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Chef to the chief

Former White House chef to tell all this weekend at library Try these specialties of a White House chef

By **LEA SCHNEIDER**
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Pomp and ceremony aside, what Americans really want to know is what kind of food the First Family enjoys.

At a special President's Day Program, a former executive chef and resort manager of Camp David and sous chef at the White House for official state dinners tells all. Chef Martin CJ Mongiello will tell tales of the presidents and bring samples of food from the White House recipe archives to the Jackson-Madison County Library at 2 p.m Saturday. The program is free and open to everyone.

▼ ADVERTISEMENT ▼ At the library, listeners will be sampling Fresh Basil, Parmesan and Parma Ham Pinwheels with Ramblin' Rostr' Sauce for dipping. They also will hear tales of the presidents.

"When I heard he was in town, I just thought since he cooked at the White House for the president, it would be a good program," said Judy Pennel, program librarian. "He has lots of interesting stories."

"It is Washington and Lincoln's birthdays, so my hope is to talk a little about the culture and what they liked," said Mongiello, a former Navy chef who was a Pacific "FORCE" Specialist for the U.S. nuclear submarine force.

With Mongiello, everything has a tale attached. The moment he mentions Washington, he launches into another one.

"Washington didn't really have a chef. Things were done more piecemeal. He was a big plantation man, and he ate greens with ham hocks. Washington ate a lot of traditional Southern fare."

From Washington's Southern fare, Mongiello jumps into food history, talking about the traditions of how and what we eat. He moved from the fact that Washington was a slave owner to the food trivia that slaves brought over okra seeds which they had hidden in their hair.



Submitted photo

Mongiello, left, serves Thanksgiving dinner to former President Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary.

A talk with the chef

- Where is he from? 'I have spent more than half my adult life in the South - Charleston, S.C.; Florida, Virginia and now Tennessee. I have family in Nashville and Tupelo, Miss.'
- Best food in West Tennessee? Muscadines, homemade jams and preserves, hand-churned butter and milk in old-fashioned glass jugs - all from the Farmers' Market in Jackson. You have the best natural homemade goods that you can't get anywhere else. For the best meal, buy some fresh Tennessee vegetables and some fresh churned butter.
- What does he do now? He has worked for nearly 20 years in marketing and sales of the hospitality industry. He currently works as a consultant to the food and restaurant industry. He consults with Ramblin Rostr, a line of sauces and food sponsor of the Presidents' Day program and assists

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"Lots of the things we ate, we ate because of where the cook came from," he said.

Although stories about the presidents will be in big supply, much of the program will be devoted to his real love - food.

His love affair with food began at age 13 when he took a job as a dishwasher, and by age 15, he was working at a fine-dining Italian restaurant. Other than his stint in the Navy Cooking School for six weeks, he is a self-taught chef. He spent his hours on submarine duty devouring cookbooks.

"In the Navy, cooking was considered girly. The other guys would say demeaning things, but I used to tell them, 'I am not doing it for you. I am doing it for me,'" said the former chef to the president.

Whenever Mongiello does a program, he said part of that experience is dealing with a million questions from the listeners.

He said one of the most popular and often-asked question is, 'Did you feed Monica?' referring to the famous Monica Lewinsky scandal of the Bill Clinton presidency.

The answer is no.

Another popular question is, "What was President Clinton's favorite food?"

While he said most folks think it was a hamburger, that is a myth. The former president's favorite food was bananas, said Mongiello.

During the time Mongiello was the chef at Camp David, he said both the president and first lady were concerned about health issues and eating healthy meals. Once he was acclimated to what they liked, he did the entire menu planning and passed those menus on to his boss for approval.

"There is a trust that comes from the feedback of the family. Once I knew that President Clinton loved bananas, I made him banana vinaigrette for his salads. You pay attention to the folks you are serving," Mongiello said. "Mrs. Clinton was bongo for mango. I thought it would be cool for her to have her own salad dressing, and I invented mango vinaigrette made with fresh mango puree."

His cooking as executive chef at Camp David, was sometimes "family cooking for the three - Momma, Daddy and baby every night," he said, referring to first daughter Chelsea. "Or sometimes for the whole extended family at a holiday."

Plenty of entertaining of guests went on as well. During President George

with their marketing. See www.ramblinroostr.com. In addition, he has written two business plans for how to open a restaurant in 'Business Plan Pro 2006,' which is available at Office Depot, Best Buy and other locations. He is working on a book about Navy chefs and another of poetry about fruits and vegetables. He makes television, radio and speaker appearances.

- What does he cook? He loves seafood, fresh fruit, vegetables and making a big pot of gravy, which is an Italian term for tomato sauce.
- Bet you didn't know: Chef Mongiello is a Civil War re-enactor (for both sides) and can make a mean johnny cake in a camp skillet.
- Cooked last? Fresh sweet potatoes
- Favorite cookbooks? 'For the moment, they are 'Jack Daniels Cookbook,' 'Miss Mary Bobo's Boarding House Cookbook' and Chef Paul Prudhomme's 'Louisiana Tastes.' As a member of the American Culinary Foundation, I got to work with Chef Paul on Childhood Hunger Day, a day of awareness about childhood hunger in America.'

If you go

Chef Martin Mongiello, a former executive chef to the President of the United States, offers samples of dishes from the White House recipe archives and tells tales of the presidents at a President's Day Program.

- Sponsored by: Ramblin' Roostr' Sauces
- When: 2 p.m. Saturday
- Place: Jackson-Madison County Library in the Program Center
- Cost: Free; no reservations are needed.
- To purchase Ramblin' Roostr' products: Visit www.ramblinroostr.com
- Contact: You may write to Chef Marti at marti@mongiello.org
- More program information: Call the library at 425-8600.

