

A Thoroughly Modern Thanksgiving

Uber chef Craig Shelton tweaks tradition for Dr. Mark Schlesinger's holiday feast in Wyckoff

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BLUE THISTLE

Dr. Mark Schlesinger readily admits he is not the sort of host who would spontaneously invite friends over for a burger or a bowl of pasta.

“If I’m going to do it, I’m going to do it right,” says the busy physician, who is chief of anesthesiology at Hackensack University Medical Center. Schlesinger and his partner, James McKee, divide their time between a sleek and sophisticated Park Avenue penthouse and their “country home” – a three-story remodeled Victorian in Wyckoff that is decorated with a mix of antiques and masculine, contemporary furnishings.

On the rare occasions when the couple entertains at home, it is likely to be for a small dinner party, with Schlesinger handling the cooking. But the man who describes both his personal and culinary style as “decadent, extravagant, over-the-top,” is not likely to offer his guests a “simple” meal.

“I like things that are more prepared, more elaborate,” he explains with a wide grin. “I don’t like doing what other people do, and I like introducing people to things that they haven’t had before.”

Twist on turkey

For a Thanksgiving feast that meshes with his food philosophy, Schlesinger says it was important for him to find “a balance between the tradition of the big turkey in the middle of the table – and elegance.”

To create the perfect holiday at their Wyckoff home, Schlesinger and McKee turned to a chef whose culinary knowledge and technical skill bring unparalleled complexity to his cooking. Craig Shelton, former owner and chef of the celebrated Ryland Inn in Whitehouse Station, Hunterdon County, has received every top accolade in the food world. Trained under the finest chefs in France (Shelton has dual citizenship in the United States and France), the chef returned stateside to work at top restaurants on both coasts before landing the position of



Dr. Mark Schlesinger (at left, in white sweater) and his partner, James McKee (in purple jacket), savor a special Thanksgiving feast with friends.

MAIN DISH

sous-chef for David Bouley at Manhattan's famed Bouley. During Shelton's tenure there, the restaurant received the coveted four stars from The New York Times. The Times also gave The Ryland Inn – a member of the exclusive Relais & Chateaux – the rare rating of “extraordinary,” and Gourmet magazine, which put Shelton on its cover, named the Inn one of the “top 10 country restaurants in America.” Shelton was also deemed “Best Chef Mid-Atlantic” by the James Beard Foundation, and is one of just 10 Relais Gourmand chefs in America. Today, he is consulting chef for Whippany-based Ome Caterers, and a partner in Chef's Coffee Company, which produces exceptional coffee created by Shelton with the same attention to detail usually reserved for wine.

Shelton describes the holiday meal as “imbued with emotion.” Even those who like to experiment in the kitchen would be advised, he notes, not to change the annual formula of turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie. “Of all the holidays, the Thanksgiving tradition revolves around food – precise food,” he says. “Were you to omit any or all of these things, you're starting off with disappointment.”

To meet Schlesinger's – and his – expectations, Shelton says he decided to take “a dual approach – to see how we can improve the textures and outcomes with scientifically improved techniques on the cooking side. What's in the past is worth preserving and honoring, but we can combine this with discoveries that science has elucidated for us to get even better results.”

Before he turned his attention to cuisine, Shelton had planned to be a physician. His degree in molecular biology from Yale is as responsible for his cooking technique as his training in first-rate restaurant kitchens. This approach greatly appeals to Schlesinger, who is in sync with Shelton's assertion that “simple is not necessarily a virtue.”

In traditional fashion, Shelton's Thanksgiving menu begins with hors d'oeuvres. But these feature the unusual, top-notch ingredients that are the chef's trademark: petit crab cakes made with Maine peekytoe crab, glazed turnips with mint and black pepper wrapped in duck prosciutto, Kobe beef tataki served on a lotus crisp with scallion marmalade. A sitting-room coffee table holds a bamboo-wood board with artisanal cheese from New Jersey's Bobolink Dairy, presented with whole honeycomb and fig jam.

American classics

While Shelton prefers French wines, the bottles selected for this evening are as American as the turkey: California sparkling with the hors d'oeuvres, a Sonoma chardonnay with the soup course, an Oregon pinot noir with the main course and an Oregon muscat with dessert.

The appetizer and main course are served in the home's serene dining room, which features a round, polished wood table and silk upholstered walls. The soup is a refined version of the classic cream of mushroom – cream of chanterelles with butter-braised lobster and chervil, with Asian matzutaki mushrooms shaved over the top.

After the soup has been savored, guests wander into the kitchen to watch Shelton put the finishing touches on the turkey. He surprises his audience by showing them that the pan holds virtually no drippings – “they are all locked in the bird.” This is due to long roasting at a slow temperature.

“The controversy today about turkeys is whether to brine or not to brine,” says Shelton, peering professorially over his reading glasses. “I think that controversy is on the brink of truth. In the inner circle of truth is that all protein is much less damaged with low-temperature cooking, so to brine or not to brine is superfluous.”

Shelton explains that after rinsing and thoroughly drying the turkey inside and out, he sears it very quickly over high heat – just a few seconds on each side – then roasts it at 220 degrees for 2 1/2 hours (for a 12-pound bird). For the last half-hour, he bastes it continually with a mixture of honey, yuzu zest (an Asian citrus fruit) and black pepper. The result is a turkey with a lacquered, crispy and delicious skin and moist, tender meat.

The plate also includes a sage and chestnut stuffing, with cubes of foie gras and minimal bread, tart cranberry chutney, celeriac potato purée, roasted carrots, sautéed Swiss chard and light, cheesy English popovers. Instead of gravy, the turkey is further enhanced with a white truffle jus.

“There’s not a thing on the plate that people don’t recognize, yet every single thing was done in a more modern technique to capture more of the life and more of the flavor,” says Shelton as guests applaud. “There are no secrets, but we take more steps – or more intelligent steps – and use high-quality ingredients.”

After the main course, everyone repairs to the casual sitting room at the back of the house. With whitewashed barn-wood walls, a cushy leather couch and large stone fireplace, this is the perfect place to enjoy dessert (pumpkin tarts with eucalyptus cream) and the other fruits of Shelton’s labor: the coffee, biscotti and chocolates produced by Chef’s Coffee Company. Among the guests are business partners Michael Leob, Woodcliff Lake, and Warren Leeds (owner of Ome Caterers), who market Shelton’s “engineered” fine coffees to restaurants like Ridgewood’s Latour and Ramsey’s Café Panache.

All agree that while this may not have been the traditional “over the river and through the woods to Grandmother’s house” kind of holiday, good friends and extraordinary food are certainly reasons to be thankful.