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PLATEAU



Brian Von Eggers, CEC, brings fascinating, multi-faceted experience as Executive Chef to Wildhorse—the focus is food

Brian Von Eggers, CEC, doesn't appear to be a man with a light touch. He's German-American and he's got what some might regard as a stout German-American physique. And he states that he is very fond of starches, having grown up on potatoes.

But then, he's also a man who delights in contemporary cuisine and the fresh Northwest styles that require the sensitive touch of a culinary artist.

As the Executive Chef for Wildhorse Resort & Casino, where he will now reign over six food and beverage outlets, Brian also applies a light touch to the less artistic side of his profession—managing people. Chefs sometimes acquire a reputation as prima donnas. But Brian was actually once hired as Executive Chef of a four-diamond resort almost as much for his nice-guy nature, as for his skill in the kitchen.

When he applied for the job at the Furnace Creek Inn in Death Valley National Park, he was told they wanted someone easy going, since they were in a post-prima donna chef recovery mode. He fit the description perfectly and spent the next few years at the luxurious resort, catering to everyone from the environmentalists who came for the purity of Death Valley's stark landscape, to Hollywood stars, who came, presumably, to get out of LA.

“A highlight of the work in Death Valley was the time a Las Vegas law firm bought the entire resort for a three-day weekend,” said Brian, “and hosted a variety of spectacular affairs, including a huge luau complete with roasted pig, although not buried in the ground! Or catering for Matt Damon on the set of his new movie.”

Housing was in scarce supply there because there was no community nearby, just the resort and the desert. There was some employee housing, where Brian and his family lived, and many employees camped out in RVs. There was a nomadic nature to some of the staff, who spent time there to enjoy the free benefits, such as golf and food, before moving on. Brian and his family, however, were there almost four years.

From Death Valley, Brian's career took him to a very different place, Vicksburg, Mississippi, to the Ameristar, one of four casinos in the small city astride a major southeast freeway. I-20, nearly in Louisiana and halfway between Dallas, Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia. There, his major career enriching experience was the opportunity to open an \$8 million food and beverage facilities expansion. He also starred in a bi-weekly, 15-minute TV cooking presentation on a local afternoon variety show produced in state capitol, Jackson, about an hour east of Vicksburg.

On opening day of the expansion his new buffet restaurant served 2,400 people, a record for an Ameristar restaurant. Like the new buffet restaurant he's opening at Wildhorse, *Traditions*, Ameristar's buffet provided patrons with several "cooking action stations", places where the guest can watch as the food is prepared and interact with the cook, even selecting ingredients.

"Ameristar really focused on the food," said Brian, "and we had the reputation for quality dining."

Perhaps his most memorable food event there came almost as a response to "leftovers". He tells the story of how he inherited \$40,000 in frozen lobster, some 12,000 pounds. After the remodel re-opening in the fall, he decided to save the lobster for New Year's Eve that year and serve it all on one day. "We had lobster everywhere, on everything, even the pizza. It turned out really well. I was commended for an idea that basically came from inheriting so much lobster."

Brian grew up in the East and graduated with a culinary degree in Rhode Island. Following school he interned at The Breakers Palm Beach, a legendary Florida resort that opened in 1896 and boasts a five-diamond rating.

Like most young chefs just out of school his ambition was to work at a high-end restaurant. He notes that it's easier to work at a high-end restaurant for a few years and then move down, then to do the opposite. It's a good idea, he says, to try to get your first jobs at the best places. He describes his apprenticeship as a great experience where he had the opportunity to work with several excellent specialty chefs.

Then it was back to the Northeast for sous-chef jobs at the Oceania in New York City, a fine-dining restaurant well known to New Yorkers yet today. He also worked at the Hay Day Café, which, despite its name, is a fine-dining restaurant located in one of the richest bedroom communities in the U.S., in Connecticut. There, famous chefs would show up to conduct cooking classes, people such as Wolfgang Puck. Puck would be responsible

for guiding the preparation of the food and conducting a demonstration, but Brian would do the actual cooking.

At that point Brian was still only 20-years-old and he took one of those turns that has much less to do with career building than with pursuing an affair of the heart. In this case, he was a man in love with the outdoors and for him, nothing represented the outdoor life ideal better than Alaska. In short order, Brian was cooking for the guests of the Chena Hot Springs Resort, about 60 miles from Fairbanks. It's a place so cold that the neighboring Aurora Ice Hotel, one of six ice hotels in the world, never melts.

