

Report on the ACF National Conference, July 9th through July 13th
Coronado Springs Resort, Disney World, Orlando, Florida

Before the official start of the conference, there were several interesting workshops offered on Sunday – I attended a Chefs' tour of Marriott's (Orlando) Whisper Creek Farm. The land is immediately adjacent an area of the hotel's golf course and is tended to by a full time gardener. Whisper Creek also raises quail, ducks and four bee hives. Eddie, the Executive Sous Chef, escorted us back to the hotel bar where we learned more about the Peruvian history of ceviche, leche de tigre, and the Japanese influences upon their cuisine. We enjoyed Peruvian beer, created our own plates of squid, grouper and shrimp ceviche and salmon sashimi with all appropriate condiments. The Marriott chefs were generous, engaged and created a unique learning experience for us.

This year's National Conference at Coronado Springs Resort was very well attended with perhaps 1000 chefs present. The Opening General Session included Retro Rad Chef Emily Ellyn who spoke how the passion for cooking helped overcome the stigmata of her dyslexia. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis on the effects of the dining experience on individual psyche. Chef's session was followed by a preview of the creation of Modernist Bread, the newest addition to the Modernist Cuisine library. The research and planning of this tome (4 pounds of ink in each book!) was overwhelming. The final presenter at the Opening General Session was Chef Lenora Garcia – the first (and currently only) female chef to own a restaurant on the Las Vegas strip. La Chica embodies her love of her native Argentinian cuisine augmented by lifetime travels throughout South America. She appears to be a terrific businesswoman and an inspirational speaker.

The individual seminars held some surprises this year. The Texas Chefs Association sponsored several seminars on Texan beef paired with Shiner beer (very well attended). A local Orlando ACF chef talked about his foray into beekeeping and brought part of a hive into the classroom (his honey had notes of citrus and pepper) (it takes the lifetime effort of 12 bees to produce one teaspoon of honey) (also heavily attended). The seminar on cheese pairing and bourbon was so popular that chefs had to be turned away. I opted for an interesting class taught by Charles Carroll, C.E.C., A.A.C. alongside Eric the Trainer about keeping ourselves healthy, happy and at optimal condition (one chef followed Eric's programming over the last year losing over 75 pounds – he received a loud standing "O"). Chef Norman Van Aken's seminar on "trash" fish cookery was outstanding! His "victim" was an easily 20 pound Wreckfish – one of the ugliest fish I've ever seen. This year there were also many offerings in the pastry and ice carving arenas.

Former VCA apprentice Ryan Manning, currently at the Ritz Carlton in Washington, D.C. presented a wonderful seminar on Foods of the Yucatan Peninsula. He was accompanied by several associates from the Ritz Carlton who demonstrated drying and grinding corn for tortillas, cooking the flattened tortillas, the spice blends unique to the Yucatan and served two examples of their soft tacos: a saucy red shrimp taco and a hardboiled egg/vegetable taco. A small group of artisan hot sauce producers brought three different sauces (and levels of heat – i.e., a label with the flesh melting off the skull) to enjoy on the tacos. Small bags of coconut horchata (drink) helped quench everyone's fire! Chef Ryan did an outstanding presentation.

Chairman of the Board, Steve Perkins, C.E.C. represented our chapter at both the General Business Meeting and the Board of Governors' Meeting. This was the final meeting of the outgoing national officers before the newly elected officers took their oaths on Thursday. I did attend the General Business session leaving Chef Steve to digest all the business of the Board of Governors.

The Trade Show was heavily skewed towards cheese and knives this year. However, that being said, the competitions were compelling to watch. The student teams continue to raise the bar with their evident professionalism, focus and quality of plate presentation. The Pastry Chef and Chef of the Year competitions were amazing and, most especially, the competitions for Culinary Team U.S.A. positions showcased the talent that will represent us in Europe in 2020.

The American Academy of Chefs Gala Dinner and Induction Ceremony was memorable. Chef Norman Van Aken was inducted into the Hall of Fame. The meal was delicious and an outstanding team of 100 (chefs and wait staff) bowed to our applause.

Thursday's closing session came all too soon. Mark Edderling of US Foods began with an interesting seminar on the effects of music on the dining experience. Then, founder of Blue Apron, Matthew Wadiak spoke pointedly about chefs' social responsibilities towards farming, sustainability and our global future. At no time did he make any "plug" for his company. Sitting on the same global sustainability board as Michael Pollan, Wadiak made an impassioned plea for us to get it right, follow seasonality and avoid artificially nurtured food products. Wadiak was brilliant, fluent and, obviously, a person on a mission. Finally, Walter Staib took center stage with a delightful video clip from "A Taste of History" and a culinary demonstration. He had great fun alongside his young commis who also received a sustained round of applause for his good nature and humor.

The President's Gala Dinner Thursday evening was the final event for outgoing National President Thomas Macrina, C.E.C., A.A.C. All of the competition awards were announced to loud applause and shouting and the room went wild when Stafford DeCambra, C.E.C., A.A.C., took his oath of office. It was electric!

I had never been to a Disney resort before and wanted to give mention about the qualities of the Cast Members working within the conference. Rarely have I met a more hospitable, well trained and engaged team. From the gardener happily clipping the exotic shrubs, the environmental services members who often helped me navigate the maze of the hacienda building to the server who wanted to be absolutely certain that I had eaten enough breakfast; their kindnesses made a good stay a lovely stay.

Thank you for allowing me to represent you at our 2017 National Conference. There were many greetings sent to you from chefs and sponsors; many of whom sighed, "Ah, Virginia, what a lovely place"!