



So what makes this chef so hot?

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Chef Victor Matthews is caressing a steak, showing it off around the dining room of his restaurant as though it were his newborn son.

“Look at this,” he says, moving from table to table, the pride burbling up in his North Carolina drawl like the foam in a roiling veal stock. “Isn’t it amazing?”

The steak isn’t just any old piece of meat. It’s a cut of Kobe, the now-famous beef from the Waygu cattle of Japan, the ones that have been fed beer and honey and massaged with sake.

And it isn’t just any old Kobe. It’s the Gold Label, the designation of the best of the best. So marbled it actually resembles marble, deep red evenly striated by lines of fat so thick they’re literally melting beneath his fingers.

It is the most tender and arguably the most flavorful of meats in the world, and while many eateries offer the lesser standards of Kobe, only one place in the United States regularly has access to the Gold Label.

That would be the Black Bear Restaurant in Green Mountain Falls, along Ute Pass, 15 minutes west of Colorado Springs. Chef and proprietor: Victor Matthews.

“You gotta try this,” he announces, to no one and everyone, and then he runs into the kitchen.

To many of the Green Mountain Falls locals who have watched their beloved Pub and Grub transformed from a hangout for hot wings, a smoke and a beer to a fine-dining establishment that serves things they can't pronounce, this is just another example of that crazy chef doing his thing.

But to the local converts and the foodies who have driven from Colorado Springs and Pueblo and, sometimes, Denver, Matthews is the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Colorado dining, the transcendent guru of the best of the best.

You can just call him "Chef."

That is, if you're ever lucky enough to be talking to Victor Matthews.

Lucky, because if you're talking to him, that means you're eating his food, and if you're eating his food, that means you've died and gone to heaven.

Metaphorically speaking, of course.

Or, maybe not.

Term of respect

"Chef" is what Matthews has called his superiors during his 20 years in the restaurant world, and it's what European chefs have been calling each other since medieval times. It's a term of respect, a term of deference to experience and survival, and a sure sign that the speaker understands the caste system that is alive and well in the professional cooking world.

Matthews has earned the moniker, and evidence of that is all over the rustic, comfy Black Bear. The hallways are lined with his national and international awards and accolades, copies of ultra-favorable reviews, photos of important restaurant people.

He drops culinary names like pats of butter into a sizzling skillet, waiting after each one to hear the "tssss" of awe from the listener.

Here's Matthews with Kevin Graham, probably one of the best chefs Great Britain has ever produced and one of Matthews' teachers. Here's Matthews with Andrea Apuzzo, another certified master chef, another teacher, and Gunter Preuss, the infamous German master chef. Ditto on the teacher status. Kevin Davis of Arnaud's in New Orleans is a former boss and current buddy.

"I have been so lucky," Matthews says. "I have been loved and tortured by the best in the business. And now I have something to show for it."

In 1999, Matthews, who spent seven years in a classic European apprenticeship under four master chefs, who once owned the Chef's Table Restaurant in New Orleans, who in 1996 was named the youngest Mobil four-star chef in Louisiana history, bought the Pub and Grub in this small mountain hamlet after seeing an ad for it in an industry publication.

He gave the 1959 log cabin its original name back.

"I adore this part of the country," he explains. "I've always wanted to own a restaurant in the mountains, and this was just perfect. It needed a little bit of work, though, and like as not, it'll need more."

Matthews spent every last dime of his own savings to renovate the space, pulling away bad '70s decor on top of bad '60s decor to reveal a massive river-rock fireplace and stunning antique stained glass. He labored to eradicate the smell of cigarette smoke – the locals demanded that he leave the attached lounge alone, though – and bring everything up to code.

Every other day, something breaks. One frosty-breathed morning, he's just started to craft a menu using the cobra meat and fresh black truffles that just came in when the water pipes burst.

'You gotta try this'

The Black Bear is Victor Matthews in restaurant form: down-to-earth and straightforward, a little bit country, a little bit rock 'n' roll, with nothing in its background to suggest a potential for greatness.

But it just might be the best restaurant in the state, and Matthews might be its best chef.

He won't tell you that, though. As a matter of fact, he has created a culinary competition to find the best chef, and he doesn't even let himself compete in it. The Champion de Cuisine is held annually in Colorado Springs, and Matthews delights in finding the best ingredients in the world for the chefs to use as they compete.

The phrase he uses most often is, "You gotta try this," in the kind of tone that suggests he can't believe he's had the good fortune to stumble upon it, and it just might be the best thing you've ever tasted.

And like as not, it is.

Few Denver diners have stopped in on their way across Ute Pass, but folks from across the country know all about it.

