of getting back to normal, I hope, I don't know, I don't have a crystal ball. But what I would say is, you know, try to get out with some friends and try to support your local restaurants or local farmers markets, or try to order the platter of cookies from a local bakery, the small local places are really, really struggling. And the best way we can help all of them is go out to your favorite restaurant, go and get your favorite pizza, go out and have a beer and a burger at you know, the local tavern or a burger shop that you like, that's going to help them that's also going to, you know, hopefully encourage them to, you know, keep moving forward. And we will get out of this and places hopefully will serve survive.

J

Jessica Prugh 08:26

The best ones will right? Yes, that's the same thing is happening. I suspect we've mostly all noticed that the prices in the grocery store are rising, inflation just rose to over 9% in June, grocery prices are rising at an even higher rate up to 12.2%. Overall, according to article on web easy this morning, what can the home cook do to save money on their grocery bill while eating well,

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Chef Vena 08:48

to two problems with you know, two problems that have occurred in our industry number one, you know, the supply chain throughout the world is throughout the US is really affecting everything, not only food, but it's affecting everything from toilet paper to canned goods to you know, food. So the supply chains are the big, you know, is the big problem and some of the ports and our reopening and we're moving forward. The other problem is, is that there's not enough people out there to work these factories or these ports, or these farms. So we're having a you know, we're having a hard time in general just getting the product processed to get it on a you know, a truck or you know, on a train or on a boat to even get to us or get to a local restaurant. So that's part of the problem too. And the other problem is is because of all that the prices have increased. So they've they've gone up like you said up to 12% on few items. There really isn't any way around it right now. You know the best way that I try to preach to the students but also to my friends and family members. Try to buy stuff that's in season. It will help buying something in season you're going to get the best flavor The availability is going to be there it's going to taste really good flavor tastes same thing but also you know your price even though stuff has gone up price should be not too bad it would you know everything's going up but you're buying stuff and season that's that's going to help a little bit all your proteins across the board fish Meat Poultry is high right now but try to look at the local markets there you know, they usually have deals, try to, you know, go to some of the higher end stores that are you know, maybe have a better supply chain that are getting product in at a quicker pace. You're Mariano's, your whole foods, your treasure islands, sunset foods, those are higher grocery stores, there's nothing wrong with a jewel or an Aldi. There's nothing wrong with that. But keep in mind, the the bigger dogs or the more high end stores will get the supplies faster than some of the lower you know, lower grocery stores or middle of the road. So there really

isn't a way to you know, I can't you know, I can't tell you there's a way to you know, solve the problem but I can kind of guide you down some of the avenues to save a few dollars and put a good meal in that's gonna taste good because it's in season.

J Jessica Prugh 11:16

What should we be looking for in the grocery store right now as far as in season fruits and vegetables go

C Chef Vena 11:21

right now, one of my favorites or is right around the corner. It's actually starting up tomatoes. Tomatoes are awesome. Right now end of July all through August, a little bit of September. Hot and stickier more humid, the better tomato is going to grow. Here heirloom tomatoes are coming around beefsteaks Roma's, cherries, anything tomato related in the next I would say eight weeks is what you want to be buying. You know, tomato seasons quick. But when you're eating something in season, like I've already mentioned, the flavor is going to be off the charts, you don't have to add a lot to it. A little salt, pepper, a good olive oil balsamic, and you're there. The other one that's coming around the corner right now also is one of my another one of my favorites, watermelon, watermelon and August, if this weather keeps up, the way it has been, is just going to be is going to be awesome watermelons, they're usually coming from the south, we do get a lot from the west coast. But generally the stuff we see here in Illinois comes down from the southern states and it comes up. So watermelons are going to be really really good. You know, seedless or with seeds of they're both in the next two to three weeks should be fantastic. You know, so those are a couple items that I would tell you to start looking for now. Unfortunately, lettuce season is kind of died. So if you're a lettuce fan, really the only stuff you're going to be able to find now is your Romaine and iceberg. And that stuff's all made under a climate controlled areas. And it's mass produced just like the domestic mushroom, it's made year round and you can get it and it's going to taste okay. But it's not like a wild mushroom that's only in season a couple of months or like a tomato and watermelon that are only in season a couple of months. So that's how I how I would tell you to to kind of guide your way to saving money. But also, you know, putting a good meal in front of your friends and family. We will

J Jessica Prugh 13:16

post a tomato recipe from you on our website that'll be available when this podcast launches. Can you give us a tip for picking a good watermelon because I always have a lot of trouble.

C Chef Vena 13:26

You know, there's a lot of there's a lot of myths and a lot of tips out there. I mean, I always you know, look for one that's somewhat firm. You know, you kind of you bang on it with your your fingers and there's almost like an echo is what some chefs have told me. You don't want something that's been bruised, so you kind of want to feel it. It does want to be firm around the watermelon. If it looks like the waters will watermelons been sitting on one side for a while that

area will be bruised when you go cut into it. So just affirm watermelon and make sure you kind of have that drum rhythm if you tap on it with your fingers. That's you know, that's what was told to me young in my younger days. Thank you

J Jessica Prugh 14:28

What do you love about teaching Culinary and Hospitality at CLC?

