

ARTICLE BY PATTI ZIELINSKI

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*Celebrity Chef David Burke
transforms the Bernards
Inn into a gathering spot
full of flavor!*

The Culinary Prankster





Lobster Dumplings

"It was like being in a band working on a project and the project was food and every night we had to perform."

There are few moments that can compare to finishing the appetizer course at one of celebrity chef David Burke's restaurants and spying Burke himself rounding into the dining room from the kitchen and making a beeline to your line of tables against the window.

David Burke is in the house!

He approached our table just as the entrees were being served. Taking a plate from our server, he placed it in front of my companion who had ordered the Provencal Cod, which was baked in a clear parchment with red lentils, salted peanuts, yellow Thai coconut, braised leek and calamansi lime butter. Revealing a pair of scissors from his white chef coat, he snipped open the parchment and gently poured the contents onto the plate. Then, he picked up the tiny saucière and dribbled sauce across the cod. "Ah, that's enough. You just need a little. Enjoy your meal," he said with a smile as he returned to the kitchen.

"David Burke just prepared my meal tableside," my companion said, dumbfounded.

This is quintessential Burke, keeping people on their toes: The self-described "Culinary Prankster" is full of surprises, whether it is how his dishes are prepared and presented or his take on culinary hospitality. The end game is the same: to create a memorable experience.

The evening of our visit, Burke was at his new restaurant, Red Horse by David Burke at the Bernards Inn in Bernardsville, for Dinner in the Dark, one of his signature events in which 30 blindfolded guests were guided through courses and pairings designed to heighten their senses of taste and smell.

"The beauty of a dinner like this is that you use your senses and get childlike about what you're eating," he says. "You put your phones down and converse. It's a reminder about how blessed we are to have all our senses and to keep an eye out for people who need help. It's a reminder to not take anything for granted."

And Burke, who rocketed to fame when he was named executive chef of New York City's legendary River Café when he was just 26, takes zero for granted. He developed his love for restaurants before it was cool, washing dishes in a hot kitchen in his teens, observing and taking every opportunity to learn. "When I started cooking in the 1970s, I basically was told that this is a terrible business. You didn't go to school to become a chef; it was a utility job," he says.

He became inspired by the kitchen staff, men in their 20s and 30s — "some returning soldiers from the Vietnam War, some high school dropouts, but all fun-loving, hard working characters," he says. "There was a sense of camaraderie, teamwork and accomplishment. There was craftsmanship, a sense of satisfaction and a desire to impress: Who could open clams faster? Who made the better short strawberry shortcakes? Whose marsala sauce tasted better? It was like being in a band working on a project and the project was food and every night we had to perform."

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Clothesline Bacon



Burke became hooked. The environment inspired in him a thirst for knowledge and desire to work even harder. He went into the kitchen on his days off, seeking to improve, then built upon this knowledge at the Culinary Institute of America and at the École Lenôtre Pastry School and with legendary chefs in France. “All of a sudden,” he says, “the sky was the limit.”

This competitive edge was solidified at River Café, where he earned a prestigious three-star review from *The New York Times* and became the first – and remains the only – American to win the prestigious *Meilleurs Ouvriers de France* *Diplôme d’Honneur*, the first of many prestigious awards. Twice nominated for James Beard’s Best Chef, Burke subsequently rose to celebrity chef status and appeared on “*Iron Chef America*” and “*Top Chef Masters*.” Today, Burke and his David Burke Hospitality Management team operate or orchestrate the culinary component of over a dozen restaurants, a historic event venue and a bakery.

But Burke’s soul remains grounded in the kitchen – a place he has often referred to as the “heartbeat of hospitality” – and artful innovation, whimsy and a creative approach to food is always foremost

in mind. This mentality, born in the kitchens of his youth, was honed early in his career. “I took over the River Café for two great chefs: Larry Forgione and Charlie Palmer, who I worked with for two years. I have the same *crème brûlée* recipe as Charlie, but I wanted to see how mine would edge out his. You’ve got to take chances, but you have to understand the fundamentals and be the architect of it. From a design aspect, my pastry background comes into play.”