Inside

H.W. Bush's last year in office, he went to Camp David some 50 out of 52 weekends, so Mongiello said he entertained a lot of people there. His list of notables he has cooked for range from the prime minister of Japan to Jon Bon Jovi to Sheryl Crow.

Part of his healthy cooking involved learning about healthy cuisine from Dr. Dean Ornish, author of best-selling books, such as "Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease," and "Eat More, Weigh Less." Dr. Ornish came in and worked with the chefs to establish healthy cuisine, Mongiello said.

"It was basically no oil, no chicken, no beef, no fat, no fish - a totally vegetarian diet. I learned how to cook again," he said. "I remember Mrs. Clinton asked me if I was excited about learning from Dr. Ornish, and I was. It added a whole new thing to my rŽsumŽ."

Today, Chef Mongiello enjoys returning to his family roots to cook Italian, French and German. He loves to prepare fresh fish, especially Hawaiian fish and deep sea fish. He's learned how to make healthy trades in his life. He'll dine on a lunch of fresh steamed broccoli in order to splurge on real butter at dinner.

"This guy - and I am serious about this - is an epicurean's delight. I am not embellishing this at all. If he were to open a restaurant somewhere, I'd have to be the first in line, and I don't stand in line for anything," said Danny Winbush, Ph.D. Winbush became a fan of his cuisine during the time Chef Mongiello cooked at the Jackson Country Club.

At the President's Day program, the chef hopes to share trivia and photos he has of the various state china selected by first ladies.

"You can see the colors and the patterns they choose. I have photos that include individual pieces from collections," he said. Leaning in to share some interesting news, he imparts that "Mary Todd Lincoln had china with a huge purple band around the edge. That was a sign of royalty and was so taboo. So that went over like a lead balloon."

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Fresh Basil, Parmesan and Parma Ham Pinwheels

Serves 12 to 18 for a party or reception

- 6 (10 inch) flour tortilla wraps (use three spinach and three sun-dried tomato colors for holiday time)
- 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened

Find recipes for Fresh Basil, Parmesan and Parma Ham Pinwheels and 'Merlion in the Mist' Shrimp Cocktail inside on page 5C.



LINDSAY McDONALD /The Jackson Sun

Chef Martin CJ Mongiello stands in front of the Rock Springs Dairy booth at the Farmers' Market in downtown Jackson. Mongiello, a former chef at the White House, will speak Saturday at the Jackson-Madison County Library.



Photos by LINDSAY McDONALD /The Jackson Sun

Chef Martin CJ Mongiello enjoys this hickory-smoked cheddar cheese by Troyer.

- 12 slices Parma ham, Italian ham or some tasty ham
- 6 ounces fresh basil (or more)
- 1 ounce fresh oregano or dried McCormick shaker
- 1 cup fresh grated Pecorino Parmigiano cheese or grated cheese from Kraft
- Ramblin' Roost'r Original Flavored Sauce, served for dip
- 1 green pepper, cut into a serving bowl

Mix (don't whip) cream cheese, oregano and cheese in bowl. Spread each tortilla wrap lightly with cream cheese mixture. Arrange two ham slices across the middle of each tortilla. Add a layer of fresh basil.

Tightly roll each tortilla wrap. Place tortilla rolls in a dish, cover and refrigerate for 2 hours. This stiffens the cream cheese mixture.

Slice each roll, creating pinwheels, and serve as soon as possible. Make sure your knife is thin and long and razor sharp - otherwise it will crush and ruin the wrap while cutting. You may need to clean the knife occasionally to ensure you are not smearing while cutting the rest of the wraps.

A paper doily on a silver platter or nice plate makes the difference. Add a few flowers on the platter and maybe a nice, large sprig of basil for garnish. Place pinwheels onto platter. Place Ramblin' Roost'r sauce in carved green pepper.

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'Merlion in the Mist' Shrimp Cocktail

Serves 6

Take a water glass and fill it halfway with water. Select a small ramekin or glass Pyrex dish that fits into the top of the water glass. Add just enough to almost cover the glass and to allow the ramekin to sit into the glass, without falling into the water.

The goal here is to fill the ramekin with a zesty cocktail sauce and shrimp. Fill all of your ramekins and place the shrimp in them; then chill in the refrigerator. At the last minute, put dry ice into the water glass and a volcanic steam flow will begin. Then nestle the cocktail sauce-filled ramekin into the water glass and off it goes to the dining room for an unbelievable appetizer



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from the Far East!

- 36 massive sized shrimp, may be peeled already
- 32 ounces Heinz chili sauce
- 4 small containers of Ramblin' Roostr' Spicy Sauce (6 ounces)
- 12 T. prepared horseradish
- 2 lemons, juiced - zest lemon peel first, then squeeze
- 7 drops hot sauce, J.L. McIlhenney
- 1 small bag dry ice (Purchase same day of use.)

In a small bowl, blend the chili sauce, horseradish, lemon juice and hot sauce. Place into ramekins and chill before serving.

Boil shrimp and refresh in cold water. Do not devein shrimp; only remove shells. Place as many shrimp as possible, in a circular fashion, into the ramekins and chill until needed. Tuck the tails in to make it look nice.

Garnish with lemon zest over top of ramekin. Advanced chefs and cooks can make lemon "curly cues" or "dragons" out of slivers with cutters for super garnishes.

Line up water glasses on the counter. Set ramekins on the counter; then put on a pair of thick latex gloves. One person assembles the appetizers while another takes them to the dining room. Drop a small amount of dry ice into the water goblet; then send it off to the dining room. These recipes were submitted by Chef Martin CJ Mongiello. They also may be found at www.ramblinroostr.com

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