
THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

CHEF JIRI KREJCIR: NO SHORTCUTS

BY BILL FORE



Jiri Krejcir's tone is cautiously optimistic as he describes the challenges of rural pioneering in his new Gaylordsville restaurant, the White Peach. The restaurant business is, after all, notoriously risky. But his mood warms visibly when the conversation turns to food; his passion is evident as he recounts the point in his career when, as chef of a fledgling Litchfield restaurant, growing demands on his culinary skills coaxed him to new levels of achievement—and an admiring public responded. His tone betrays the unmistakable zeal of obsession: Jiri Krejcir is in love with food.

Czechoslovakian born and raised in Sweden, Krejcir comes by his respect for quality ingredients—and his straightforward culinary style—honestly. Recalling his Czech grandmother's resourcefulness when food was scarce, he seems to *actually smell* the plums from her trees cooking slowly into a thick conserve, to be stored as a dense brick in the cold cellar and carved up as needed for enriching a stew or sweetening a tart. Meat was a luxury enjoyed once a week and no part of a rabbit went unused.

This connection to the White Peach's pâté of duck, pork, veal and pistachios, or the homemade chicken sausages with warm potato salad is direct and clear. And if a kitchen may be judged by its stocks and sauces, a dish of curried pumpkin and chicken soup evokes a

Above: Chef Jiri at the White Peach Restaurant.

sense of well-being that goes beyond satiety to security. Krejcir, who earned a degree in business and marketing in Sweden, began learning the fundamentals of the professional kitchen only after coming to the United States in 1983. A brief stint in construction and a growing family quickly confirmed his love for restaurants. In a series of kitchens throughout Washington, Litchfield, Hartford, Kent, and Bethlehem, Jiri plucked pheasants and cleaned fiddleheads, learned purchasing and supervision, and devoured classical cooking books (*Larousse Gastronomique* remains his reference of choice). He particularly credits his stint at the Hopkins Inn with teaching him the discipline and teamwork of the classical kitchen brigade.

Through the cold early months of 2006, Jiri spent his days sanding the pine floors and remodeling the rooms of the former grocery market that is now the White Peach. Where a stove once fell through

RECIPE

POTATO AND ROASTED GARLIC SOUP

by Chef Jiri Krejcir

10 cloves garlic, unpeeled	1 small onion, diced
1 T. olive oil	1 pint heavy cream
2 qts. chicken stock (or substitute vegetable stock)	Pinch nutmeg
6 to 8 medium potatoes, peeled	Salt and ground white pepper to taste
	Dill, chives or parsley

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. Rub the garlic cloves with olive oil, and roast them until tender and golden. Cool, then squeeze the soft garlic out of the dry skins.
3. Boil the potatoes and diced onion in the stock until soft and falling apart. Remove from heat.
4. Add the cream, garlic and nutmeg to the potato mixture, and purée it in a blender until smooth.
5. Adjust the seasoning with salt and white pepper (several tablespoons of salt may be required depending on the seasoning of the stock, and the quantity of potatoes used).
6. Fresh dill, chives or parsley may be added.
7. Serve hot or chilled.

RECIPE

ROAST PORK LOIN WITH FRUIT STUFFING AND BRAISED RED CABBAGE

by Chef Jiri Krejcir

For the roast pork loin with fruit stuffing:

3 plums, pitted and cut into ½" chunks	1 center-cut pork loin roast, approximately 2½ to 3 lbs, boned and trimmed of excess fat and connec- tive tissue, at room temper- ature
1 c. pitted prunes cut roughly into quarters	Coarse salt and cracked black pepper
2 tart apples, peeled, cored and chopped roughly	
1 T. brandy	
Pinch salt	

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. Combine the plums, prunes, apples, brandy and pinch of salt.
3. With a sharp boning knife, cut a 2" hole lengthwise through the eye of the loin to create a pocket for the stuffing.
4. Push the stuffing into the pocket so that it is filled evenly from end to end.
5. Rub the outside of the roast with coarse salt and cracked pepper.
6. Place it in an oiled shallow roasting pan, and roast for approximately 45 minutes, or to an internal temperature of 155°.
7. Remove from the oven, cover loosely with aluminum foil and allow to stand for at least ten minutes before slicing.

