

by Ron James

THE CHEF

Thomas Keller was a dishwasher at the Palm Beach Yacht Club restaurant managed by his mother, Betty, when she asked him if he would like to be chef. He said yes and she replied, "OK, you're the chef, now learn to cook."

THOMAS KELLER - Thomas Keller, chef and owner of The French Laundry, is one of America's culinary icons who has garnered almost every major honor in the food world. CNS Photo. Boy, did he. Today, Keller is an American culinary icon who has garnered almost every major honor in the food world.

Keller learned the basics in the yacht club kitchen, but came to understand his passion under the mentoring of French master chef Roland Henin. At the Dunes Club in Rhode Island, he discovered that great cooking was rooted in the tremendous self-gratification of making others happy through culinary effort.

With that inspiration, Keller began a journey that would take him from working in top-rated American and French restaurants to opening his own high-end New York restaurant, Raket, in 1987. Although Raket earned two stars from the New York Times, it closed when the stock market took a tumble.

When Keller found a restaurant for sale in the tiny Napa town of Yountville, he was smitten with the stone building that was once a saloon and laundry. He spent the next 19 months putting together \$1.2 million from friends and investors to make the purchase.

Keller bought The French Laundry in 1994 - and the rest is restaurant history. Prestigious awards and top ratings followed, as did more restaurants, including Bouchon, Bouchon Las Vegas, and Per Se in New York.

The French Laundry was the first West Coast restaurant to garner a three-star rating by the Michelin Guide.

THE DISH

This butternut squash soup recipe comes from Keller's award-winning and best-selling cookbook, "Bouchon" (Artisan, \$50).

BUTTERNUT SQUASH SOUP - Thomas Keller's Butternut Squash Soup begins with roasted squash added to sauteed squash, onions, and carrots in a vegetable stock that is pureed for a soup that's a little thicker and more substantial than a cream soup. CNS Photo."Butternut squash, brown butter and sage are a classic combination in various cuisines, whether as soup, sauce, or pasta," Keller writes in the recipe notes. "This recipe combines roasted squash with sauteed squash, onions, and carrots, then is finished in vegetable stock and pureed for a soup that's a little thicker and more substantial than a cream soup.

"We like to make this a day ahead because the butternut squash gets sweeter if it rests," Keller continues. "When serving, be care not to burn the butter - as soon as it hits an aromatic hazelnut brown, add it to the soup, which will stop the butter's cooking as it seasons the soup."

THE WINE

An elegant Napa Valley 2005 Joseph Phelps Viognier pairs beautifully with this elegant soup. The layers of fruit and floral tones harmonize perfectly with the rich flavors of the vegetables, herbs and spices.

Joseph Phelps Vineyard, located in the foothills just outside St. Helena, Calif., produces some of the best wines in Napa Valley. Its flagship Insignia blend won the Wine Spectator wine of the year in 2005. The

viognier has soft flavors of apricots and peaches with floral and spice undertones. It is balanced by a nice acidity producing a refreshing and satisfying finish.

BUTTERNUT SQUASH SOUP WITH BROWN BUTTER, SAGE AND NUTMEG CREME FRAICHE

1 (3 to 3 1/2-pound) butternut squash

2 tablespoons canola oil, divided use

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

2 sage sprigs

1 cup thinly sliced leeks, white and light green parts only

1/2 cup thinly sliced carrots

1/2 cup thinly sliced shallots

1/2 cup thinly sliced onions

6 garlic cloves, peeled and smashed

2 tablespoons honey

6 cups vegetable stock, plus extra if necessary

1 bouquet garni (using 8 thyme sprigs, 2 Italian parsley sprigs, 2 bay leaves and 1/2 teaspoon peppercorns)

1/4 cup creme fraiche

Freshly grated nutmeg

4 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 tablespoon minced chives

Extra virgin olive oil

Yields 4 to 6 servings.

For soup: Preheat oven to 350 F. Line small baking sheet with aluminum foil. Chop neck off squash and set aside. Cut bulb in 1/2 and scoop out seeds. Brush each piece inside and out using 1 tablespoon canola oil. Season inside with salt and pepper, and place a sage sprig into each. Place cut side down on baking sheet and bake 1 hour, or until completely tender.

Remove squash from oven and set aside to cool until it can be handled. Scoop out and reserve flesh, discard sage.

Meanwhile, using paring knife or sharp vegetable peeler, peel skin from reserved neck of squash until you reach bright orange flesh. Cut squash into roughly 1/2-inch pieces (about 4 cups).

Put remaining canola oil in stockpot over medium-high heat. Add leeks, carrots, shallots and onions. Cook and stir often, about 6 minutes. Add diced squash, garlic, 1 1/2 teaspoons salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper, cook gently 3 minutes reducing heat as necessary to keep garlic and squash from coloring. Stir in honey, and cook 2 to 3 minutes. Add stock and bouquet garni, bring to a simmer and cook about 15 minutes, or until squash is tender.

Add reserved roasted squash and simmer gently 30 minutes. Remove from heat and discard bouquet garni.

Transfer soup to blender in batches and puree. Strain soup through fine strainer tapping side as it passes through. Taste and adjust seasoning, add more stock if too thick. Let cool and refrigerate until ready to serve.

To serve: Place creme fraiche in small chilled metal bowl, stir in nutmeg to taste. Whisk creme fraiche until it holds shape. Cover and refrigerate.

Heat medium skillet over high heat. When very hot, add butter and rotate pan over heat as necessary to brown butter evenly, scraping up bits that settle on bottom. As soon as foaming subsides butter is hazelnut brown, pour into pot of soup.

Ladle soup into bowls. Top with a dollop of creme fraiche. Grind black pepper over top and garnish each with minced chives. Drizzle a little olive oil over top.

- Adapted from "Bouchon."

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Food and Wine: Butternut squash soup will bring on warming trend by Ron James