

taste buds
chef Larry James

Where chili fans gather

All right, all you chili lovers out there who dream about the food that won the West.

We're getting close to one of childhood's yearly featured events, the Great American Chili Cookoff — in beautiful Saline, Michigan — to benefit the National Kidney Foundation.

Mark your chili peppers with the dates Saturday-Sunday, May 5-6. Get ready to sample some of the best chili the Midwest has to offer, and have loads of fun doing it.

What really makes the best chili? On a recent chili Saturday (excuse the pun) I ventured out to a practice session of the Blue Flame Chili makers. It was there, amid a case of Michelob and a pungent aroma, that I met Brad Silvester and Dennis Hill of Ann Arbor, Brad King of Farmington Hills and Don Carney of Northville, the team behind Blue Flame Chili.

I have been a chili judge for the past seven years. Momma made chili at least once a week and, like the Blue Flame Chili makers, I too use fresh jalapenos, sirloin, tomatoes, various other items and a secret ingredient that will be revealed later in this story. What makes this chili better than the rest?

To quote the team, in unison, "It's not the chili going down. It's the aftereffects."

AS ONE OF the judges who has to sample more than 25 different chilis in an afternoon, I wholeheartedly agree, it's the aftereffects, and God knows I have aftereffects.

What exactly is it that makes these four fun-loving product engineers from the GM Proving Grounds make chili better than the others? Well, for starters, they believe that after doing this for five years and finishing in the top 20 (out of 30 entrants) every year, they have their recipe down pat and all it needs is a little fine tuning from year to year.

King, Blue Flame Chili maker for the past four years, claims it's the secret addition of just the right amount of Nestle's Toll House Morsels that is added to the pot. "The chocolate shouldn't be noticeable, so we add just a small amount to help mellow out the heat. Then we munch on the remainder," said King.

Silvester is still considered the apprentice, with only two years' previous experience. He prescribes a taking gourmet cooking classes in Ann Arbor. Silvester brings along the experience of his favorite chili maker, his dad, who is a pilot for United Airlines and "has tasted the best chilis all over the world."

Chili maker Hill, gently stirring the cauldron of bubbling chili while the crew roasts fresh jalapenos over an open flame, thinks the Blue Flame chili has become much more tame since its origin, and would like to taste it hotter.

AS A RETURNING judge in this year's cookoff, I will refrain from making any judgments till I've tasted them all. But a word of warning to the other teams,

Please turn to Page 2

Got a special veggie recipe?

There's still time to compete for a contest prize by submitting a recipe for your favorite vegetable dish.

The winner will receive a \$25 gift certificate and the pleasure of knowing that other Taste readers will soon be trying out the special recipe. Any vegetable, or vegetables, of your choice may be featured.

Mail to: Taste Recipe Contest, Observer & Eccentric, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150. Entries must be postmarked by Tuesday, May 8.



DOUGLAS E. SUSALLA

Grace Crowl, a former nursing administrator, and her husband, James, a doctor, are Bloomfield Township residents who are involved in the food business. They offer catering and carryout at their shop, Taste of Seasons in Farmington Hills.

A shop for all seasons

By Ariane Funke
special writer

LOCAL FOOD LOVERS can be glad Grace Crowl decided to give up nursing.

Seven years ago Crowl checked her job as a nursing administrator in the surgical unit at Providence Hospital in Southfield. She enrolled in culinary-arts classes and took a totally different career path.

One year ago, having studied with some outstanding local chefs, Crowl opened Taste of Seasons, a catering firm and gourmet takeout shop in Farmington Hills.

"This is a labor of love," said Crowl, a Bloomfield Township resident. "It was my dreams."

Crowl specializes in the country French and nouvelle California styles of food preparation.

"It's much lighter fare," she explained. "It isn't swimming in sauces. It's lots of fresh fruits and vegetables."

Crowl learned to love good food from her mother, a "fabulous cook." Although Crowl has dozens of cookbooks she is particularly fond of the

"Open House Cookbook" by Sarah Leah Chase and the Silver Palate series of cookbooks.

Crowl uses a deft blend of spices, herbs, interesting food combinations and light dressings to bring excitement to meat, chicken and fish.

ONE RECENT MENU offering was a boneless, skinned chicken breast stuffed with onions, celery, water chestnuts and herbs. It was basted with a honey-soy glaze and topped with sesame seeds.

Another tasty choice was a Greek chicken pie, which pairs chicken breast with feta cheese, Parmesan cheese, green onions, spicy Dijon mustard and herbs. The chicken is layered in phyllo. There's also a grilled duck breast with cherry sauce.

