



The Interview: Chef Chad Minton

We speak to the head chef at California's Ojai Valley Inn and Spa

Mar 15, 2013 @ 6:17 PM

Chad Minton is the executive chef at the 90-year-old Ojai Valley Inn and Spa, a AAA Five Diamond resort for six years running and home to a world-class spa and a golf course that dates all the way back to 1923.

Minton got his start as the executive chef at the Ritz-Carlton in Marina Del Rey, Calif., where he earned their restaurant a Michelin guide recommendation and became the only cook in the history of the hotel chain to work his way up from apprentice to executive chef.

At Ojai, which is located on the state's central coast, Minton oversees all five of its restaurants and sources as many ingredients as possible from his 2-acre on-premises garden as well as a local farmers' market.

The Daily Meal: What was your first restaurant industry job?

Chad Minton: I started as a pot scrubber at Texas Chili Parlor, in Austin, Texas.

When you first walk into a restaurant, what do you look for as signs that it's well-run, will be a good experience, etc.?

I look for a few things at places I'm eating at on arrival: smiling happy people, starting with the staff! If that checks out, I turn my attention to the diners. I always like to see what the food looks like (think menu spoiler) while being seated. Those first few moments of guest engagement set the tone and are so important to the overall dining experience.

Is there anything you absolutely hate cooking?

It's funny, I don't hate anything. Of course, nothing is going to change the fact that mincing pounds and pounds of shallots is a tedious and sometimes tearful task, but it can allow you some small mental reprieve.

If one chef from history could prepare one dish for you, what would it be?

It would have to be Marco Pierre White, at Harvey's circa late-'80s, with a young Gordon Ramsay in the kitchen. We would have Tagliatelli of Oyster and his version of Pierre Koffmann's Braised Pig Trotter. After, we would skip dessert and smoke cigarettes in the dining room with super models of the era as beautifully captured in his 1990 book *White Heat*. Such an extraordinary book, one whose energy or impact on cooks, in my opinion, has yet to be matched. Marco is the gold standard of "hard work pays

off." His success as the youngest at the time to ever earn three Michelin stars should serve as inspiration "for those who come from nothing."

What do you consider to be your biggest success as a chef?

When I was a young cook I was fortunate to work for great chefs who also happened to be great mentors. I assure you they *always* went out of their way to show me right from wrong, not only in the kitchen but in life. I have always appreciated that and owe much of my current happiness to those chefs. Now I'm old enough to have influence on the "next" generation of young chefs. In that same tradition, I hope that I am able to play a role in helping these talented young people find their way in the kitchen and life. Helping my fellow cooks is my biggest success as a chef.

What do you consider to be your biggest failure as a chef?

I think people would find it interesting how much time we spend developing our teams. The strategy, selection, training, and development of just one cook is an extraordinary emotional investment. Imagine doing that for a brigade of 20, 40, or 50 chefs! Professional cooking is equal parts dedication, sacrifice, and humility. My inability to get this thought across to cooks that have worked for me looking to "fast track" their careers at the expense of experience, is my biggest failure as a chef.

What is the most transcendental dining experience you've ever had?

Without question my most transcendental dining experience was the 16-course tasting menu on my first trip to Joël Robuchon at the Mansion back in 2007. Course after course was a study in perfect execution. While I enjoyed the very best meal I've ever had in North America and ballet-like service I began to remember exactly what "fine dining" means.

Are there any foods you will never eat?

Sharks. Plain and simple; please don't eat sharks, people.

Is there a story that, in your opinion, sums up how interesting the restaurant industry can be?

The restaurant industry provides individuals with limited resources or education an opportunity to join the workforce, to be able to feed their families and get a "foot in the door" for potential career growth. The restaurant/hospitality industry is the second largest employer in North America behind only the government. That's a wonderfully optimistic statistic for anyone with a passion for hospitality willing to start at the bottom, work hard, and create their own future.