



KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

HONEST COOKING YIELDS... EXCEPTIONAL RESULTS

CHEF JAN BIRNBAUM INNOVATES THE TRADITIONAL STEAKHOUSE AT EPIC ROASTHOUSE

By Lindsay Brooke Cohen



Chef Jan Birnbaum has had an extensive and varied career as a chef, having taken positions at top-tier restaurants in New Orleans, New York City, Denver, and Seattle. Yet, his most recent venture, as partner and Executive Chef of EPIC Roasthouse in San Francisco, seems like the culmination of all his past experiences, and represents the fulfillment of his travels and tenure at restaurants across the country. Synthesizing his influences, Chef Birnbaum created EPIC Roasthouse in 2008 with the mission of showcasing traditional steakhouse favorites with an inventive, contemporary flair. Featuring only the finest beef cuts, EPIC serves an array of steaks aged to 28 days from grass-fed, Kobe beef, and are prepared over the restaurant's signature wood-fired hearth, a practice Birnbaum has perfected with over 10 years of experience. Recently, we had the chance to ask Chef Birnbaum a few questions about his culinary upbringing, career as a chef, and why EPIC Roasthouse has become a hallmark of the San Francisco waterfront.

How did you begin your career in the culinary field?

After earning my engineering degree at Louisiana State

University, and a short two-year career in the oil business, I decided to follow my real passion of cooking. I started as the "family cook" in first grade when my mom went back to work. Mame, our housekeeper who was a great southern cook, was a big influence, and my mom and several aunts taught me about the love of food through their knowledge of mostly eastern European foods. Grandma Valica, the Italian granny next door, taught me how to bake bread and gave me access to her family's Italian cooking traditions.

What restaurants did you work at prior to this one?

In 1979 I moved to New Orleans and got to know Chef Paul Prudhomme, eventually becoming the bread and dessert baker at his soon-to-be-famous K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen. Five years later as a more experienced cook, I moved to New York City and started at the Quilted Giraffe Restaurant. A year and a half later, I opened the Casual Quilted Giraffe with Barry and Susan Wine, in the beautiful, newly built AT&T building on 55th and Madison.



In 1985 I moved to Denver and opened the Rattlesnake Club with Jimmy Schmidt (of Detroit's London Chop House) and Michael McCarty (of the famed Michael's in Santa Monica).

I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1988 and after three months as sous chef at Campton Place, I was offered the position of executive chef. Campton Place became a cornerstone of Bay Area dining. I opened my first chef-owned restaurant in Napa Valley in 1993 called Catahoula Restaurant and Saloon. The same year, I opened the restaurant Sazerac in Seattle, Washington, with my friend Bill Kimpton, of the Kimpton Hotel dynasty.

What appetizer, entrée, and dessert is EPIC Roasthouse most well known for?

People love our house-made charcuterie, that is, our



nightly selection of house-cured meats. All of our steaks are dry aged 28 days, so several of them are popular, most notably our New York strip, our wood oven roasted pork porterhouse, and our "Steak n' Cake," which is a petit beef filet served with a spicy crab cake. People love to polish off dinner at EPIC with our beignets, which are warm from the kitchen and served with three different toppings.

Are you a globetrotter? If so, do you get inspiration for your dishes from places you have traveled to?

I have gathered much inspiration from places in France and Italy. Influences from my original home in New Orleans also seem to sneak into my cooking. These days, my cooking mostly stays close to home with local influences and the wood ovens of EPIC Roasthouse.

What's your favorite drink?

I love old world wines—both red and white. I am a regular Fernet Branca and ginger drinker.

What's your favorite pastime?

I love the kitchen and prefer cooking more than anything else. I am also an enthusiastic vintage car collector and ride a motorcycle daily for transportation—for both relaxation and sport. I am an avid exerciser and especially love swimming. •

