

Gianduja Chocolate Cake
(Photo: Julie Bidwell Photography)



The Making of a Menu

HOW TWO GREAT CHEFS PLAN DINNER

ARTICLE BY ROBIN MOYER CHUNG

Here’s my weekly shopping adventure: I enter the grocery store, stand in the produce section, stare at the bagged lettuce, and wonder what I’m supposed to do. Then I shake off my paralysis and buy what I always buy for the seven... six or so dinners I prepare in circulation.

No surprise, I’m in awe of chefs. They shop efficiently, they dream up recipes, they create menus, they cook dinner over and over, year after year, and always keep it interesting.

I asked two stalwarts of our esteemed cooking industry, caterer Robin Selden and restaurateur Bill Taibe to describe their process and where/how they get their inspiration.

ROBIN SELDEN OF MARCIA SELDEN CATERING (MSC)

The challenge in catering is that every event is different, as is every menu. So developing repasts and carte du jours is a near-constant. Further, while they have a commissary with 18 chefs and two pastry chefs who do the prep-work, everything must then be hauled to the event site to be cooked and completed.

“You could say that we are the Navy Seals of the culinary world,” Robin explains, “as you can drop us in a field, we build a kitchen, serve hundreds and sometimes thousands of people, and then take it down and go on our way as if nothing was ever there.”

So let’s focus on one party:

When planning an event, MSC typically finds inspiration in, well, everything. The location, theme, available ingredients, client requests, whatever.

Sometimes, but not always, the grand idea is obvious. For instance, they are currently working on a large gala in October with an “underlying theme of Puerto Rico,” therefore MSC brainstormed a corresponding menu relying heavily on Latin cuisine.

However, the clients took a gander at MSC’s proposal and decided they loved the creativity of the menu, but worried it may not be enticing to such a broad audience. They requested only touches of Puerto Rican flavor.

So MSC revisited their plan. Says Robin, “I really worked to have a fusion of things that were not too themed and or heavily spiced,” ensuring that “the vibe would be universally appealing” and everyone could find something they liked.

After the main courses are set, the rest of the menu is created to complement them.

Below is a snapshot of the menu created for the gala:

Amuse-bouche

- Gazpacho

Passed Hors D’oeuvres

- Plantain-Crusted King Crab Bites
- Grilled Tequila Shrimp with Jalapeno Yogurt Aioli

Entrées

- Braised Short Ribs with Chimichurri
- Crispy Corn Polenta Cakes with Monterey Jack
- Garlic Lemon Green Beans
- Herbed Grilled Filet of Beef
- Creamed Corn Elote
- Grilled Jumbo Asparagus

Desserts

- Toasted Coconut and Mango Cheesecake
- Gianduja Chocolate Cake with Candied Orange and Rum Crema



Robin Selden.
(Photo: Dennis Kwan Photography)



Robin Selden at work.
(Photo: Andreas & Nico Photography)

BILL TAIBE, OWNER OF KAWA NI

While Bill has many restaurants, Kawa Ni (*translation: Near the river*) intrigues me most. An Irish-American creating a Japanese gastropub in Westport? Hmm... But he likes Asian food and the space* was available, so there you have it. And, of course, like all of his other ventures this one caught fire like hot oil on a gas stove.

Restaurants' challenges differ from catering in that the menu must include both staple and du jour dishes which work for the specific theme and clientele. So Bill had to figure out Far East fare for a Fairfield County audience. He traveled to Japan to learn about their bar concept *izakaya* "stay-drink-place," as well as how and what they eat.

His goal was to embrace the tidiness of Japanese cuisine and "to create slightly traditional, known dishes, and Americanize them a little with our ingredients." Using local and seasonal produce as much as possible was also important.

The hardest part? Learning all of the ingredients. The solution: "I went to H Mart [Asian grocer] to buy all of the ingredients," he recalls. "And then I showed them to our reps." The second hardest? "Eternal lack of confidence that, God forbid, there's a dish that everyone wants that I didn't make."

Then he began building a menu of "dependable" and seasonal dishes. These included crab rangoon with real crabmeat, ramen bowls (of which he perfected the broth), and inari sushi (tofu pockets) with crab. Which perplexed the matriarch of a visiting Asian family. "You can't put crab inside of a tofu pocket!" she admonished Bill. "Do you like it?" he asked. "Yes," she admitted.