But even in America's icebox, love occurs, and it occurred for Brian. Because another refuge from the lower 48, his wife to-be, Jennie, raised in Umatilla County, was also working at Chena Hot Springs Resort. That was certainly the most significant result of his trip to Chena Hot Springs Resort, although he has other fond memories.

"What's really interesting is that in the winter, almost nobody comes up from the lower 48," said Brian. "Instead, the Hot Springs get thousands of Japanese tourists. They start showing up in the late fall, all the way to spring. By December, you wonder if you're still in the U.S.!"

What's the attraction? The auroa borealis or northern lights. According to a New York Times travel article that ran just this March, somewhere in the neighborhood of 7,000 to 8,000 Japanese tourists visit this tiny resort area in the winter to revel in the natural wonder of the northern lights. They sit out all night, "bundled around a roaring fire" to watch the sky.

"And they want genuine Alaska food," said Brian. "They demand salmon and game meat, no miso soup or sushi."

Now married, Brian and Jennie headed for Oregon, where Brian took a job with a new restaurant in Portland's trendy Northwest retail district. He helped open and then served as sous-chef at Tribeca. On opening day, his attention was divided between the opening of a chic new dining place and the birth of his first son, Mitchell, now 12.

Shortly thereafter, talking with an Alaskan friend, Brian learned that the Westin Alyeska Prince Hotel, a splendid golf and ski resort, was looking for an executive sous-chef. Soon Brian and Jennie and Mitchell were back in Alaska, where his new job gave Brian the opportunity to oversee ten food and beverage outlets.

Much as he loves Alaska, Brian points out that cooking fine food there can have its challenges.

"Leaving the Northwest and returning to Alaska was eye-opening," he says. "I tried bringing the Northwest cuisine but it was difficult. The ground is frozen for so much of the year and it can be hard to get the ingredients."

So from the frozen North, Brian and his expanding family, now including two sons, moved to the toasty environment of Death Valley. In an article on “The Diverse World of Park Chefs”, The National Culinary Review, a magazine for food professionals, in April, 2002, quoted Brian. “I happened to stumble across this job on the internet, and the resort was looking for an ACF-certified executive chef. Personally, I love the outdoors, so the bonus of living in a national park was the icing on the cake.”

Of course, the resort itself was pretty nice too, given the usual swimming pools, golf, tennis courts and fine dining. Continued the chef, “I think my kids are lucky to be raised in Death Valley National Park. We get to play when others work . . .”

As much as he enjoyed Death Valley, and later Vicksburg, the Northwest was a huge magnet for Brian, not only because his wife could assure him it would a terrific place to raise the kids, but also because of the lure of the food—the fresh ingredients so prolific here, the burgeoning wine industry and the increasing reputation of Northwest cuisine. So they moved to Pendleton, where Brian began catering while also teaching cooking at Blue Mountain Community College. He had the credentials, since he had earlier taught at both the University of Alaska—thanks to encouragement from a couple of chef mentors there—and at the University of South Carolina during a brief stint at a country club there. The Alaska mentors also helped him get his credentials, so he could add the CEC (Certified Executive Chef from the American Culinary Federation) to his name.

And finally, here he is at Wildhorse Resort & Casino, where he can add the biggest opening project yet to his enviable resumé, the launch of four food and beverage venues at once.

Brian and his wife Jennie, who grew up in Athena, have four children, Mitchell, Seth, Daylen and Sadie, and reside in Pendleton.

Chef Brian on food and the vision for Wildhorse Resort & Casino

What are Brian’s favorite foods? He notes that he is a German American who grew up on potatoes and who is a sucker for starch. Freshly cooked pasta with fresh olive oil and basil is his idea of a great, simple meal. He loves the Northern Italian flavors and other cooking that features fresh, bold flavors.

(Brian noted that a significant portion of the acclaimed French cooking style was born in a food revolution that occurred when a princess from Italy, Catherine de Medici, married a French king, Henri II, and brought an Italian chef with her. This 16th century revolution even brought an Italian dining tool, the fork, to France for the first time.)

