

IN THE KITCHEN WITH

“Chopped” Winner Wade Burch, CEC

By Leah Spellman Craig



WADE BURCH, CEC

Executive Chef

Southwest NY

New York, N.Y.

ACF member since 1994

QUICK, you have 20 minutes to prepare an appetizer using oysters, pomegranate juice, red chard and gingerbread. What would you make to wow a panel of expert judges? That was just one of the three challenges posed to “Chopped” contestants Nov. 28, 2010, during the show’s holiday episode. Among the four contestants was American Culinary Federation (ACF) Northern New Jersey Chapter member Wade Burch, CEC, a native of Texas and executive chef at Southwest NY in Manhattan’s World Financial Center. After three courses and 1 hour, 30 minutes, of pressure, he walked away as the \$10,000 winner.

Burch, whose family and friends describe him as hardworking, driven and the life—and perhaps noise—of the party, he says, has spent more than 20 years in the culinary industry, working for numerous restaurants, clubs, hotels and other venues throughout the U.S. He’s been in New York and New Jersey since 1996, when he traded his cowboy boots for the job of executive chef at The Grand Summit Hotel in Summit, N.J. He has been with Merchant’s Hospitality, which operates Southwest NY, since 2004. Here, he reflects on his two-decade career, how shucking oysters as a child helped him on “Chopped” and the most important culinary lesson he has learned.

Your bio says you’re a “true Texan,” but you’ve worked all over the country. How long have you been in New York?

I arrived in New Jersey nearly 15 years ago in the town where my wife was born and raised. It is about 15 miles from Manhattan and a beautiful area. I always wanted to work in New York City, so shortly after we met, we began planning our move here.

What do you like best about the city?

Not to sound cliché, but it is a restaurant mecca. I am surrounded by talented chefs on almost every corner.

What do you enjoy most about working at Southwest NY?

I get the opportunity to feed the same people several times a week. Playing to a captive audience keeps you on your toes and challenges you to be consistent and creative at the same time.

Describe what your average day is like.

I catch a train by 6 a.m. most mornings, and use the hour ride to catch up on e-mails and plan my day. Once I arrive at the restaurant, I assume it is what most chefs do—checking in with your staff and making sure everything is moving along for service. I oversee multiple properties, so I try to make the rounds in the evenings and visit each property over the course of a week.

You grew up in Texas City, Texas, and spent many summers visiting family on a dairy farm. How did that influence you as a chef?

When we would visit the dairy or my grandparents, I recall all the women cooking for what seemed like the entire day. The smells were amazing, and let us know what was in store for the upcoming meal. I remember my Nana Dotty would cook three pounds of bacon, sausage, ham, homemade biscuits and cream gravy for breakfast. That was to feed four adults and two kids, mind you. There were leftovers, I can assure you.

You are a husband and father to three daughters. How do you balance family and work?

My wife stays home and runs the entire show. Without her help, I could not do it. We spend most weekends together, and I am able to be home one or two nights a week to tuck my girls into bed.

You've worked in many restaurants, hotels and clubs. What was one difficult/important career lesson you learned early on? Give the guests what they want, and always deliver on your promises.

You worked at Ross Perot's Electronic Data Systems in Plano, Texas. Did you enjoy cooking in that venue?

Working in a state-of-the-art facility that was HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) certified was a wonderful environment. I worked Monday through Friday, and only until 4 p.m. I was able to go to school at night and earn the education credits I needed for certification.

You've been certified with ACF since 1999, and are currently a Certified Executive Chef®. Why did you decide to pursue certification?

When I was a sous chef at the Loews Anatole in Dallas, Tom Welther, then executive chef, encouraged me to become certified and assisted me in the process.

You've been a member of ACF since 1994. How has your involvement helped your career?

The camaraderie and professionalism members afford one another is unmatched, in my opinion. It has opened doors and expanded my horizons.

Tell us about how you ended up being a contestant on "Chopped."

I was at the International Hotel, Motel+Restaurant Show at the Javits Center in New York, and someone from the Food Network approached me and asked if I wanted to apply for the show. I went to their booth, and when they said the prize was \$10,000, I was in. Several months passed until I was asked to do an on-camera interview. Shortly thereafter, I was notified that I had been selected to compete.

What was it like cooking on a reality TV show?

It was an amazing experience. The amount of work that the entire crew puts in is mind-boggling. It was a full day from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. The judges were fair and their critiques were honest.

What was your strategy in the mystery-basket competition?

I wanted to make certain I completed my dishes on time and got every ingredient into each dish. I watched several episodes and practiced at home with my wife and friends numerous times. I was accustomed to the format and the challenge. I was able to guess that we would have oysters and goose, so I began preparing a menu in my head early that morning. When we arrived on the set, they gave us a tour of the kitchen. I noticed the wreaths and instantly thought it would be a holiday themed show.

For your appetizer, you made Oysters Rockefeller, and for your entrée, goose, two ways, while you had to adjust your dessert—boniato latkes with ice cream and mint fudge—a bit before you finished. Which dish were you most confident about?

I knew the oysters would be a hit because the other three contestants did a cold preparation and failed to open all 12 oysters. It helped me that I worked as an oyster shucker when I was younger.

What was going through your head at the final judges' table?

I was a bit nervous after I overheated the chocolate for my dessert, but I felt confident that I had done well enough on the entire meal to win.

Now for the \$10,000 question... What did you do with your prize money?

Well, after Uncle Sam took his cut, I put some in my three daughters' 529A accounts, and bought the family a new iMac computer.

QUICKFIRE Q&A

Best culinary advice received?

Shut up and cook.

Can't-live-without kitchen tool?

10-inch chef's knife

Must-have ingredient?

Salt

Most admired culinary figure?

Jean-Louis Palladin

Favorite dishes to make?

Soups and sauces. Also braising, because of the transformation that occurs with some coaxing and patience.

Memorable guests?

Muhammad Ali, Terry Bradshaw, Walter Cronkite, President Bill Clinton, President George H. Bush, Shaq