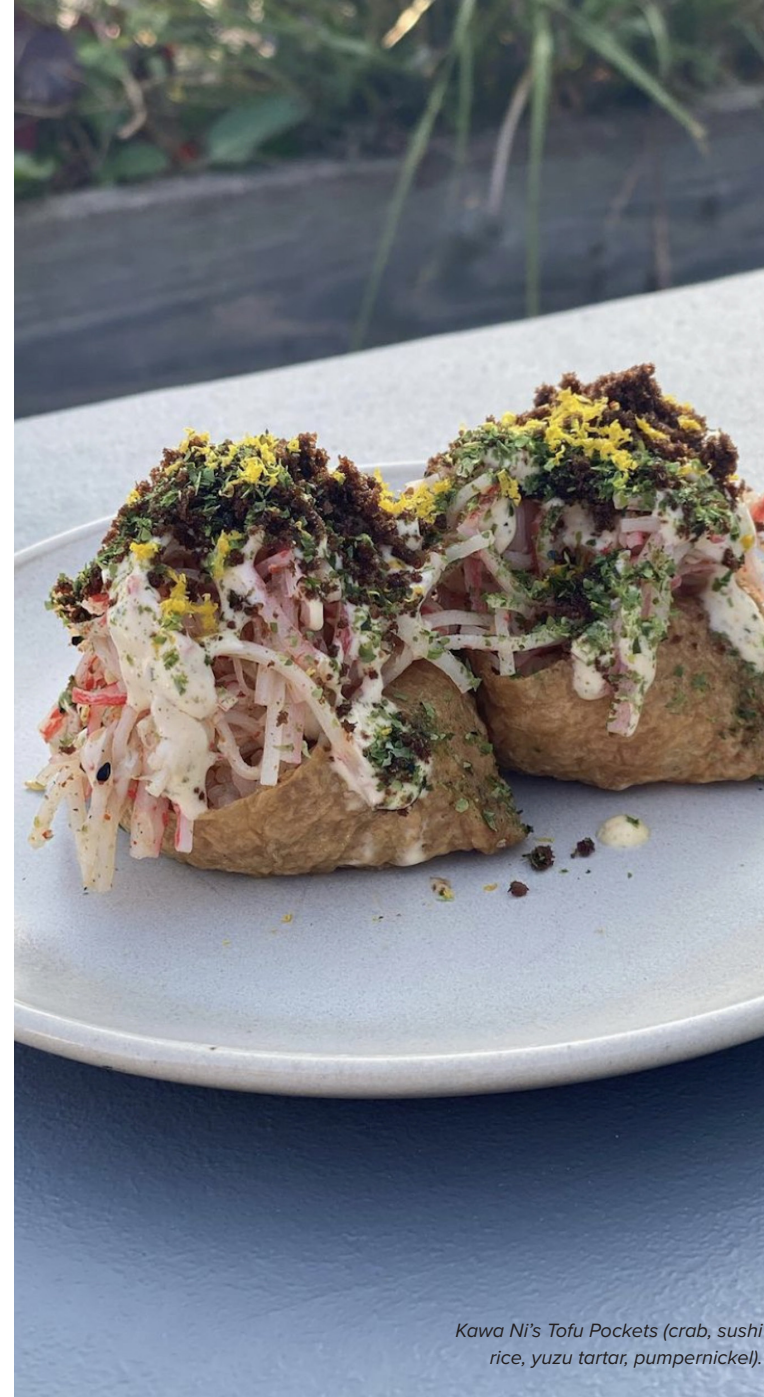
This was years ago, and the menu has changed a bit but maintains the beloved staples.

But wait, there's more. Now Bill is opening Kawa Ni (and Don Memo) in Denver, which means "strengthening and streamlining" to maintain "consistency and high level dishes" across state lines, knowing he can't be everywhere at once to police quality standards.

So he's studying the Denver demographic, local restaurants, and resisting his perennial urge to constantly change everything and "create chaos." At least for Kawa Ni and Don Memo. For The Whelk and The Art Space, he can still go full-on Tasmanian devil.

*Fun Fact: the space had been a nondescript Chinese takeout. Says Bill, "It was a cool little space, already had woks in it! We got rid of those."

KawaNiWestport.com
MarciaSelden.com



Kawa Ni's Tofu Pockets (crab, sushi rice, yuzu tartar, pumpernickel).



Bill Taibe, owner of Kawa Ni
(Photo: Anthony Rinaldi)