

What's cooking at the White House



First lady Michelle Obama shops with Sam Kass, assistant chef at the White House, in September at a farmers market two blocks from the White House. The Obamas recruited Kass from Chicago, where he had worked with such chefs as Paul Kahan and had cooked for the family in their Kenwood home. (Win McNamee, Getty Images / September 17, 2009)

By Katherine Skiba
Tribune reporter
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WASHINGTON -- Not long after arriving at the White House, first lady Michelle Obama led reporters and culinary students through its cramped, stainless steel kitchen, enthusing, "This is where the magic happens."

The food at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. is fresh, seasonal and gathered from across America, as far away as the rivers of Alaska and as close as the first lady's garden.

There's a Chicago influence too, not only because of the first couple's deep roots. They brought with them Sam Kass, who had cooked for them in the Windy City and is now an assistant chef at the White House.

Ten months into the Obama presidency, it's plainer than a scoop of vanilla ice cream that Barack and Michelle Obama are food enthusiasts. Call them the "first foodies." The Obamas possess sophisticated palates, according to chefs who know them.

Still, there's a dichotomy to their dining. They're omnivores who enjoy "adventurous" eating, but confess a hankering for humble foods, like burgers and sweet potato french fries.

All of this translates to a White House where food, and who is cooking it, matters.

It begins in that kitchen, where Michelle Obama, leading the kitchen tour, observed: "No one would expect that all that comes out of these dinners happens in this little bitty space, but we have some of the best talent here."

Her comment was a tribute to staff members, including executive chef Cristeta Comerford, a Filipino-American and the first woman to occupy the post. She was chosen by first lady Laura Bush in 2005 after filling in when extra hands were needed.

Then there's Kass. A University of Chicago history graduate, he trained at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Italy and drew raves cooking at Chicago's restaurant Avec. In May, he made People magazine's list of the 100 most beautiful people in the world.

Talking about the Obamas, one observer said: "If they're eating Sam and Cris' food, I know they're eating well." That's Walter Scheib, who for 11 years was the White House's top toque, serving Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, their families and countless guests.

Still, the Obamas have looked beyond their new home for culinary ideas and inspiration. Californian Alice Waters, founder of Berkeley's Chez Panisse restaurant -- a favorite of Clinton's -- says they are "consulting with a lot of people around the country."

"They have very passionate young people in the kitchen and it seems like they are being fed in the most nutritious of all possible ways," she said. "And it's inspiring."

Waters, a pioneer in the push for seasonal, locally grown organic foods, visited the White House kitchen and garden in June. "I think they want to eat simply most of the time, but like all of us, we like to have a fancy meal once in a while," she says of the Obamas. "It's unavoidable when you're in a position of such grand events and state dinners. It's very difficult to maintain a kind of sane eating, unless you really pay attention."

What's the kitchen like?

Imagine: A place where chefs have the best of what fishermen, ranchers and farmers offer; the handwork of artisan cheese makers, master bread makers and mushroom foragers; and ripe produce from the four corners of the country.

A pressure-cooker that feeds a family of five, puts on feasts for visiting potentates, throws backyard events for thousands and dazzles upward of 25,000 people each December with holiday fare and drink.

A place where the work day may start at 4 a.m. and end 18 hours later.

"We used to, laughing, say you work on White House flex time: You get to choose the 85 hours you want to work every week," says Scheib, who lives in Great Falls, Va., and has a cooking-and-lecturing business called The American Chef.

Gastronomes are impressed by how seriously Michelle Obama takes food as they are by her organic garden, which has produced kale, kohlrabi, turnips, radishes, cauliflower, collards, eggplant, lettuce, spinach, broccoli, rapini, tomatoes, peppers, beans and other plants. That garden, which is overseen by Kass, supplied vegetables and herbs for the first state dinner Nov. 24, which honored India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh.

She's intent on getting kids to eat better, including daughters Malia, 11, and Sasha, 8. She says a pediatrician in Chicago once urged her to modify the girls' diets, a nudge for a working mom who often turned to take-out food to "stop the whining."

In an interview with Women's Health, she recalled her childhood on the South Side, where dining out was rare for her family and dessert not a given. She and her brother were rewarded with pizza on report card day and a McDonald's visit some Saturdays. When ice cream was doled out, it was done sparingly.

She told the magazine that the family now sits down for dinner at 6:30 p.m., but does not finish every meal with dessert. What they're eating is generally considered private. And the White House chefs are tight-lipped, meaning books like Scheib's "White House Chef" are published after they've left the payroll.