For the braised red cabbage:

1 small head of red cabbage	4 T. salt
1 red onion, peeled and sliced in ½" pieces	1 t. cracked black pepper
4 T. vegetable oil	2 whole cloves
1 large tart apple, cored and sliced	¼ c. red wine vinegar
¼ c. sugar	1 c. dry red wine
	Juice of 1 lemon
	¼ c. crème de cassis.

1. Slice cabbage in half through the stem, then cut out and discard the core. Cut the cabbage into ½" strips.
2. In heavy stockpot over medium heat, lightly brown the onions in the oil.
3. Add the apple and cabbage to the pot, cover with a close fitting lid and cook for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
4. Add the remaining ingredients, bring to a boil and then reduce heat to simmer.
5. Cover, stirring occasionally until the cabbage is tender, about one hour. (A small amount of water may be added if the ingredients begin to dry.)
6. Adjust seasoning to taste with salt, pepper and a squeeze of fresh lemon juice.

Serve the pork with its pan juices, the braised cabbage and boiled new potatoes.

SOME OF JIRI'S FAVORITE RESOURCES

Sharon Pheasant Farm, Sharon
Hidden River Farm, Bantam
Connecticut Cut Flowers, Bantam
Bantam Bread Company, Bantam
Sun One Farm, Bethlehem
Averill Farm, Washington Depot
Starberry Farm, Washington Depot
Farmers Market, New Milford
White Silo Farm, Sherman
Hallock Orchard, Washington Depot

rotted floorboards, now hums a small and immaculate kitchen. Doubled, draped tables, heavy silverware and delicate crystal glow in the subtly lit dining room. Above the bar, a small, framed photograph of the Swedish royal family keeps vigil. The White Peach is an unmistakably personal creation, exemplary of the inventive and resourceful genre of the chef-owner restaurant.

This tall, patient chef had not been cooking in America long when he began to appreciate his European food sensibilities. "Tomatoes are really great for only a few weeks a year," he says with transparent logic. "When they are not wonderful, I will serve you something else." With characteristic sensitivity, Krejcir's nose wrinkles slightly as he describes the difference in the smell of a roasting organic chicken from that of a commercially grown bird. In a quiet, softly accented cadence he lists some of his favorite local resources, and reflects on the delicate balance of acquiring fresh local product, the often-prohibitive cost of organically produced foods from other regions, and the necessary complement of traditional foodservice distributors. Flavor, budget and politics make strange and sometimes contentious bedfellows.

As winter settles in on the Northwest corner, Krejcir's menus are populated with roast turkey and duckling, braised cabbage and butternut squash. Between marinating a Bohemian sauerbraten and smoking line-caught bluefish (to be served with fresh applesauce of native Romes and local horseradish), he chats in Swedish with pastry chef and culinary soul mate Britt-Marie Horrocks, whose temptations range from soul-warming puddings to elegant works of art executed in chocolate, fruit and pastry. Their common Swedish heritage is coincidental; their shared passion for food is fate.

Most of the time, Krejcir seems not to notice that this is hard and ceaseless work. His car is a mobile office, chock full of file folders, invoices, and uniforms; the restaurant is a demanding, consuming mistress. But as he retreats to his kitchen to roast bones for a stock, the confidence of years of experience is apparent in his stride. It is the satisfaction of many small things done well. □

WHAT: White Peach Restaurant
WHERE: 1 South Kent Road, Gaylordsville
WHEN: Tuesday–Thursday, 5:30–9:00
Friday & Saturday, 5:30–10:00, Sunday, 12:00–9:00
RESERVATIONS: 860-210-8104