C Chef Vena 14:32

What I really like about the job, you know is you know, the development of the students makes me just feel incredibly satisfied when I see students that walk into this program. At the very beginning don't know how to put a chef's jacket on, don't know how to hold a knife, have no idea about safety or sanitation really, their palates are really undeveloped, and to watch them grow in two and a half years and then walk across the stage. Ah at the gymnasium with her diploma and ready to go out there and make a difference. And, you know, really spread the word about CLC in the program that's, that's the most rewarding to me is when I see a student that really didn't know how to make a sauce, and now they know how to make 10 sauces, or didn't know how to put a play together with a focal point. And now they're doing these amazing presentations and the food's coming off the plate and it's popping, and there's vibrant colors with the sauces, then you know, I can go home at night, and it's rewarding to say, hey, you know, I'm doing something right. And I'm making a difference and a lot of these young culinary uns careers, and it that that's the most rewarding about the job that the second thing is a lot of the people I've met here in 10 years at CLC. Especially with my department, we're really close knit group, we've all kind of been together now for 10 plus years, we did get a few new team members on the team within the last year. But the core is kind of been together. And I like to call it my second family. I see them more than I you know, see my wife and kids a lot of times and you know, we communicate well, it's a close group, but then a lot of people I've met in other departments, good people, it's a fun place to work. It's a good environment. It's good that we're all in no matter what department you're in. We're all making a difference on young people's lives, which is important.

J Jessica Prugh 16:26

The last thing I want to talk about is the CLC Bray lock expansion project. So for several years, CLCs sort of had this secret restaurant that's been well known to the college community, but maybe not outside of it. The restaurant was called Prairie and it was located in the basement of the Grays Lake Campus. And it was a student managed restaurant. And through a new partnership with Lake County Forest Preserve, we are expanding.

C Chef Vena 16:47

Yeah, Prairie opened up 2020 12 It was open for nine years it was in the basement of a wing. It was a little diamond in the rough. When we first opened it was it is meant to be the capstone class of the program. And it's the last class that I call the senior students go through, they pretty much run the restaurant, they order the product they cook the food they serve, they do

everything there is to do if you're going to open a restaurant with the exception of you know, making sure the money in the labor is intact. We help them with that. But that's kind of whoever's running the class takes care of that. But it was extremely successful. It became really, really popular. Within the last three or four years, we were getting lots and lots of people from the public. Gray's Lake Mundelein Libertyville around Lake, a lot of the neighboring communities were coming here. It was a nonprofit when we opened up so it was basically bottom line prices. You know, we were I wouldn't say we were giving food away, but it was very cheap, and you were getting a great meal. But it was, the more of it was the experience for the students what they were going to get out of it. And unfortunately, we closed but the good news is we did partner up with the Lake County Forest Reserve. And we are taking over the brayla Country Club, the clubhouse aspect of it for now, we're in the midst of redoing it and designing it, my team and business and social science team and some architects. So what's going to happen, hopefully by fall of 2023, is when we're going to open cut the ribbon or have the ceremony. And what we're going to have is a state of the art restaurant on a wonderful golf course. So the idea is that you know, people go go out and play a, you know, a nice round of golf, it's a public course, so anybody can come out and play. And then from there, come on in to get a great meal prepared by again, it'll be junior and senior students that will be running it. We are thinking about doing kind of a hybrid and having some freshmen and sophomores in there, to kind of start off maybe do a breakfast, or the lunch portion of it. The plan is to be open breakfast limited. But lunch and dinner, you know, at least five days a week, four days a week, again, it's going to depend on enrollment, it's going to depend on the students, it's going to depend on when the project gets done, but it's going to be again, a state of the art teaching kitchen with a wonderful lounge area, beautiful dining room that's going to overlook the 18th and 19th greens, I think the vibe that we're kind of shooting for is more of a kind of a rustic country feel. So it should be fun. You know, I have a bunch of ideas in my head. But you know, we'll keep those quiet right now we'll see you know, we'll see how it opens. But it's going to be it's going to be a great thing, we're gonna be able to seat a lot more people, which will be good. And then we'll also have the capability of doing small parties or small banquets there. And you know, it's great for the program. We're also looking at possibly doing some type of food truck down the road a class. So having a food truck that maybe goes on bops around to all three campuses of CLC. So there's there's quite a lot quite a bit of ideas, prairies, the big Uh, taking that we're working we're all working on right now. And, you know, again with the supply chain and the way stuff's going, you know, equipment and to get it all done on time is going to be a challenge. But I think we got a good team in place. And hopefully I'll see everybody out there in fall of 2023.

J

Jessica Prugh 20:18

I'll definitely be there. That food truck sounds amazing, too. That's so cool. Yeah, that's great. Where can we find you out and about with students this summer,

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Chef Vena 20:27

Grayslake Days, which is going to be August 19, and 20th. I believe that's Saturday and a Sunday, or maybe that's a Friday and Saturday. But we're going to be out in Gray's Lake. That's our you know, that's our kind of our main town or main hub. Because we work on the Gray's Lake, I work in the Graceland campus. So we're going to be out at Gray's Lake days, we're going to be doing another you know, type of food specialty, and again, promoting the college.

And then if this really takes off, when we get to fall, or possibly next summer, doing a few more to really, you know, again, that the main reason for this is to promote the great college that I work at, but also to let people know that we have a culinary program here. It's a career program, you can get a great degree and then get out there and start making money at local restaurants or catering companies or wherever you know, your your goals are. So you can find me at Gray's Lake days, but I'm always walking around campus to if you ever have a question about food or a recipe or anything like that.

J Jessica Prugh 21:29

Well, that being said, thank you for joining us today. It was really nice to have you on I really enjoyed listening and hearing about all the new projects that are coming out of the Culinary and Hospitality program.

C Chef Vena 21:39

Well, thanks for having me and looking forward to seeing everybody on campus. Yeah. Take care

J Jessica Prugh 21:44

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