If Scheib's experience feeding Chelsea Clinton is a roadmap, the first daughters are probably on a culinary journey. He says Chelsea arrived favoring Kraft macaroni and cheese or a chicken breast with steamed broccoli. She became a vegetarian and came to relish dishes such as Thai-spiced sweet potato soup with gingered bok choy. He also taught her to cook.

Michelle Obama and her chefs have singled out preferred dishes such as Nantucket sea scallops, creamed spinach (without cream) and huckleberry cobbler served with caramel ice cream. The dessert "is one of the first family's favorites," White House pastry chef Bill Yosses has said.

Chef Rick Bayless of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo calls Michelle and Barack Obama "adventurous eaters." Kass' former boss, executive chef Paul Kahan of Blackbird and Avec, says they are people drawn to "simple food."

Kahan remembers Kass often saying the president likes salmon with broccoli on the side.

One departure was the couple's "celebration meal" in a private room at Blackbird after he clinched the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

It was seven or eight courses -- all small portions -- with dishes including country-fried rabbit leg and rabbit chorizo. Kahan quotes Barack Obama as saying of the rabbit leg, "I would eat a shoe cooked like that, it was so good."

Fancy is not exactly their style, observes Kahan, who says a dish may sound as if it's from Larousse Gastronomique, but, in fact, is simple and seasonal. Consider the Chesapeake crab agnolottis with sunchoke puree served as the first course of a black-tie dinner the Obamas hosted in February for the nation's governors. Agnolottis are similar to tortellini; a sunchoke is a root reminiscent of a potato. At a Chicago Bulls- Washington Wizards game in March, chef Tony Mantuano of Spiaggia in Chicago surprised the president with wood-roasted scallops with mushrooms and Parmigiano-Reggiano.

The Obamas have dined at Spiaggia at least 20 times and are "passionate about food," according to Mantuano. He says Barack Obama was so disappointed when the scallop dish disappeared from the menu that he took a moment during the presidential race to make a case for its return when he ran into Larry Levy, founder and chairman of Levy Restaurants, which owns Spiaggia. Voila! The dish was presented to Obama during a return visit even before it was officially back on Spiaggia's menu, leaving Michelle Obama to tell Mantuano: "You have no idea how happy you just made him."

Bayless notes the president's yen for spicy food. He got to know the first couple from multiple "date nights" at Topolobampo and remembers that they often chose a tasting menu.

"They never said, 'We don't eat that,' or 'Can you make it differently?' They're not finicky. No absolute 'no's.' They were like ideal guests.

"You could never predict what they were going to have. They're open to life's experiences."

Open, perhaps, except when it comes to beets, which the president is known to dislike.

In their outreach to the nation's chefs, the Obamas have opened their doors to several top chefs, including Bobby Flay, who teamed up with Comerford against Mario Batali and Emeril Lagasse for an episode of "Iron Chef America" to air Jan. 3.

According to Scheib, Comerford is "phenomenal, a cuisiner, with a great eye for detail, for design and for the layout of the plate. She creates spectacular tasting, spectacular looking dishes. She knows all kinds of cuisines and puts them in an American presentation."

And the dish on Kass? "An excellent cook," Kahan says, adding: "I think he's digging the spotlight a little bit. He's eating it up, in a positive way."

Bayless says one of Kass' strong suits is a "really good rapport with the (Obama) kids. He was the one they hired to take care of the kids and help around the house" in Kenwood.

Another of Kass' admirers is Jose Andres, a Barcelona-born chef who has long worked in Washington and has a string of restaurants, including minibar. Andres has been a guest at the White House and did a cooking demonstration at its Easter Egg Roll.

Talking about Kass, he says: "He's a very humble guy, young, but one that thinks like a 50-year-old. He's a great listener."

Scheib says former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton paved the way for Michelle Obama because she insisted on low-fat, high-flavor foods, less meat and more vegetables while Laura Bush favored organic foods in the White House at every opportunity, but without fanfare.

Michelle Obama is going further. "Now the push isn't so much nutritional, it's now the (food's) geographic pedigree, the carbon footprint, sustainable fisheries, free trade -- all the buzz words," said Scheib.

Michelle Obama has said she balances her diet with light, healthy salads and soups for lunch. White House breakfasts of waffles served with grits are the exception, not the rule. As for the president's guilty pleasure, it seems his favorite pie may not be pizza.

For Thanksgiving, the Obamas hosted 50 guests, and the only dessert option was pie: banana cream, pumpkin, apple, sweet potato, huckleberry and cherry.

Michelle Obama has said that her husband has nicknamed pastry chef Yosses "the crust master."

"He's a big pie guy," the first lady says of her spouse. "And he has some of the best pies and tarts that come out of this place, and the fillings are just perfection."