

# Supporting Excellence

Westchester Country Club takes culinary matters seriously: It fields a superb culinary team and gives generous support to ACF Culinary Team USA.

by Kay Orde



Westchester Country Club's culinary team

Passionate people who care about food and care about their jobs—that's how a member of Westchester Country Club's culinary team describes her co-workers. "We have a solid culinary program at Westchester that only continues to get stronger," says Sarah Deckert, banquet sous chef at the club in Rye, N.Y. "Food is what we love, and we all motivate each other to create great dishes."

Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, leads the culinary team at Westchester Country

Club, which began as the Biltmore Hotel in 1926. Four kitchens, a pastry/bake shop and a charcuterie room are home to a culinary brigade that can number more than 60. And that brigade, which includes nine ACF-certified chefs, receives a bonus: The club is the headquarters for ACF Culinary Team USA, which is managed by Leonard. His staff is exposed to practice sessions held on-site by both ACF Culinary National Team USA and ACF Culinary Regional Team USA.

"When the culinary team is practicing at the club, there is opportunity to be exposed to some of the latest trends and techniques being used in the industry," says Michael Matarazzo, senior banquet chef and a member of ACF Culinary Regional Team USA. "Observing a team session teaches cooks how to work efficiently in the kitchen and how to come together as a team."

## Showing support

The club's tangible commitment to Team USA, which dates back to 2001, has included paid time for culinary staff, use of the facilities—kitchen and hotel—and, in certain circumstances, food product and meals. During practice sessions, visiting team members are given hotel accommodations and club dining privileges. And, as Robert James, CCM, Westchester Country Club's executive director, says, the story continues well past the club's financial support.

"Perhaps of greatest import, the club provides a culture of learning and excellence that is congruent with the values of Team USA," he says. "As such, a natural partnership is formed with Team USA in which the club's team can grow. The club's culinary team is

encouraged—if not expected—to participate with Team USA and, from time to time, assist individual chefs.”

“By supporting Team USA, the club proves that it is supportive of its own chefs gaining knowledge and progressing professionally,” says Jonathan Moosmiller, CCC, executive sous chef. “The club realizes that having Team USA practices here gives our staff the chance to see many things from many different chefs. This is a great perk that not all properties can offer.”

For Hannah Lanek, CC, restaurant chef de cuisine, Team USA practices are a huge plus. She says the inspiration that comes from team members doesn’t leave the kitchen when practice ends. Often, staff see something presented “that’s the beginning of a conversation or an idea that may lead to a new dish or a special for the restaurant,” she says. “The culinary team is receptive to the education that occurs every day in our kitchens.”

Spring asparagus salad with truffle and egg



The positive relationship between the club and Team USA goes both ways, says Mike Feil, CCM, general manager at Westchester Country Club. He says the club realizes numerous cultural, financial and experiential benefits from its commitment to Team USA. The club’s culture of culinary excellence and professionalism is continually reinforced, and greater personal-development opportunities are provided to the club’s staff.

“Simply put, supporting the development of your key staff members is important and consistent with the club’s culture,” Feil says.

“Moreover, supporting Chef Leonard and Team USA provides notable benefits to the individual department team members, the club members and, ultimately, club revenue. The club has found the relationship with the individual Team USA members and ACF to be a healthy and helpful partnership.”

Ultimately, the real return on the club’s investment in Team USA comes in the form of a positive impact on its membership,” says James. “Members perceive our food operation to be superlative to experiences they receive elsewhere. They are proud to have a decorated chef and excitedly participate in the innovative meals available at the club. When Team USA brought home the gold medal from Germany, the club featured an event where the team cooked the winning menu for the membership. The member’s response was, ‘Wow!’”

### Opportunities plus

The club’s culinary team members agree that they enjoy something unique at Westchester—the opportunities that come



Feil, Leonard and James

both from working with Leonard and having a relationship with Team USA members.

“Working here enables me to get well-educated and learn many different aspects of the culinary world,” says Jose Tavarez, CEC, chef de tournant. “It is a privilege to work with a CMC. Chef Leonard gives support to the whole culinary team, and drives us to become better chefs, as well as more well-rounded and educated.”

Matarazzo says that cooks are able to work with top-quality ingredients and see techniques that are no longer being used at other properties. “They also have the opportunity to observe and assist during ACF Culinary Team USA practice sessions,” he says.

Kelly Butler, an extern at the club who attends Chef John Folse Culinary Institute at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux,



Lobster poached in pear jus, sauce Verdi with vanilla bean, hearts of palm, fall truffle, pear confit

La., says Westchester Country Club is spoken of very highly among the chefs at her school. "It is one of the few places in the country where externs can work side-by-side with a certified master chef," she says. "I know that everything I am being taught is held to ACF's standards. Also, members of ACF Culinary Team USA that I work with are the best of the best, and have a great deal of knowledge to pass on."

