

On the Fast Track

The newest member of ACF Culinary National Team USA hones her skills in preparation for the 2008 IKA.

By Kay Orde

Mellisa Root began her culinary journey on a bicycle. As a young child—having exhausted her mother's Betty Crocker cookbooks—she rode that bicycle to the local library, where she checked out her own selections. At home she searched for recipes in preparation for Tuesday night, her night to cook for the family.

"I would spend hours poring over recipes to decide what I would subject my family to next," she says. "I began a love affair with lemon, and everything I made had lemon, whether it was dessert, chicken, or even pasta. To this day, my father teases me when I serve something with lemon."

Meet Mellisa Root

Root, who joined ACF Culinary National Team USA in March as the team's pastry chef, was previously a member of ACF Culinary Regional Team USA, a position she earned at the 2006 National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show in Chicago during Team USA tryouts. She is a pastry chef at Payard Pâtisserie & Bistro in Las Vegas, working for François Payard. She was the pastry chef at River Oaks Country Club in Houston, under executive chef Charles Carroll, CEC, AAC, before

moving to Las Vegas. Root attended the baking/pastry-arts program at California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, and is a member of ACF National Chapter.

With just four months left before the team competes at the International Culinary Art Exhibition (IKA) in Erfurt, Germany, Root is grateful for the support of her husband David. "I am extremely blessed to be married to a very talented chef and an extraordinary man," she says. "He fully understands this crazy business and all of the demands



that come with my involvement with the team. He supports me by taking care of things while I am focused on my practices. And he is a creative sounding board to bounce ideas off—I get some really phenomenal feedback. His advice and encouragement help keep me motivated and focused on the goal.

“And I am very much looking forward to his cheering for me in Germany. Also, my parents are planning to come to Germany and cheer Team USA on to the gold!”

Inspired

Root is fortunate to have had international-competition experience before heading to Erfurt. In 2007, ACF Culinary Regional Team USA represented the United States as the country’s national team at the 2007 American Culinary Classic in Chicago. So when the invitation was extended to be a part of Team USA’s national team, she was ready. “I am excited to belong to a team of such devoted and talented individuals,” she says. “It is a real honor.”

Downtime?

On a fast track with limited time to train for the IKA, Mellisa Root has given up trying to balance her work life with time off, saying practice must take precedence when she finds a few extra minutes in her busy schedule.

“My day is filled with work duties, and then the remaining hours are spent on development and practicing for the big event,” she says. “I am just trying

to cram what I can into the hours of the day while leaving a few for sleeping.”

Although the word “balance,” as in balancing work and pleasure, isn’t in her vocabulary these days, she does have some plans for when the IKA is over.

“I like to work on my house, and I love going out to different restaurants to eat with my husband,” she says. “And I really love to travel, so a vacation will be in my future.”

Root practices often with the team, then—after a day to re-group and catch up on sleep—she’s back in the kitchen, working to refine her dishes or, in some cases, she says, to completely change a concept. She is always looking for that next incredible design.

“I draw inspiration from all avenues—books, the Internet, art, nature,” she says.

“I have even used tattoo designs for inspiration on filigree and plate etching. When you compete at this level, you have to be open to drawing inspiration from anyplace. It might give you the key to developing something new.”

She has already seen a bonus to her team membership—a considerable growth in her skill level compared with two years ago. “And I look forward to the end of the IKA to see where my skills will be by then,” she says. “I believe being on the team pushes me to be a better chef—it forces me to grow my abilities at a faster pace. What do they say about four years on the team being equivalent to 12 years in the industry? Well, I believe that is true, because I am amazed at what I can accomplish today.

Raspberry Fool, Chocolate Fondant and Essence of Summer Berries



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—Mellisa Root

“Team USA allows me a chance to hone my skills in a totally unfamiliar environment, which stretches me in such different directions it can’t help but make me a better chef, as well as a stronger individual.”

Dreams of gold

Root is enjoying the opportunity to work with accomplished chefs on the team. “And the networking is very valuable,

because it gives me a little cluster of people that I can call at anytime and ask for advice or help,” she says. “There are not many opportunities like this, where you play an important role in somebody else’s dream, and, at the same time, trust them to give their all in their role in your dream.”

Root might have come to the national team late in the game—the team was formed in May 2006—but she says that doesn’t mean she should be viewed as the underdog or the team’s weak link. “I have to say that having five other people counting on me to perform to the best of my abilities so that they can realize their dreams is an enormous responsibility that I do not take lightly,” she says. “Not to mention the motivation that I have within myself, that insatiable desire to say, at the end of the day, I did my absolute best.”

Root thinks her fellow chefs, wherever they are, should appreciate what she and others on ACF Culinary Team USA do. She admits that success in Erfurt will bring a personal sense of accomplishment, but team members understand that, most importantly, they are representing all U.S. chefs in competition with other countries, she says. “Yes, we compete for ourselves, but we also compete for our country. We



I Pernod Bonbon Liqueur

are trying to raise the bar so that the world looks at American chefs as a great culinary talent as well as a force to be reckoned with. I think all chefs would want to support us in that vision.”

Team USA allows Root to travel and experience new places and things, “which I like to think of as the salt and pepper of life,” she says. “It brings out the flavor.” But beyond that, “Team USA means an opportunity to grow as a chef who pushes the bar higher and higher, and to grow as an individual who can deal with the tremendous stress and pressure with courage and integrity.

“And it offers the opportunity to motivate others. Because if I can, then they should be telling themselves, ‘I, too, can do this.’”

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