

Seasoned Competitor

A wealth of experience, and a deep sense of pride and passion travel with Edward Leonard on the road to the IKA.

By Kay Orde

Below: Edward, Ariadna, Giancarlo and Cosette Leonard enjoy the festivities at an ACF national convention. Right: Petite club sandwich of burrata, mozzarella, olive-oil tomatoes and palette of vegetable purées.

Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, attended his first International Culinary Art Exhibition (IKA) in 1984 as an apprentice to Fritz Sonnenschmidt, CMC, AAC, HOF. He has not missed the event, held in Germany every four years, since. This year's IKA, Leonard's seventh, is his third as a member of ACF Culinary National Team USA.

The thrill, he says, is still there.

"Even after this many IKAs, when I enter the Great Hall and see the chefs and the food, my adrenaline runs high," Leonard says. "The excitement of it all is still as it was in 1984. It's like being a kid in a candy shop."

He says the education gained from being a part of such a prestigious international competition, as well as the friends he has made over the years, still drives him. "There's an obligation when you are a part of something this great," he says. "It becomes imperative to give back and develop others to become better cooks and chefs."



Meet Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC

Leonard knows he wouldn't be where he is today without the training he's received over the years, which began when he was growing up in a family with rich culinary traditions. On his mother's side, family members hail from Naples, Italy, and on his father's side, from France.

"It's a rich food heritage," he says. "My maternal grandmother had 16 children, and they raised their own chickens, made breads and



It's all about cooking . . . well, almost.

When we asked Leonard if he had a hobby or interest outside cooking, he said, "Yes. Cooking," Cooking? Well, he added, "Weightlifting. Travel. And I have a passion for cars and music. And . . . did I mention cooking?"

grew vegetables. My grandmother was a great cook, as is my mom. She really taught me the basics of making great-tasting but simple foods and respecting your product. My mom to this day can make pasta without a recipe, and knows how to adjust the dough by the feel of it in her hands."

Leonard has three children—Edward, 10, Giancarlo, 7, and Cosette, 6. He and his wife Ariadna have been married for eight years, and he notes that she is from Monterey, Mexico, another area with a rich food heritage.

He says his family's support of all his commitments is more than generous. "Being a chef is hard on your family, but when you are involved in other industry endeavors, such as Team USA, it can be even harder," he says. "My family's support comes in the form of much patience and understanding, and being there for me. It is important, as well, to include them in all you do, such as traveling to events and being part of your life."

Free time is a luxury for Leonard in the months leading up to the 2008 IKA in Erfurt, Germany, in October. In addition to

managing ACF Culinary Team USA and being a member of the national team, he is the executive chef at Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y., has served as vice president for the World Association of Chefs Societies since 2006, and is a cookbook author and speaker. But what little free time he has goes to his family, with an effort to make it quality time, first and foremost, he says. "I most likely sacrifice time for myself, but you need to pay a price in some way for all that you do."

Nothing but the best

So, how does one person wear so many hats? Leonard admits that he's not sure. "But I have a very high energy level and a passion for all I do," he says. "I just make every minute of every day count. I'm extremely disciplined in the way I organize my time, and can produce a good amount of work consistently."

The national team has upped the number of times the team practices in recent months. Leonard says his role is one of reviewing progress and keeping the team on track, as well as motivating team members. "My job is to push the other chefs

to get better and never settle for anything less than their best," he says. "Our task is to show the new American cuisine, so I study, review pictures, develop presentations for them and keep communication flowing."

He says he also advocates finding opportunities to learn, whether by traveling, eating out or speaking with other chefs. "So we learn, and then we take what we've learned and let it help us reach our objectives."

Team members can also tie their Team USA cuisine and ideas to the food they create at their jobs, to the advantage of both, Leonard says. "The same philosophy on cuisine drives the team food and the food we do every day. The style of presentation, the new methods, the classical foundation—it's all part of what we do with the team and all part of what we do with food on a daily basis."

Such a total immersion in culinary education, which includes the sharing of ideas at the team level, causes team members to go back and try some of those concepts in their operations, he says. "We also try

Edward Leonard celebrates son Edward's 10th birthday with, from left, Giancarlo, Edward and Cosette.





Croquettes of lobster and cod fish, potato fondant with caviar, and candied leeks.

John Ormond

the concepts we develop for the IKA hot-food kitchen in our kitchens, to practice and to ensure that they will work," he says.

Learning experience

There's a huge bonus that comes from being immersed in a rigorous schedule that brings with it an enormous amount of work. Team members become better chefs.

"It does what it should," says Leonard. "It forces you to keep learning, it forces you to keep looking at everything you do and trying to make it better. It is a constant process of renewal, a process that builds your skills and keeps you learning and realizing that you are not yet good enough.

"You cook with other chefs who are very good, and you receive input from coaches who are very good. You need to be constantly on top of your game, and you keep on cooking and doing the best thing a chef or cook can do—cook, learn, cook, learn."

So, once chefs have dedicated themselves to cooking and learning, what motivates them to work even harder to raise the bar in cooking? "You are motivated because of your pride, your ego, and the fact that you do not want to let your teammates down,

because you have goals that you set as a team," Leonard says.

"All successful people have an ego or are confident. You need this to succeed. Not an ego that is obnoxious and causes people to resent you, but one that causes you to be the best you can be and to push yourself for the simple reason that you want to be the best. You simply have no choice but to raise the bar. If you do not, you will not last!"

Rewarding success

Leonard knows that success often breeds jealousy and criticism, but he cautions that those who put down successful people are in danger of hurting the culinary profession.

"I cannot say that I like or agree with all chefs who are successful, whether because of their cuisine or their views, or because they're TV stars," he says. "I do respect the talent, though, and the way they brand themselves or their accomplishments. They are colleagues, and their success breeds more success for the profession.

"Knowing how hard our profession is, you have to respect those who produce, those who set themselves apart from the pack based on hard work and a drive toward excellence, and have a talent that is greater than that granted to others."

Leonard is adamant, however, when it comes to appreciating all those who work and sacrifice to be members of ACF Culinary Team USA. "People have choices, but to not respect a hardworking group of cooks who give of themselves to represent the food

of their country and put themselves on the line to show how good that country's cooks and chefs are as they represent ACF and the culinary profession is just wrong."

The upside is that those chefs who compete gain much from their involvement. For Leonard, the rewards are, first, education, and then, developing long-lasting professional and personal friendships. Finally, he says, there is "the pride in representing one's cuisine for your country and your profession."

And, 24 years after attending his first IKA, Leonard still feels that pride. "There is pride in being a chef, pride in being a member of ACF and pride in the cuisine and the craft of cookery in America."

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