"Health aspects are very important," Crowl said. "Chicken is the rage. And we always focus on one or more heart-healthy entrees."

Dinner specials are rotated weekly. Prices range from around \$5 for the entree only, to \$11 for the full meal, which includes vegetable, salad, homemade bread and dessert.

Strudels, creamy cheesecakes, luscious, moist carrot cake and several cookies and brownies are made on the premises.

Although hers isn't a kosher kitchen, Crowl also caters many "kosher-style" meals. For Passover she developed a special carryout meal of roast chicken or beef, chicken soup with matzo ball, gefilte fish, potato kugel and sponge cake.

Crowl, formerly of Lathrup Village, has worked with her share of demanding, often temperamental chefs. She believes her years of hospital work prepared her for the grueling task.

"Physicians have a tendency to think they walk on water, and so do chefs," she said.

ONE CHIEF whom she holds in high regard is Douglas Grech, also known as Chef Douglass. He taught Crowl how to turn potential cooking disasters into success stories.

"With catering he has a flair that far surpasses everybody," Crowl said.

After finishing culinary-arts requirements at Oakland Community

College in Farmington Hills, Crowl studied at the New York Cooking School, where she learned about classic French cuisine and elegant pastries. For three years she had a home-based catering business, which finally outgrew its quarters.

"When you have four ovens and five refrigerators in your home, it starts getting out of hand," Crowl said.

In December 1988, Crowl moved to her present location, formerly the site of a delicatessen, in the Tiffany Plaza shopping center on Northwestern Highway near 14 Mile Road. The bulk of the business is catered parties, which run the gamut from bar mitzvahs and business dinners to wedding receptions.

Crowl employs 15 full-time workers, three people with culinary-arts degrees, and several part-timers. Her husband James, a physician, helps when she has large parties — particularly when servers fail to show up for work.

Crowl sings the praises of her staff, including Bill Hickey of Bir-

Please turn to Page 2

Chinese food is different at Ah Wok

Long before Novi was an up-and-coming suburb, Ah Wok restaurant was drawing people westward with meals that had Detroit restaurant critics raving.

Today, Novi has changed. Ah Wok, thankfully, hasn't. Szechuan, Mandarin and Cantonese meals are still prepared with the utmost care.

Ah Wok advertises "gourmet cuisine," terminology more familiar to French or American menus than Chinese, but this is gourmet, and it is special.

A selection of innovative dishes offers intriguing alternatives to more customary Chinese fare — like an absolutely perfect Seafood Wok Ba entree featuring a combination of lobster, crab, shrimp, scallops, baby corn and other vegetables served over sizzling rice.

Not only was this a fantastically well-prepared meal, but the entree was loaded with lobster and the other seafood ingredients. At \$13.75, it was a bargain.

THAT SEEMS to be the way it is at Ah Wok. The chef doesn't scribble on ingredients and the portions are hearty. He also uses first-class, fresh ingredients and doesn't treat the vegetables as filler.



At the suggestion of another Ah Wok fan, we tried General Ching Chicken, a breaded chicken dish served with a "hot-spicy" sauce with scallions, ginger and garlic.

We found this a little sweet, rather than hot and spicy, though a very interesting dish.

Because it was so sweet, it would best be tried when ordering several entrees to share — everyone could enjoy a small portion of it rather than try it as an entire meal.



SHARON LE MEUX/staff photographer

Chef Pak Lai stirs up excitement at Ah Wok in Novi.

OTHER INTERESTING special dishes include Sam Pan Wok Ba, a dish of beef tenderloin, chicken, pork and vegetable served on sizzling rice (\$10.50), and Wor Dip Har, an entree

featuring shrimp wrapped in bacon (\$11.25).

The two entrees we tried from the more conventional part of the menu were superb also — shrimp egg foo

young and chicken chop suey.

Both were flavorful, especially the chop suey, which was among the best we've ever tasted.

This entree wasn't laden with bean sprouts. Instead it had a hearty combination of celery, onions and tender chicken. The shrimp egg foo young also was excellent and filled with baby shrimp.

MAIN DISHES are a la carte, though you can complete the meal with soup, an egg roll and tea for another \$1.50.

Details:

Ah Wok, 41563 W. 10 Mile, Novi, 349-9260 or 349-9261. Dinner reservations recommended on weekends. Carryout available.

Hours: Tuesday-Thursday 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.; Friday 11 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.; Saturday, 4-11:30 p.m.; Sunday noon to 9:30 p.m.

Prices: \$4.95-\$18.50 with chef's specials \$9.25-\$18.50. MasterCard, Visa, American Express, Diner's Club, Carte Blanche.

Value: Excellent. Highly recommended.