

Executive Chef Tim May  
April 2006

## **TIM MAY, EXECUTIVE CHEF WILD AT HEART, A CHEF IN THE WILDERNESS**

**Tofino, BC** --Tim May is wild man. Wild in a good way. Wild in an untamed, no rules, enthusiastic, unrestrained, uninhibited way. He is wild about hockey. Wild about his wife and two kids. And he is completely head-over-heels mad for his life on the wild west coast of Vancouver Island.

May sees the rugged coastline along the western fringe of Vancouver Island as nirvana for those who love to haul their dinner directly out of the ocean. As Executive Chef for Clayoquot Wilderness Resorts, his kitchen cupboard is as broad and long as Vancouver Island. His pantry encompasses the valleys, fields, bays and beaches of this magical mystical part of the planet. His "paradise found" comes from a close relationship to nature and its bounty, and to the people who harvest, and bring their food treasures right to his backdoor.

Food was not always his passion. As a youth, his life revolved around a rink. He could have been a contender. May was heading for the big leagues as a goalie. His life in a suburb of Toronto centered on hockey, family and school...in that order. The sudden death of a beloved coach sent him adrift. He quit hockey. He lost his drive and focus.

At 16 it is all about money and girls. If you can find a part-time job that has both, all the better. May hired on as a dishwasher at Ponderosa Steak House. It was the early 80's and Ponderosa was THE "family of four" dining spot in Ontario. He moved up the ranks from fry cook, to baked potato guy, to the grill line, all the while eating his teenage way through endless cans of Jell-O pudding and chocolate cream pie. Not the gourmet lineage one would expect.

Enter May's first mentor. He has many and acknowledges them all. His skill on the grill line was recognized by Fred Kolar, a consultant to Ponderosa and professor at a local community college. Kolar was heading up one of the best chef training courses in Ontario. He was always on the lookout for talent. What he saw in May was organization, timing, the ability to play on a team and an incredible work ethic. He also the beginnings of a world-class chef.

May was fast-tracked into the chef training course while still completing high school. He rode many horses. He was completing high school, training at the community college and doing his apprenticeship at a local hotel. By the time he was 18, he had graduated from high school and he was working fulltime at a large international hotel near Toronto's Pearson Airport.

He worked 26-hours-a-day and loved it. The learning curve was akin to climbing the Matterhorn. It was all about presentation, timing, inventory control and massive volume while keeping quality high. He soaked it up. He moved to another large hotel and the curve continued with expertise garnered on aspects such as ethnic and kosher cooking in large scale format. By the time May was 19, he had his "papers," but he had also had his own version of a "kitchen confidential" epiphany.

Pulling no punches, May talks about life behind the swinging doors of the big elegant hotels. The management philosophy of "yell before you ask" was wearing thin. So was the cut-throat world of back-stabbing and fending for ones self. He did not want to burn out at 22. He wanted to be true to his new love. To do that, he had to continue to learn.

May counts some of Canada's most luminary chefs as mentors. Mark McEwan of North 44. Bonnie Stern of TV, cookbook and catering fame. And Susur Lee, who has taken on rockstar status in the international world of dining as an art form.

In 1990, the winds of fate blew in. An opportunity to interview with famed Chef Bernard Casavant at Fairmont's Château Whistler came his way. He got the job and went from sous chef to chef de partie in quick order. In the words of the Buddhist proverb, "When the student is ready, the master appears" was true in the case of May meeting Casavant. To quote May, "You think you know it all and then along comes someone who inspires you to learn more and to learn forever."

Whistler was May's first introduction to "west coast cuisine." He found himself in the bread basket of the Pemberton Valley surround by organic farmers, free-run everything, year-round herb gardens, and access to fresh wild seafood only kilometres away.

His cooking mantra started to evolve. Treat food with respect. Treat the people who farm it, grow it, fish it or forage for it, with respect. Understand the climate. Smell the earth. Know the seasons. Respect them well.

More learning meant more travel. Calgary first and then back to Vancouver to work with well-respected chef Robert LeCrom and help him to open 900 West at Hotel Vancouver.

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May was garnering a name for himself and his food style. In 1998 he had come to the attention of Richard Genovese, the owner of Clayoquot Wilderness Resorts, via May's friend Rodney Butters who was working at the Wickinnish Inn at the time. Genovese had a vision for a new concept five-star wilderness resort. His dream was to gently hue an intimate resort out of the untamed landscape of Clayoquot Sound, with thoughtfulness and honour for the land, her people and its wildlife. Genovese needed a chef whose philosophy for food married with his vision for the resort.

The opportunity to "write the book" on a food story of one's own telling, is the dream of many great chefs. To be given a blank canvas and told to "go for it" to someone with May's talent, with wild dreams and wild ideas, was a gift.

Modern natural cuisine is the phrase May uses to describe his food. In a way, it does not do his talent justice. How is it that you can hold a conch shell to ones ear and hear the roar of waves? This is more fitting a description for May's food. His food is ocean, earth, sun and rain served on stunning ceramic. It is nature, the seasons and the BC's wilderness delicately coating your taste buds. It is discovering what food is supposed to taste like and feeling a sense of awe and delight in the learning. It is a soup bowl filled with history and heritage. His food is the shortest path taken between the harvest and the plate. It is food that creates memories. It is food that will bring you back...to your senses.

May has plans. This is not a man who rests on his laurels. He would like to see a cook book that deals with the wild west coast elements of food and the seasons. He wants to teach. He wants to continue to learn. These are the dreams of a man who is wild at heart and has found the perfect wilderness resort in which to run free.

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