Food celebrities make it a regular stop, and politicians from near and far use it as their own personal dining room, entertaining other self-important people and showing off their allegiance to Matthews.

General Ed Eberhart, commander in chief for the North American Aerospace Defense, brought his staff and several Japanese generals here a few months ago.

"There were a bunch of these mountain-sized bodyguards and this armored-van limo transport thing with escort vehicles, the whole deal, here in this sleepy little town," Matthews says. "We must have done a good job, because the general gave us all medals in a ceremony after dinner. His top aide said that he rarely does that."

You gotta try this: A cappuccino cup three-quarters full of a mushroom reduction the color of espresso, tasting like a forest might smell after a beef rain, its meaty quality so concentrated as to be almost painfully rich. On top floats a thick, heavy snowdrift of cream, some of which leaches into the reduction and some of which can be spooned out on its own, the ultimate cream of mushroom soup.

"When I was a little guy, I didn't even know what a chef was," Matthews says. "But I'd never heard of tattoos either; they were something for criminals and gypsies. Now, like so-called chefs, tattoos are everywhere."

Thanks to mom

Victor W. Matthews Jr., 36, grew up in various parts of North Carolina, and his mom was single most of his life.

"I can tell you about these great chefs I worked for, and all the honors I've achieved, and that's great and all, but always, my No.1 credit and thanks goes to my mom," he says, his voice getting a bit more Southern, his eyes watering just a little.

“She’s the best.”

He started cooking when he was a little over 14, in a neighborhood Italian joint, tossing pizzas and flirting with the neighborhood girls through the window. He later graduated from North Carolina State University with a B.A. in English and education, his fallback plan, since he already knew he wanted to be a chef.

“When I was 18, I was in this used-book store, and I was just looking through the cookbook section,” he remembers. “Most of these books were those Better Homes and Garden kind, which talked about the bizarre concept of using actual heavy cream like it was, you know, whale gizzards or something.

“But then there was this one book, ‘Take Twelve Chefs,’ and the food in it looked incredible. I just sat down right there and looked at these pages of incredibly beautiful dishes, and I fell in love.”

He still has the book, and he’s still in love.

With cooking, anyway, and his 7-year-old son, Victor Matthews III, who lives with him above the restaurant in an apartment that perpetually looks like the aftermath of a kegger.

But the restaurant below is pristine, lovingly cared for by Matthews’ staff, which includes Derick Kuntz, an 18-year-old from Divide who is apprenticing with Matthews the way Matthews once apprenticed with the great masters. Right now, Kuntz is training to make elaborate pastas from scratch so that he can compete in the notoriously difficult pasta championships in Rome in 2006.

You gotta try this: Homemade tortellini with the texture of butter, stuffed with fennel-flavored cream cheese, deep-fried until the center liquifies, and draped in a shallot-kissed cream sauce.

The rest of his kitchen staff includes Sara Winking, 21, a four-year apprentice sous chef; Brooke Ash, 21, pastry apprentice and floor manager; and Derek Cox, 18, dishwasher and newest apprentice. So very European.

“Starting out young is the best chance at being the best,” Matthews says.

Unlike the great masters, though – about whom he has terrifying stories of line cooks writhing on the floor in stress-induced seizures and giant platters of searing-hot food heading toward his face – he tries not to torture his people.

"I don't yell," he says. "Well, OK, maybe I yell a little, but not in a mean way. I get more mad at myself than anybody else. I get frustrated."

He sighs when he's frustrated. But he doesn't throw things. Like the child of abusive parents who grows into a gentle father, Matthews rebels against the abuse of the chefs he's worked and cowered under.

"What are you going to do?" he wonders. "I never saw anything effective happen from throwing a pan at someone, except that it does make Chef feel better."

Uses Colorado products

What makes him feel the best at the Black Bear is the "amazing" food he offers.

You gotta try this: sheung tong royale, a luxurious chilled custard made from a Chinese broth of dried orange peel and "the best" pork and chicken available, seasoned with a hint of nutmeg.

Matthews will use American, and especially Colorado, products if they're the best the world has to offer, including Colorado lamb, Paragon Pork from Pueblo and Washington's Apex Syrah. He has garnered a devoted following of local farmers who make sure everything they send him is the best. Sometimes, Asian or European ingredients are superior, such as Kobe beef or chicken from Provence.

He hopes to turn Denver on to the best the world has to offer, sometime in the next year. His plan for a private restaurant, the Paragon Dining Club, will pair his food, the best food, with "peerless service" and "amenities like you've never seen in this country."

You gotta try this.

Whatever you say, Chef.

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