

IN THE KITCHEN WITH

Bocuse d'Or USA semifinalist Percy Whatley

By Leah Spellman Craig



Photos: Kenny Karst, DNC Parks & Resorts at Yosemite, Inc.

PERCY WHATLEY

Executive Chef

Delaware North Companies Parks
and Resorts, Inc., The Ahwahnee
Yosemite National Park, Yosemite,
Calif.

ACF member since 1994

IN EARLY DECEMBER 2009, Percy Whatley, executive chef at The Ahwahnee in Yosemite National Park, Yosemite, Calif., got the news he had been waiting for. In just two months, he would have a second chance to compete in the Bocuse d'Or USA Cuisine Competition at The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y., Feb. 5-6, against 11 of America's top chefs. The winning team will represent the U.S. in the Bocuse d'Or in Lyon, France, in January 2011. Whatley competed at the last U.S. competition in September 2008 in Orlando, Fla., but did not win.

This weekend, chefs and the commis of their choice will create two protein dishes before a live audience and present them to a panel of distinguished judges. The winning team will be announced at the Awards Gala Dinner and will receive an awards trophy and \$5,000. Then, the team will spend the next year training under Bocuse d'Or USA Foundation board members that included Daniel Boulud; Thomas

Keller, HHOF, ACF National Chapter and Jérôme Bocuse. The American Culinary Federation caught up with Whatley shortly after he was named one of the semifinalists. Here, he shares why not winning the first time empowered him to try again, how his strategy has changed and why working at The Ahwahnee keeps him humble every day.

You competed at the Bocuse d'Or USA competition in Orlando in September 2008. What drove you to apply again? The feeling of unfinished business and the knowledge that I am capable of doing better. Plus, it is an exhilarating experience.

How did you receive the news that you were selected as one of the candidates? I was busy throwing a Christmas party for our staff. My phone buzzed, and as I answered it, I had a feeling it was them [Bocuse d'Or representatives]. I was overcome with excitement that I was able to do this again. It takes an extraordinary amount of work and this time at The Ahwahnee is very, very busy because of our

ABOUT THE BOCUSE D'OR

Chef Paul Bocuse created the Bocuse d'Or World Cuisine Contest in 1987 to broaden the public's understanding of the dedication, hard work, practice and precision required to execute the finest cuisine. The biennial competition brings 24 countries together in Lyon, France. For more information, visit www.bocusedorusa.org.

visiting chef series, Chefs' Holidays, along with our grand Christmas events, such as the Bracebridge Dinner. I slumped over and pictured the next eight weeks in my head and thought, "Wow!"

Describe how you will prepare for the competition. What will your practice routine be like? What skills will you work on?

At the last competition, I took a classical approach to my preparations. This year, I will be much more contemporary and will use some more contemporary methods such as sous vide cooking. I will get each individual piece and garnish down before practicing the timelines all at once. The last three weeks will be dedicated to getting the entire session down.

Who is your sous chef? The commis [sous chef] needs to be 22 in January 2011. Her name is Melissa Marshall and she is currently an extern at The Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. What an externship, huh?

What lessons did you learn from the 2008 competition, and how will you use those experiences in the upcoming competition? I learned not to overthink the food. First and foremost, it needs to be food that you believe in and it should come from the heart. When you force a dish or a food preparation, it becomes mechanical and therefore, the love is lost.

What other things will you consider as you develop your menu? It is important that the flavors harmonize between the main pieces and the three garnishes. Plus, each garnish needs to be composed well enough to stand alone. The judges are some of the best chefs in the country. Their palates are extraordinary and these

are some of the things that need to be considered during the planning phases. Using the right combination of flavors and textures to bring all of the items together as one is also important.

You have come from humble beginnings—first working at a hamburger stand in Yosemite, and today, 15 years later, overseeing The Ahwahnee's food production. How does it feel to compete at such a level as the Bocuse d'Or USA contest? You know, as long as I remember where I came from, it keeps me humble. Humility can go a long way. The hard work and dedication I have for Yosemite and The Ahwahnee drives deep into my soul. I do this, not just for me, but the team that I work with. They have been so supportive as I take on these challenges and the decision to do this many times is not for self-promotion; it's for The Ahwahnee. I am humbled every day at this place.

THE COMPETITORS

Here is a look at the other 11 Bocuse d'Or USA semifinalists who will compete this weekend.

- Luke Bergman, sous chef, The Modern, New York
- Jim Burke, executive chef/owner, James, Philadelphia
- Danny Cerqueda, executive sous chef, Carolina Country Club, Raleigh, N.C.
- Michael Clauss, executive chef, The Daily Planet, Burlington, Vt.
- James Kent, sous chef, Eleven Madison Park, New York
- Mark Liberman, consulting chef, Roxy's, West Palm Beach, Fla.
- Christopher Parsons, executive chef/owner, Catch Restaurant, Winchester, Mass.
- Jennifer Petrusky, sous chef, Charlie Trotter's, Chicago
- John Rellah, executive chef, New York Yacht Club, New York
- Jeremie Tomczak, executive chef/event operations, French Culinary Institute, New York
- Andrew Weiss, executive chef, The Lakes Club at the Lake Las Vegas, Las Vegas