And play this Culinary Prankster does, creating presentations that captivate the imagination in an Alice-in-Wonderland way. Much imitated, but never paralleled, Burke’s dishes spark a wonder and appreciation for food that makes diners stop, look and really experience what they are tasting.

With Burke, each signature dish tells a story. “There’s a reason why they were made; there’s trial, there’s experimentation and what we find out is this surprise and delight,” he says. “The uniqueness counts.”

Take his iconic Clothesline Bacon, which has a distinct sculptural quality. Indeed: Why serve food horizontally when it is best presented vertically? Here, grilled, thick-cut, pepper-flecked bacon strips are hung by clothespins and torched until sweating, the fat dripping down onto

a pickle lounging beneath, absorbing the bacon flavor, transcending to a food flavor beyond your basic dill.

Then, there is Burke’s patented process of dry-aging beef in a room lined with pink Himalayan salt with UV lights on a timed cycle that allow for a longer aging process and absorption of the salt flavors that permeates the tender cuts with a unique umami taste.

And a David Burke meal is not complete without dessert. “The Tin Can Cake is our answer to a soufflé. We send out the cake beaters with the batter on them to the table first so you can lick them,” he says. “That little touch makes the cake taste better, because it brings back a memory, makes you smile.”

On our evening with Burke, the dessert of choice was the Cake Pop Tree, topped by a pouf of bubblegum cotton candy – because, of course, why not! “I care about desserts a lot because I have a pastry background,” says Burke, who appeared again tableside to check in and waved his hand toward the presentation. “I want to show people something they have not seen. When you experience something like the Tin Can Cake or the Cake Pop Tree, you leave thinking ‘Wow, that was unique.’”

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Smoked Duck Breast

Crispy Shrimp "Spring Rolls" and Peaches



HORSING AROUND IN BERNARDSVILLE

Bernardsville is the third location for Red Horse by David Burke; the other two are in Rumson and White Plains, New York. Burke — a Jersey boy who was raised in Hazlet — was drawn to the historic bones of the century-old Bernards Inn.

"When I started working, the best restaurants were in older buildings, like the Bernards Inn. They have a feeling when you walk into them — that you have arrived somewhere. This was built to be a restaurant, a place where you feel comfort as well as grandeur and sophistication," he says. "I like a challenge and saw this as a chance to renovate it, make it more progressive, put our spin on it and bring it back to life."

Burke set about giving the restaurant a new look, playing on the equine theme of the restaurant's name as well as the area — "All three Red Horse restaurants are located in horse country," he says — from the artwork to the tongue-in-cheek names of the signature drinks (A Roll in the Hay, Peach Trot). His well-appointed design retains the building's historic character while infusing it with bright colors in dining rooms sunbathed by expansive windows.

The equine theme dovetails from the logo, which is based on "Red Horse," a painting by Vietnamese artist Tran Tuan that Burke bought from a gallery in New Hope, Pennsylvania, early in 2020. "I saw it and knew it would be a logo for a new restaurant," says Burke, who acquired the copyright from the artist. "I wanted Red Horse to be a modern American restaurant featuring great steaks and locally sourced ingredients and to pay tribute to horses. There is comfort and romance to this theme: Horses are elegant and sophisticated. They are also masculine and feminine. Plus, 'red' is a strong word, and we have a little Asian influence."

Besides the main dining rooms, *'The Bernie'* is an underground speakeasy social club featuring live entertainment, wine dinners, comedy, trivia and events like "Dinner in the Dark."

On this evening, the darkened dinner now over, Burke sits outside on the Bernards Inn dining patio as chattering patrons spill out into the night, glowing from their experience. "This is a life commitment. It's not a job; it's a lifestyle," he says. "You give up a lot to be a chef at a high level, and the more celebrity you get, the more you have to work. Restaurants never sleep."

View the menu and upcoming events at Red Horse by David Burke at redhorsebydb.com.