

In the Kitchen

MEET JOSÉ

By Jennifer Chandler

Most Memphians have heard of Master Chef José Gutierrez. Many know that he is one of an elite few who have earned the title of *Maitre Cuisinier de France*. (By the way there are only 52 *Maitre Cuisiniers* in North America.) Likely most think of his 22-year reign as head chef over the dining institution Chez Philippe.

But how many know how he got to where he is today?

I have been enjoying his food at Chez Philippe and now Encore Restaurant & Bar for many years. I have considered José and his new bride and business partner Colleen DePete friends since we met volunteering for The Food Bank more than ten years ago. But when I was asked to write this story, I realized that I didn't know the story of how this talented chef from the Southeast of France ended up in Memphis close to 25 years ago.

"I wanted to be a fashion designer," Gutierrez reminisced. "When I was 13-years old I would draw and make clothes for my teddy bear."

Okay, that's not what I expected one of the most revered chefs in town to say when asked how he got started in the food business.

Luckily for us local French food lovers, Gutierrez was too young to enter the school for clothing design. Instead he headed to culinary school to learn to be a *maitre d'*. Whereas Gutierrez spoke French and Spanish fluently, his English was terrible. His professors said that since he did not speak English he would not be allowed to be a *maitre d'* but would instead need to study to be in the kitchen.

"I was a horrible cook when I began. Definitely the worst in the class," explains Gutierrez, "I didn't have any cooking background. My mom was a terrible cook. She burned everything including boiled eggs and toast!"

Again, not the answer I was expecting from someone who was recognized as one of *Food & Wine's* best new chefs in the country back in 1990.

"The first day was awful," Gutierrez recalls, "I was forced to clean a chicken for the first time. But after that day, I decided to work hard and ended up finishing first in my class."

Now his story is going in more of a direction that I would have thought.

With his nephew now interested in the same small cooking school he attended in the medieval hilltop village of Manosque, France, Gutierrez comments, "Kids learn by being challenged and even having their self-esteem bruised. It's how they acquire the ability to survive and excel."

It seems as if Gutierrez is speaking from experience. After graduation, Gutierrez landed a prestigious internship with the celebrated Chef Paul Bocus. "Bocus's kitchen was like a battlefield," explains Gutierrez, "He made the guy on Hell's Kitchen look really nice. In a European kitchen, chefs use a similar technique as the military," he adds, "They break you down and then rebuild you up. No shortcuts are allowed. Everything must be done perfectly."

When asked if that is the way he runs his kitchen, Gutierrez emphatically says "no."

"I knew I didn't want to be like that. I wanted to work in a kitchen where everyone is family. I still have discipline and hard work in my kitchen. But if the job is done there is no reason to make life miserable," he explains.

Eventually Gutierrez decided to come to the United States to master the one thing he had not been able to do in France—learn English.

"I first moved to Houston to work at the Meridien Hotel," explains Gutierrez, "But my English didn't improve since everyone there speaks Spanish. When I got a call from the folks at The Peabody Hotel to come to Memphis. The first thing I asked them was if anyone spoke Spanish or French in Memphis," he adds.

Since the answer at the time was "no," Gutierrez moved to Memphis to master the English language. At the time, I am sure he had no idea that he would spend the next 22 years in the same kitchen.

Serious, fun, curious, particular, elegant—the many faces of José Gutierrez, his food and his restaurant.



“The Belz family has been wonderful to me from day one,” says Gutierrez, “When I arrived Philip Belz sang me a song of welcome in each language that I spoke.”

The Belz’s charged their new French chef with one task: to put Chez Philippe on the culinary map. Within one year, Chez Philippe was written up in *The New York Times*. A not-too-easy feat to accomplish back in that day. During his time at Chez Philippe, Gutierrez became known for his distinctive nouvelle Southern cuisine. “I went into people’s homes to find out how Southern people ate,” he explains.

Gutierrez took the Southern foods he was introduced to and started creating dishes using his own twist. “I learned to cook what Southerners like and then took the ingredients and transferred it to my heritage,” Gutierrez explains, “I made beef tenderloin with a barbecue beurre blanc sauce. I garnished pompano with a sauce I made from homemade hard apple cider.”

Jokingly referring to himself as a “French redneck,” Gutierrez humbly explains the impact he made on American cuisine. After appearing at a *Food & Wine* event in Aspen, chefs such as Todd English of the Boston-based Olives restaurant group were coming up to him and

Cauliflower Risotto

*Recipe by Chef José Gutierrez, Encore Restaurant and Bar
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1 head of cauliflower, cored and cut into small pieces
1 2/3 cups heavy cream
Salt and freshly ground pepper
1 cup shredded gruyere or mozzarella cheese

Place the cauliflower and the cream in a saucepan. Season with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer until the cauliflower is soft. Remove the mixture from the heat and let stand for 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in the cheese until melted and well blended. Serve warm. Garnish with reduced balsamic vinegar if desired. Serves 4.

Reduced Balsamic Vinegar

1 cup balsamic vinegar

Place the vinegar in a small saucepan. Bring to a hard boil and allow the vinegar to boil until reduced by half. Remove from the heat and cool to room temperature. The vinegar will be syrupy in consistency. Store in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks. Makes 1/2 cup.

saying “How come I didn’t come up with that?” Shortly thereafter, greens, grits and other Southern staples started popping up on menus across the country.

After 20+ years, life at Chez Philippe became too easy to Gutierrez. Needing a new challenge, he decided to open his own place where he would also face the trials of the business side of running a restaurant. “Being a business owner is much different than just being a chef. As an owner, you are responsible for all aspects of the business...bills, waiters, marketing...not just the food,” explains Gutierrez.

“The big difference in my cooking between Encore and Chez Philippe is that at Chez Philippe I cooked what I wanted. Here I prepare food that my guests want—my way. I created a menu that is less expensive than Chez Philippe, but at the same quality, in a bistro setting,” he continues.

An example of his new cooking philosophy is Gutierrez’s latest book project. “For my new cookbook I have collected recipes that have been in families for a long time. Ones with a story behind them. I then take the recipe and show how it can be done differently using my style of cooking,” says Gutierrez.

With a two-year old restaurant, a book project and a new catering company, Entourage by Encore, that opened in August, Gutierrez is one of the busiest chefs in town.

“The excitement is the challenge. I want to prove I can do something that not everyone can do,” he explains.

Luckily for us Memphians, that philosophy led this “French redneck” to our neck of the woods.

Jennifer Chandler is the author of Simply Salads, a columnist for the Commercial Appeal, food editor for MidSouth Magazine and Nashville Home & Garden and a contributing writer to many other publications.

**Encore Restaurant is located at 150 Peabody Place.
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