

Client: Ivan Kane's Café Wa s

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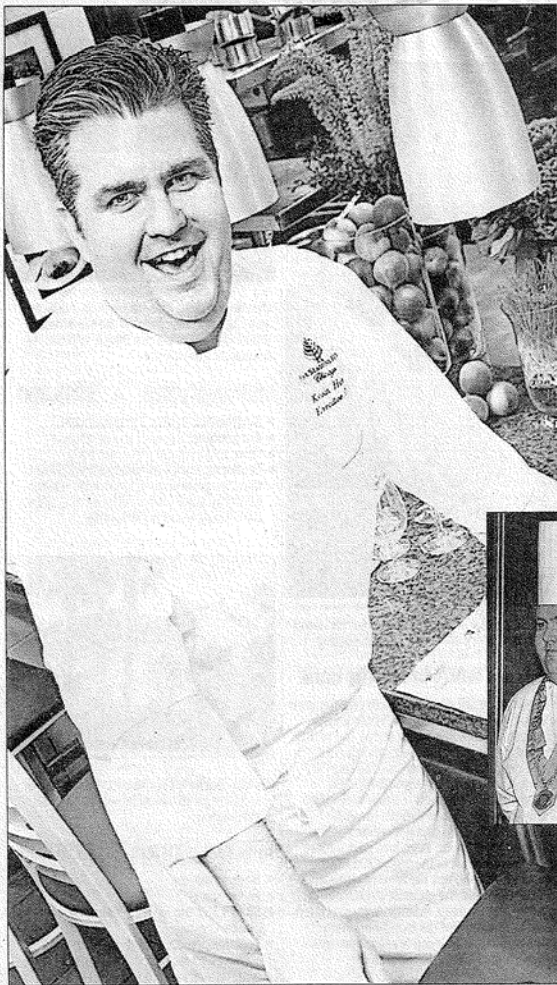
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Food & wine

Chefs cook up a weight-loss solution



Healthy eating translates to the dishes they create

By Kelly Carter
Special for USA TODAY

Kristi Ritchey bought into the stereotypical chef image — rotund belly, chin to spare — for a while. She started cooking when she was 16, went to culinary school and nine years later ballooned to 260 pounds and wore a size 26.

"Everyone says 'Don't trust a skinny chef,'" says Ritchey, 27, executive chef at Greenleaf Gourmet Chopshop in Beverly Hills. "Well, you what? I also don't like being a chef people stared at when I ate their meal. It was becoming very uncomfortable."

And unhealthy: Ritchey's wake-up call came when a prep cook rushed her to the emergency room. Now down to 150 pounds on her 5-foot-7 frame, Ritchey is among a new wave of U.S. chefs proving that size is not indicative of their talent. Not only are some losing significant weight, but their emphasis on healthier living is reflected in their menus — which means their customers reap the benefits as well.

Since losing more than 90 pounds, including 60 on an 800-calorie-a-day liquid diet, Kevin Hickey, executive chef at the Four Seasons Hotel Chicago, has "definitely added on (healthier) dishes," including a frittata made with egg whites, turkey, tofu, asparagus, low-fat mozzarella and tomato sauce.

He uses cream and butter sparingly. Instead of pan-searing his whitefish, Hickey cooks it in a stew with white beans. The liquid diet has helped him in the kitchen, where chefs agree the No. 1 rule is to taste.

"But I don't have to swallow it," Hickey says.

Although many chefs are nutrition-savvy, many acknowledge their biggest fault is not taking the time to eat balanced meals through 16- to 18-hour shifts that often extend late into the night. "My eating habits were pretty horrendous," admits Jeff Simms, executive chef of banquets at The Breakers Palm Beach. "I was eating a lot of the wrong things and not eating for a long period of time."

Two years ago, Simms carried 250 pounds on his 6-foot frame. He has since lost more than 50 pounds and cut his cholesterol count in half after attending a three-day program at the Human Performance Institute in Orlando with other top senior management from the hotel. He also has added healthier options to his buffets.



By Michael Maes

Better choice: Hickey's low-fat frittata with egg whites, turkey, asparagus, tofu and mozzarella.

Breakfast features more whole grains, homemade chicken and mango sausage and multi-grain pancakes with blackberry compote instead of a traditional syrup.

"The idea that you have to have a starch on every plate, we've changed that," Simms says. "It's really about presentation and the change of the protein."

Executive Chef Alex Reznik, 32, who has lost more than 30 pounds since 2007, created an entire French Bistro vegan/vegetarian menu for his diners at Ivan Kane's Café Wa s in Hollywood. He has made other changes to keep up with California's health-conscious diners.

"Instead of finishing risotto with 2 pounds of butter, I just cook it with a really flavorful veg stock," says Reznik, who is 6-foot-2 and now weighs 180 pounds. "It changes the flavor, but almost in a beneficial kind of way. And the same thing when I'm sautéing all my vegetables. Instead of doing everything with butter or cream, I use olive oil, canola oil or sunflower oil."

And that's a sea change for most chefs, says Ritchey, who credits Barry's Bootcamp in Southern California for her 100-pound loss. "When I first started cooking, it was all about flavor, flavor, flavor. To most chefs, flavor comes from fat, whether it's butter or a lot of cheese," she says. "I had to relearn how to eat. Doing that made me open my eyes to the food I was cooking."

Ritchey helped Greenleaf owner Jonathan Rollo develop the signature salads at the year-old eatery. She calls the Caesar and Buffalo Wings salads the "gateway" salads, used to lure those who usually don't eat salads to try one before she steers them to lighter options. She has watched clients go from eating the Buffalo Wings salad to the Farm Fresh, 300 to 400 calories lower and made with beans, tomatoes, garbanzo beans and goat cheese and topped with mayonnaise-free tuna salad.

"It's why I love being a part of Greenleaf because it's something that's out there that is trying to help people be healthier," she says. "When that day comes when I own my own restaurant, it's going to be one where you're going to find things on the healthier side."

"I want to help others the way that I've been helped and pay it forward."

After: Four Seasons Chicago chef Kevin Hickey revamped his eating habits and even went on a liquid diet to lose more than 90 pounds. He uses cream and butter sparingly in his kitchen.

By Tyler Curtis

Four Seasons