

# A Chef's Table of One's Own



By Margit Bisztray | Photography by Michael Belk

*AHH... THE BENEFITS OF DINING IN A RESTAURANT: friendly staff, pleasant setting, comfy seats, choices and indulgences, togetherness or romance, prompt drink refills, that chocolate bomb squiggled with caramel. If only it weren't for the lost reservations, the wait, the table by the noisy door, the spacey or incompetent or irritable server, the "sorry, we're out of the (dish you wanted)", the nearby teething 1-year old, the personal or professional associate you're dreading running into, the chocolate bomb featuring nuts and you loathe nuts.*

**Far Left:** Still life of local vegetables.

**Above:** From vine, straight to bowl.



**Above:** Guests enjoy a front row seat, with tips, techniques and recipes in plain sight.

**Below:** The evening's "program:" a customized, souvenir menu awaits each guest.

**Y**ou never know, do you? Even the best restaurants have off-days. That off-day might be a birthday, anniversary, planned proposal or moment to impress an important client, and it still it costs the same, plus tax and gratuity. But what option is there if no one wants to shop, cook or clean?

The option is Table Five, personal chef service by Phillip McDonald, named in honor of the senses. A personal chef service offers the restaurant experience, but out of the restaurant and in your own home (or your friend's home, if the friend's home is nicer and he owes you one).

After working from the bottom (or, more plainly put, dishwashing) up to chef positions in local kitchens like Cuvee Beach, Criolla's and Onano and developing his repertoire and skill through travel, tons of reading and years of practical experience, McDonald came up with his ideal employment opportunity.

"I saw a market for chef services," he says. "Many people here come from larger markets. Their palates are advanced. And

they have beautiful kitchens! They want to be able to invite people over but enjoy themselves, not be in the kitchen all night."

Another factor increasing the demand? People today possess an interest in food that is greater than the time they have to cook.

"The fact is, more and more people want good food, but don't have time. Once they try a personal chef, they're hooked."

The personal chef service covers a meal start to finish: an initial consultation, a customized menu, suggestions for wine pairings (Table Five is not yet licensed to sell or provide wine, but McDonald is happy to advise), grocery shopping, travel to the dinner site, food preparation, service and clean-up.

As far as the menu goes, it's nearly wide open. McDonald can either fix a themed, ethnic menu (Italian, Spanish, Southwestern, Low Country — and yes, Low Country counts as "ethnic") or do what he prefers, start with a list of ingredients the client likes and build a menu around them.



**Above:** Before puréeing, a soup's chunky ingredients simmer, wafting an earthy perfume.

**Left:** Chef McDonald pauses to let flavors settle before the final seasoning.

Try demanding that at a restaurant. Tell them that you like artichokes but not green beans. That you could eat bacon on absolutely anything. That you like tangerines, all members of the pumpkin or squash family, fish if it has no bones or skin and ice cream especially with berries. The restaurant will ask what kingdom ye think ye stumbled out of. Phillip McDonald will ask how many courses, with still or sparkling water? Hiring a personal chef service is kind of like being royalty, minus the duties and outfits.

For McDonald, it's the perfect situation. He gets to be on the creative end of things, spinning meats and produce into recipes and menus. "My inspiration is always what's seasonal. When I worked as a chef in restaurants, I had to produce certain cuisines and dishes no matter what the season: osso buco in July, tomato salads in December. Working on a small scale, I have access to local vendors. I buy direct and

fresh and in season whenever I can."

Chef McDonald tries to give his clients what they want, but interpreted. "Here in the South, a lot of people want grits," he says, "and I listen, but I bump it up a notch — char-grilled tomato grits, say. The clients give me a foundation in the consultation and I build on that. Usually I'm told it ends up being better than what they thought they wanted."

For each meal, McDonald prints up a customized menu. When the guests arrive, the table's set and the house smells like a home-cooked meal lives there. Although people will sometimes arrive crabby from work or in a foul mood from the day, McDonald says the transformation to a relaxed state starts instantly.

"Entering a restaurant, you're still on stage. You can't relax the way you can in a home, with only close friends or family present. That's a big difference. I know it's a success if people linger at the table for an hour or more afterwards."

Depending on the menu, Chef McDonald may offer pizzette as an appetizer — super-thin crusts with the

barest yet most flavorful toppings, like his phenomenal trio of Romesco sauce, arugula (called "rocket" in the forum of Italian food) and imported Fontina.

This particular trio is pretty much the ultimate pizzette. The chef will now get sick of the requests for it since it's being labeled both phenomenal and ultimate, but tell him he has to make it one more time anyway. Once more, for you, then he can cancel it. Tell him he's your personal chef and you simply must have the Romesco pizzette. He'll say yes. He's an amiable guy. Oh, and ask him to spin the dough up in the air. He's really good at it.

Following the pizzette, there may be a seasonal salad, like local cucumber and tomato still sweet from the sunshine since they haven't been stripped bland by refrigeration. They may be barely dressed in red onion vinaigrette, ricotta salata chips and parsley. They will be simple yet wondrously good, and you'll lament the fact that all salads don't go directly from the garden to the table like the ones from Table Five do.



**Top:** All five senses awoken at the table, in the comfort of home.

**Right:** Wife Madra and McDonald handle small parties as team.

His soups, like creamy artichoke with crispy leeks and garden chives, will still the moment and hold everyone tasting it quiet, except perhaps the teething 1-year-old should someone have brought one. After but three courses, your guests are already glad to be at your house and not in some restaurant. The food's straight from the kitchen and delicious. The music is suited to the group's taste. Service (McDonald and his wife for parties of four or less, extra hands when needed) is warm and attentive, and there's the comfort and intimacy of being home. No one even needs to wear shoes.

For the main course, there may be snapper with lemon risotto, country ham, fried herbs and a smoked paprika broth. Local seafood is one of Chef McDonald's particular passions.

"Having been born and raised in Destin, I have vivid memories of fishing for grouper in the bayou. Back then it was so clear you could see straight to the bottom. Those days are over, but sourcing fresh fish takes me back, at least in a way."

For dessert: Bourbon vanilla pannacotta with peach puree, fresh peaches, mint. It is likely there are other desserts just as good as this, but it's hard to imagine.

This menu described above is only a sample. In fact, ignore it. Instead, grant the chef his inspiration, his special knack of making the best out of the best that's available. His fall/winter menu has things like crispy calamari with lemon-shallot vinaigrette, butternut squash soup with green apple, crispy bacon and wild sage, spinach and mascarpone raviolis in forest mushroom brodo with grilled scallion, and flat iron steak frites with parsley butter. Give him direction, then get out of the way. The meal you get will be at least as good as what you've just read about. Perhaps even superior, because it's yours. Except for that Romesco pizzette. That's not to be missed. ■

*Table Five is recommended for parties of 2-15 people and can accommodate up to 25 people*

*Tablefivechef.com*

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