What will he bring to Wildhorse? He will definitely incorporate a lot of Pacific Northwest ingredients. We even have a different food style here in Eastern Oregon and Washington, he says, and we’re beginning to see that develop as a cuisine. Wine has led

the way and we can begin to see the food following. “In the next 20 years you’ll see a regional cuisine develop here,” he says, “which is very exciting to me personally.”

His vision for the dining experience at Wildhorse as a whole is to have the guests recognize that the food is consistently very good, where people come to Wildhorse because they know they will get great food and service. It will be a place where the adventurous diner will know something new and unique will always be found on the menus but where the traditionalist will also find familiar favorites. “A hamburger can be a great meal,” Brian says, “or even a hot dog, if you use the best ingredients and prepare it fresh.” Wildhorse will use Nathan’s Franks, he says, because they’re the best.

Although the quality will be kept uniformly high the prices will not be out of line with the rest of the dining operations in the area, he said, because Wildhorse does such a large volume.

“We get very good pricing from our vendors because of the volume and we will pass that pricing volume along to our customers. Our philosophy will be different. If you’re Wildhorse and you sell 200 or 300 of a particular steak dinner every night, versus a smaller facility that might sell a dozen, then you can get a smaller markup for each meal,” says Brian. “We in food and beverage are here to take care of the customer; not to make a killing on food.”

The buffet restaurant, *Traditions*, will be more about fun and excitement, with “action cooking stations” where guests can see their food prepared and pick the ingredients for things such as omelets, sauté dishes and gourmet pizza. “There will always be fresh Northwest ingredients available and we’ll have a special food focus each month which will be found throughout all of the casino’s dining venues,” says Brian.

In the buffet guests will be able too order their omelets or their stir-fried pasta prepared to order by selecting the ingredients from the fresh options. The basic concept will be--keep it fresh. He noted that a problem with buffets is that the ingredients sit out and become stale. “Our goal,” he says, “will be to ensure that doesn’t happen.” On the other side of the buffet restaurant guests can watch as their salmon or steak is grilled in front of them, where the guest can interact with the cook to get it just the way they like it.

Wildhorse’s new fine-dining restaurant, *Plateau*, Brian believes, will help the casino attract some people who are new to the resort. But at the same time, he says, the resort wants to make the fine-dining experience approachable for most of its guests. As for the selection of menu items, he believes in letting the guests help direct the options. “We’ll see what’s popular and get a feel for the things our guests like best.”

Plateau’s kitchen, located in the back of the restaurant will not be visible to guests. But there the cooks will cook excellently prepared fresh foods, with the apple wood grill being the main focus. Wildhorse will buy the wood, which comes from Washington apple orchards, by the truckload, says Brian. At the entry to the restaurant, a tiled wood-burning fireplace will greet guests. *Plateau* will also offer a private dining room with

etched glass walls that will allow diners in the private dining room to still take advantage of the views toward the mountains, which will also be enjoyed by the rest of the restaurant's guests.

The chef will also have an herb garden adjacent to the casino, to ensure fresh herbs are always available.

Coupled with the emphasis on fresh Northwest ingredients, guests will enjoy excellent service. To begin, Wildhorse has provided 2-1/2 weeks of solid training for all the employees of the restaurants, which will be completed before they open. Brian describes this as the most intensive training program he has ever been involved in prior to the opening of a new dining facility.

The cooks are spending time in culinary school while specialists in preparing and serving seafood, meat, produce and alcoholic beverages have all visited Wildhorse to provide instruction to the new and current employees who will now make up the staff at the new facilities. Brian notes that he is grateful to his supplier vendors for their support with training. Other consultants during the training period have included customer service specialists and wine experts.

Traditions is expected to open and begin serving guests by the third week of April. Other new venues opening then will include Wildfire Cabaret and Players, a stylish lounge that will include a fun and enticing bar menu, finger foods, sandwiches and salads. *Plateau* will follow shortly after.

Wildhorse Resort & Casino is the Pacific Northwest's highest paying casino, with a record \$9.3 million slot jackpot. The Resort includes a 24-hour casino, hotel, RV Park, 18-hole golf course and Tribal museum. It is located just minutes off I-84 at Exit 216, four miles east of Pendleton. For more information: 1-800-654-9453 or www.wildhorseresort.com. Wildhorse is owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

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