

# A FRESH AND SEASONAL APPROACH

Chef Michael Shrader brings seasonal quality to N9NE Steakhouse.

By Marla Seidell • Photography by Sarah Rivers



EXECUTIVE CHEF MICHAEL SHRADER, N9NE STEAKHOUSE

**M**ichael Shrader is a stickler about food being fresh and of highest quality. As executive chef of the West Loop's upscale steakhouse N9NE, Chef Shrader oversees a staff of 100 in addition to a seasonally focused menu. "I've got heirloom tomatoes all over the place because it's the only time of year (August) you'll be able to get them," says Michael. "I will not put tomatoes on my menu in January."

## SEASONALITY IS THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

"There are two reasons you cook seasonally," says Michael, 38, seated at one of N9NE's elegant wooden tables. "The first is that the quality is superior and second, it's affordable. When you cook food out of season, it's low in quality and expensive," the chef points out. "It makes no sense, but people do it all the time." Prime cuts of meat and seafood are N9NE specialties, as is a weekly rotating menu of internationally inspired items like fresh calamari stuffed with chorizo and olives.

Michael's culinary vision, rooted in an emphasis on fresh and seasonal ingredients, has shaped a \$9 million-a-year business that has spawned locations Dallas and Las Vegas. In Chicago, N9NE intersects Randolph Street and Canal Street, a slightly out-of-the-way location that makes it a "destination restaurant." Many come for the glamorous see and be-seen crowd, which includes heavyweight celebrities along the lines of Tom Hanks. But what keeps people coming back is the food. "The crowd we get is a testament to the quality we do," Michael says.

The chef's pedigree begins in Los Gatos, California, 60 miles south of San Francisco. His maternal Sicilian great-grandparents cooked fresh squid and clams, while his paternal great-grandmother, who hailed from Indiana, whipped up a "Thanksgiving-style meal" every day. "She cooked turkey, ham, shucked corn, beans and pies," recalls Michael. "I remember standing by the counter rolling dumplings."

A natural affinity for cooking led Michael to enroll at the California Culinary School of the Arts, following two uninspired years at West Valley College in Saratoga. One year out of cooking school, his work ethic and talent resulted in a "big break": he was hired as a prep cook at San Francisco's famed Stars restaurant (closed in 2004). "I got really lucky," he says. At Stars, the emphasis was on fresh and seasonal fare. "We had to change the menu every day," recalls Michael. Working 16-hour days paid off: within a year he was promoted to sous chef.

After four years at Stars, Michael's hard work led to an even bigger opportunity: a scholarship at Paris' Ritz Escoffier School. He moved to Paris and was training with the masters when he got a job at Le Bellecour. "It was pretty cool," he says. "Not too many American guys get a Michelin-starred restaurant job in Paris while training

at the Ritz." Following the end of training, he moved back to San Francisco. In 1997, a desire to move on from a failed relationship led to his decision to move to Chicago.

## WINDY CITY STORIES

After a couple short restaurant stints, Michael was considering moving back to California when he was introduced to Michael Kornick (now managing partner of N9NE) through his roommate. At the time, Michael Kornick, along with founding owners Michael Morton and Scott De Graff, were developing the concept for N9NE, and were in search of a chef, which they found in Michael Shrader.

After 10 months of development, N9NE opened in April 2000. He stayed until 2004, when he and Michael Kornick attempted to open a N9NE in Palm Springs, California, which didn't work out. The chef remained in California, working in San Francisco for 10 months, but then came back in 2006. He currently works 10-hour days, five days a week, yet is a devoted family man to his wife, 5-year-old son and 18-month-old daughter. "If I had to choose, it would be my family," he says.

## THE USUAL SUSPECTS FOR FALL

N9NE currently pulls in an average of 1,500 patrons a week, which is not an easy task. "We survived 9/11 and now we're surviving this economy and this is as almost as bad," he says. Yet what continues to be a crowd pleaser is the seasonal, fresh food and prime steaks. For fall produce, Michael mentions the "usual suspects" – pumpkins, squash and leeks. About the future, Michael takes things day by day. "Who knows what's going to happen five years from now?" ■