

cooking and entertaining

Some Things Old and Some Things New

A Holiday Feast With Chef Stephen Hassinger

WRITER JENNIFER CHANDLER
PHOTOGRAPHER JAY ADKINS

"When planning my holiday menu, I combined some things old with some things new," explained Stephen Hassinger.

"My wife, Kathleen, is from New England, and we have also lived in New Orleans," Hassinger further explained. "I took a little from both of those experiences and added them to traditional Southern holiday dishes."

As Chef at the Inn at Hunt Phelan, Hassinger is known for giving his signature twist to the traditional haute-Creole cuisine he dishes up at his renowned restaurant.



A TWIST ON TRADITION

"Every year, our family has the same meal," commented Jill Forrester. "We look forward to it."

We all savor traditions. Their continuity provides comfort and a sense of family pride. In particular, mealtime traditions are where a family's heritage is passed on from one generation to the next.

With that said, I am sure you will all agree that there are family dishes you adore and would never consider changing. But on the other hand, there are some things that either need to go or need a serious face-lift. Consider this an opportunity to make your contribution to the family's culinary heritage. Or—on a not so serious note—your chance to jazz-up a holiday meal.

Try a new recipe or, as Stephen Hassinger did, just give a classic your own signature touch with the addition of herbs, spices or a new ingredient.



HOW HASSINGER LANDED IN MEMPHIS IS AN INTERESTING TALE

Born in Pennsylvania, Hassinger honed his chef skills during a 13-year stint in New Orleans. His tour through this great food town included several years working for celebrity chef Susan Spicer at her restaurant Bayona. A year before Katrina hit, he moved to Vancouver to help open Café New Orleans (which by an interesting twist of fate was owned by a woman named Katrina). As the devastating storm was hitting the Crescent City, Hassinger and his family were literally in a car headed back to their old home.

Left homeless after the flood, Hassinger and his family decided to take an extended trip and travel across the United States. During this two-month adventure, Hassinger received a phone call from his old boss. Spicer was being courted to be a consultant to the soon-to-be opened Inn at Hunt Phelan. Overwhelmed by Katrina and the rebuilding of New Orleans, Spicer was not up for the job...but she knew who would be perfect. Hassinger came for an interview, and literally never left.

Fast-forward two years later, and Hassinger has become a well-respected member of the mid-South restaurant community. His innovative New Orleans cuisine and emphasis on buying the freshest ingredients, preferably from local purveyors, have earned him a place as one of the top chefs in town.

Holidays are made for enjoying meals with family and friends. With only his immediate family in town—his wife, Kathleen Hall, and children, Chloe and Theo—Hassinger invited their good friends Jill and Keith Forrester and Ester Bradford, with her young son Maxwell in tow, to enjoy their holiday meal.

THE FIRST COURSE WAS A CREAMY BUTTERNUT BISQUE WITH CRAWFISH

“I added the crawfish as a nod to New Orleans,” said Hassinger. “And the squash is from a friend’s garden in Cooper Young.”

Buying locally is something that is important to Hassinger. “I always try to buy local ingredients. They are fresher, more nutritious, keep business in the community and, most importantly, are more delicious.”

His desire to buy locally is what first introduced Hassinger to the Forresters, who own the Whitton Flower & Produce Company.

CHEF STEPHEN HASSINGER’S SCALLOPED POTATOES WITH TRUFFLES AND GRUYERE

8 medium Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and thinly sliced
Kosher salt, to taste
4 tbsp. thyme
1 large yellow onion, thinly sliced
4 oz. Gruyere, grated
1 qt. heavy cream
1 oz. truffle oil

Preheat oven to 300° F.

In a 12x16-inch casserole dish, alternate thin layers of the potatoes, salt and thyme, onion, Gruyere and truffle oil until the pan is full. In a saucepan, bring the cream to a boil and pour over the potatoes until it just barely covers the top.

Bake for 2 1/2 hours, pressing down on the top layer half-way through (this helps form a crust). Let sit at room temperature for 1 hour before serving, otherwise it will not be firm enough to cut.





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What began as a business relationship has led to a friendship between this chef and these farmers.

Next on the menu was a lobster salad that found its roots in New England. A staple on New England menus, Hassinger chose to dress his non-traditional lobster salad with a festive pomegranate vinaigrette, arugula and San Daniele prosciutto.

Once everyone's appetite had been whetted with the soup and salad courses, it was time for the holiday feast.

Served family-style, the table was filled with a variety of entrees and side dishes...each a traditional dish with a "Hassinger twist."

Two meats were featured on the holiday table. First, a rare roast that had been seasoned with smoked salt and pepper was served with a piquant horseradish cream. "Smoked salt adds a great flavor to meat," says Hassinger. Second was a roast turkey flavored with parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme and tarragon fresh from the herb garden.

One would have never guessed it, but this was the first time Hassinger had ever made a green bean casserole. "I know that green bean casserole made with soup and fried onions is a staple here in the South," said Hassinger, "so I tried to replicate it with fresh beans, sautéed shitake mushrooms, a bechamel sauce and applewood smoked bacon." From-the-can versions served on tables across the mid-South pale in comparison to Hassinger's fresh version.

Hassinger's tasty oyster tasso dressing also pointed to his New Orleans days. In honor of Kathleen's New England heritage, he glazed his rich sweet potatoes with maple syrup.

Rounding out the meal was a decadent scalloped potato dish that was worth every calorie. Instead of serving mashed potatoes, Hassinger created a sublime dish that seemingly melted in your mouth. The addition of truffles and nutty Gruyere cheese just took the potatoes over the top.

After such a feast, Hassinger's family and friends still found room to enjoy the grand finale. In a unique and scrumptious manner, Hassinger garnished pumpkin bread with a coffee gelato and rich chocolate ganache, topped with a decadent homemade chocolate truffle. ●

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SAMPLE AREA SALES

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