A Piece Of Cake: Dessert from Two Chefs Who Hate to Bake

Quaker Kitchen chats with Chefs Deb Day and Mitch Prensky

With nearly a half century under her toque, Chef Deb Day is a certified Penn legacy. Currently head chef at Kings Court English, Chef Deb's career stretches back to her mother's kitchen, who could turn simple chicken into 50 different, family-favorite recipes. Chef Mitch Prensky, Executive Chef of Culinary Innovation at Penn, is the restauranteurpreneur behind The Global Dish Caterers, Zagat Best Scratch Biscuits, and Philly-local Supper. While neither have developed a taste for patisserie, both have an appreciation for the art and a palpable passion for cooking. At Quaker Kitchen on December 1st, they will demonstrate a sweet treat from Chef Deb's kitchen; Donut Bread Pudding with Cinnamon Glaze.

Quaker Kitchen: Why did you decide to become a chef and how long have you been at it?
Chef Mitch: My mom was a chef and my family was always involved in the business, but I actually started as a musician – until I needed to pay rent. My first gig was in a really good French restaurant, then a bunch of other French restaurants, and I trained at the French Culinary Institute.

Chef Deb: For me, I love cooking and I wanted to be around people. My mother taught me how to cook, that was the best training. Other than that, I didn’t work anywhere before Penn. I’ve been right here for 47 years.

QK: Why all the French?
CM: That’s what you did. In order to learn and be taken seriously you need to build a resume. French, those guys at the time they were the most serious, respected in the industry. Now, you see a lot of macho-funky guys on TV and stuff, but back in the day they wouldn't hire you if you had a tattoo or your hair was too long. It was very militaristic.

QK: What is your least favorite thing to cook?
CD: Cake. Any baking. I admire it but it’s not my thing. I’ve done desserts, I’ve had to do it, but it’s a brain and a certain mentality. Very precise. Cooks and bakers are two different types. So when I had to bake I’d go, “Ok, what are the easiest recipes?”, and it’s always like “You guys got a puff pastry in the freezer?” that’s my go-to. Anything with a crisp, just put a crumble on top, some fruit, ice cream.

CD: [laughs] That’s right, that’s me, I feel the same way. My assistant chef Carla is the baker, she does the pizza dough, too.

CM: Another thing with baking, it’s dependent on the temperature outside and the atmosphere, and altitude. There are high altitude recipes. I actually lived in Colorado for a while and all the recipes out there were just different, I didn’t do pastry out there, but those poor guys? Just the things they have to do on a daily basis, plus it’s a very dry area and doesn’t rain often, and all of that informs what you do. You need to know all that stuff, it’s not just like make the dough and you’re good to go, you have to ask what it’s like outside.

QK: What’s one food you’ve never tried?
CM: Oxtail, I don’t know why, I’ve just never tried it.

QK: What 5 things should every kitchen have?
CM: Cast iron skillet, a good oven, and some good lighting.

CD: [gestures around KCECH] Right here!

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*This interview has been edited for clarity and length.*