



THE ROAD TO THE JAMES BEARD HOUSE

STORY BY JENNIFER CHANDLER
PHOTOS BY SUSAN HANEMANN ROGOL AND JENNIFER CHANDLER

A James Beard Foundation honor is like the Oscar of the culinary world. Chefs nationwide strive for the national recognition that accompanies a James Beard award or a coveted invitation to cook at the James Beard House.

A prolific author and cooking teacher who left an inedible mark on American food scene, James Beard is hailed as “The Dean of American Cookery” and his name remains synonymous with American food. In 1986, the James Beard Foundation was founded “to celebrate, preserve, and nurture America’s culinary heritage and diversity in order to elevate the appreciation of our culinary excellence.” Several days a week, chefs from America’s finest restaurants and hotels cook in the kitchen of James Beard’s legendary Greenwich Village home, presenting their culinary art to Beard Foundation members and the public. In addition to showcasing culinary artists, the Foundation offers tastings, lectures, workshops, food-related art exhibits, educational opportunities and scholarships.

On January 8, Ben Vaughn of River Oaks had the honor of being center stage at the James Beard House. His innovative interpretations of French bistro favorites wowed the sold out crowd.

Thanks to the awards of *Memphis Magazine’s* Best Restaurant in both 2006 and 2007 as well as his nomination for Best Chef in 2007, Ben gained the attention of the James Beard Foundation. “Ben’s food and his restaurant seemed like a good fit for our program,” explained Iz-

abela Wojcik, Director of House Programming for the James Beard Foundation. Chefs have to be at the top of their field, well established at their restaurant as well as able to afford the time and expense of doing a James Beard dinner.

Receiving an invitation to cook at the James Beard House is just the first step in the long road to the actual dinner. It’s an expensive endeavor. The James Beard Foundation is a not-for-profit. Chefs donate the entire cost of the ingredients as well as travel expenses. “These events are a partnership between us and the chef,” explains

Ms. Wojcik, “It’s expensive to create and maintain a performance space for the chefs.” The price charged for the dinner just covers the essential staff, marketing, and maintenance of the home.

The planning began back in the early Fall of 2007. He would have just a few months to design the perfect menu as well as assemble a team to cook with him.

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Chef Ben Vaughn, River Oaks Restaurant

In September, Ben prepared a menu for a special event that would become the basis for his James Beard offering. “The flavors of that menu really came together,” he recounts. Over the next several months, Ben would adjust each dish until he achieved what he deemed the perfect menu. “I worked each dish in as weekend special about 8 to 10 times over several months,” he further explains. Each dish remained basically the same but with some small modifications. For example, the fish dish started as sea bass but ended up being cod on the final menu.



As he was developing his menu, Ben also had to assemble a team to help him prepare his feast for 80 guests. One of the first people he called on was his sous chef at River Oaks, Trey Allison. “Trey has been cooking in Memphis for more than 15 years,” says Ben, “His organizational skills are awesome. He takes care of the details and keeps me in line.” Next on the list was his good friend and talented chef Justin Young. Now the Executive Chef of Kraft Food Ingredients, Justin spent many years working with Erling Jensen and had been to the James Beard House years before with Alex and Judd Grisanti. Nick Alyward, the General Manager of River Oaks, was also on the team to represent the restaurant. I, Jennifer Chandler, had the honor of being the fourth member of the kitchen crew.

Probably the biggest logistical feat of a James Beard dinner is getting all the ingredients to the kitchen in New York City. The James Beard kitchen, housed in Beard’s small New York town house, is a little better equipped than a conventional home kitchen. Storage space is minimal and, because of the number of events each week, nothing can be brought to the house until the day of the event. Ben and Trey spent the days leading up to the event organizing the food. Dry ingredients were boxed up at River Oaks. Perishable items were shipped directly to New York by the purveyor. “It’s amazing how it

all came together,” says Ben, “We didn’t want to miss one day of freshness so everything was shipped overnight.”

The day of the dinner began early. Before we could begin cooking for the 80 guests who would be arriving at 7:00 PM, we would have to unpack and organize ourselves in this tiny kitchen. “The best part of the day was that pot of coffee the kitchen manager gave us when we arrived,” joked Ben. That calm moment of realizing that we were about to spend the day in the kitchen of one of America’s most beloved chefs quickly led to a demanding day of cooking. We had six complicated courses plus hors d’oeuvres to be prepared from scratch in just a few short hours.

Justin set to butchering all the meat—short ribs, oxtail and flank steak. Trey was busy preparing the numerous sauces. Nick was put to work prepping vegetables. And I started carefully carving and poaching one hundred pears. As each hour passed, more components of the meal were completed and we moved like a well-oiled machine toward the end goal of having the entire meal prepped before the guests arrived. A necessity since the guests would congregate for hors d’oeuvres in the already cramped kitchen.

As dinner service started, Ben orchestrated each course to perfection. From the decadent Maine lobster over a crispy egg noodle pancake to

Left to right: Ben Vaughn's team; cod and foie gras; plating the poached pears and cheese plates; the team has a great time plating the final course in New York.



the guava barbecue sauce-glazed Arkansas quail with a duck confit ragout, each plate amazed the guests in the various dining rooms of the Beard House. "I think the cod got the most feedback," he recounts, "Separately each part—the fish, andouille sausage, and foie gras—didn't make sense but it all came together so well."

As the guests enjoyed their dessert of poached pears with blue cheese and port truffles, Ben was treated to a standing ovation. This young chef from Memphis, Tennessee had charmed the food savvy New Yorkers, and a few fans from home, with his creative New American cuisine.

"It's like the Carnegie Hall of cooking," Ben reflects, "It's an honor to do and nice to be recognized outside your region. I also wanted to represent Memphis well. I would like for Memphis to be known as a good fine dining town instead of just for barbecue."

Ben made his mark on the national food scene that night and will definitely be back in the James Beard spotlight again. "His food was delicious and our members responded favorably. We would love to have him back," says Ms. Wojcik.

Beard House Chefs in Memphis

What's the connection between Memphis and the James Beard House? Easy. We've got some fantastic chefs here in Memphis. So when you're looking for a high-caliber meal, be sure to visit one of the many Memphis chefs who have had the honor of being invited to the James Beard House.

RICK FARMER | JARRETT'S

March 24, 1999

KAREN CARRIER | BEAUTY SHOP AND DO

with Brett "Shaggy" Duffee and Marisa Baggett

March 22, 2001 and October 27, 2005

ALEX & JUDD GRISANTI | RONNIE GRISANTI & SONS

with Ryan Luttrell

April 19, 2001

JIMMY ISHII | SEKISUI PACIFIC RIM

June 18, 2002

WALLY JOE | WALLY JOE RESTAURANT

[Wally Joe is now the chef at the Brushmark]

June 3, 2003

JOHNNY KIRK | STELLA

June 2, 2005

BEN SMITH | TSUNAMI

Nov 26, 2005

BEN VAUGHN | RIVER OAKS

January 8, 2008

PEABODY CHEFS | PEABODY MEMPHIS

April 10, 2008

Source: www.jamesbeard.org

For reservations or information about James Beard House events, visit www.jamesbeard.org or call 212-627-2308.