

Chef's Choice: Greg Jefferson, executive chef at the Blue Sushi Sake Grill in Naperville

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Greg Jefferson, 24, is executive chef at the Blue Sushi Sake Grill, which opened this summer at 123 Water St. in Naperville. Jefferson climbed the corporate ladder quickly, working as a line cook when he was 15 in southern California at a small bar and grill before moving to Lincoln, Neb., and attending culinary school at Southeast Community College. He managed a delicatessen at 20 years old, and was sous chef before being promoted to the Naperville location.



The Salmon Toban Yaki at the Blue Sushi Sake Grill in Naperville features a salmon fillet dusted with a Japanese pepper blend and served with a tomato butter pan sauce that includes mushrooms, Brussels sprouts and asparagus. (David Sharos/Naperville Sun)

Question: When you were a teenager, what got you into that first job at the bar and grill?

Jefferson: I've always been a food guy. My grandmother was always in the kitchen, and I was curious about what she was doing and how. She'd take me along and show me tips and tricks. She's a better cook than I'll ever be.

Question: What would you say was the best tip or technique you ever learned from her?

Jefferson: That's a hard one. Little things like making a cake and making sure you sift the flour first. I was always an eager kid that liked to dump, stir, and pour.

Question: What about the topic of cooking? Are there intuitive skills or can people learn by the book so to speak?

Jefferson: It's a little bit of both, but it's a passion. Anyone in the kitchen can't imagine being anywhere else. It's a way of life.

Question: Restaurant work requires a lot of time. Is this job wreaking havoc with your social life?

Jefferson: You know - it is, but you learn how to circumnavigate that. I just moved here 3 months ago from Nebraska, so my social life is the restaurant - that's my wife. You pretty much are married to it.

Question: To follow up on that, what's the biggest difference you see here in the Midwest and Naperville after living in Nebraska?

Jefferson: The food - everyone here is all about going out to eat. For people in Nebraska, eating out is more of an event, not an everyday way of life. Here, people like to experiment and try things, whereas there, people tend to go to the same places and order the same things.

Question: Given the corporate structure you're in, how much individual creativity are you allowed?

Jefferson: Not as much as other chefs, but I do have some moments where I get to play around and do different things. We do make a lot of the same things, but consistency is the key.

Question: Let's say you want to amaze someone for dinner. What might you prepare?

Jefferson: I'd make seared veal in a burgundy sauce - it's one of my favorite things to make with an Israeli style couscous.

Question: Is that on the menu here or just in Greg's head?

Jefferson: Nope, it's just in Greg's head.



Question: Speaking of that, what's something that you'd say is common among chefs' DNAs that most people don't know?

Jefferson: How much a chef appreciates his knife – there's nothing worse than having a dull one and nothing more dangerous. A lot of people don't appreciate the right tool for the job.

Question: What are some of your favorite ingredients you use here?

Jefferson: Japanese style eggplant is one of the more mundane ones, but there is lot of mirin, rice vinegar, salmon roe, lots of specialty Japanese ingredients.

Question: What's something you like so much you could eat it weekly or even more often?

Jefferson: When I have a free minute, I like to make crepes – that's one of my guilty pleasures.

Question: What do you think about the phrase, 'Life is short – have dessert first?'

Jefferson: That wouldn't work for me – I'm a meat and potatoes guy.

Question: Tell us about the dish you're featuring today – is this something on the menu?

Jefferson: Yes, it's a Salmon Toban yaki that has salmon, asparagus, Brussels sprouts, and a three mushrooms blend. The salmon is topped with a Japanese sansho pepper spice blend and a tomato pan sauce with sake soy sauce, and yuzu juice which is Japanese citrus fruit.

Question: What about this dish – was it something you had to tweak to get it right?

Jefferson: Corporate came up with this – it's not one of my babies, but we were one of the first restaurants to roll this menu out. We do tweak things to make them more accessible and easier to put out.

In Chef's Choice, the Naperville Sun asks local chefs to share their culinary background and experiences and talk about a featured dish found on their menu.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/ct-nvs-chefs-choice-st-0915-20170907-story.html>