The club creates a training ground for all levels of chefs, Lanek says. As a new and somewhat inexperienced manager, she recently was given the opportunity to manage a kitchen. "This is an opportunity that may have been out of reach for me, but because Chef Leonard is so intent on training young chefs to become good kitchen managers, and because of the encouragement of the club's administration, I am supported in my training as a new manager," she says.

Feil agrees that the club's culinary team is afforded a number of training opportunities. "Culinary team members interact with Chef daily to learn or improve culinary skills and methods. The culinary crew receives lifelong benefits from the relationships developed with Chef and his colleagues in this process," he says. "Chef reinforces the professionalism and commitment that is the culture of culinary

pride at Westchester Country Club, and this culture continues to attract and retain talented and motivated culinary team members in all positions."

#### **A diverse team**

Those culinary team members, made up of various ethnicities and genders, add richness to the club's culinary repertoire.

"Westchester is an interesting place to work, because we have people from all over the United States with various kinds of professional experience," Deckert says. "It works because we all share the same goal of creating and serving great food. We all have something to contribute to the culinary knowledge bank at Westchester, and each of us takes something different from it."

Lanek says she feels fortunate to be able to grow professionally in an environment with individuals who offer such rich and varied backgrounds. "Working with cooks of varying degrees of training and immense food knowledge is a real pleasure," she says. "From regional specialties from around the United States to special dishes shared by our international cooks, I'm able to see so much that I might be missing if the team was not as diverse as it is."

And do female members of staff feel at home at the club? Deckert says that being a female in the industry will never be easy, "but it is important to me that I work for people who will focus on my strengths and motivation and my dedication to my work rather than me being a female," she says. "Chef Leonard respects people who have goals, and if he knows you are willing to work for them, he will help you in any way he can."

Lanek says since joining the club she has not felt that being a woman was an issue. "I have every opportunity that any member of our culinary team has, and I feel secure in my goals because of the assurance that my gender isn't a factor to Chef's opinion of my performance," she says.

Although they are different in some respects, team members are united in their support of the club's "culinary pride" program, which holds each team member to the highest set of standards and fosters an unwillingness to accept second-best. "Shortcuts are never taken," Moosmiller says.

#### **A chance to advance**

Deckert started at the club a year and a half ago, and she says her cooking skills and knowledge of food have grown enormously. "I have the opportunity to learn new things every day," she says. "Chef has

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Rabbit terrine with heirloom carrots, roasted loin with rosemary jus

Jesi Mayeaux

faith in our abilities to push and strive to be better. He gives us opportunities so we can set goals and work toward achieving them.”

During his 12 years at the club, Tavarez has moved from line cook to sous chef to restaurant chef in the à la carte kitchen. “I was able to move up the chain of command as I gained more experience,” he says.

Lanek was hired in June as a sous chef at The Gun Club, one of Westchester Country Club’s seasonal venues at its beach property. At the end of the season, she was moved to a more permanent position in the main club house. “Chef Leonard seems to coax the best performance from all of us, making ours a unique and resilient group of cooks,” she says.

The club’s different venues—from those that offer tasting menus to a quick-service bar—produce a variety of food that allows staff to experience many kinds of culinary disciplines. Those experiences are enhanced by what Leonard brings back to the club

from his industry endeavors, Moosmiller says. “Every time Chef returns from a trip, he has new ideas and concepts that we put to use at the club. This causes our program to be constantly evolving, which wouldn’t be possible without all of his involvement!”

“The culinary program here at the club is constantly being exposed to new trends from around the world,” Matarazzo agrees. “Chef Leonard brings new ideas and new techniques to the table regularly as a result of his many endeavors and travels.”

“I cannot think of a greater advantage as an extern than to work with someone who has reached the highest level of certification possible,” says Butler. “Chef Leonard possesses a great deal of knowledge and experience that he is willing to pass on to students. In this environment, I learn something new every day.”

### **A different animal**

So, with all the talent in the kitchen, what sets the club’s cuisine apart?

“In our case, being different is great,” Deckert says. “Chef Leonard keeps it simple when it comes to flavors and food, but he never sacrifices quality and attention to detail.”

Lanek says she’s often challenged to reconsider old habits when she isn’t producing food to its best potential. “I like that about the cuisine at Westchester Country Club,” she says. “I have been thinking more about flavors, methods, products and the way that they all work together in ideal combinations to make the best meal possible.”

Feil says club members and guests benefit from Leonard’s various activities as he continues to inspire the club’s culinary and F&B staff. “Thus, members regularly receive consistent, well-executed, high-quality plates, regardless of the food outlet or concept they choose,” he says. “They enjoy regular menu changes and seasonally inspired cuisine and the latest in cuisine trends with a focus on flavor.”