

PHOTOGRAPHY

All about Adam



WITH A JAMES BEARD AWARD UNDER HIS BELT AND TWO BIG-TIME RESTAURANT KITCHENS AT HIS COMMAND, CHEF ADAM SIEGEL'S STAR IS SERIOUSLY ON THE RISE
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While some of us ease into the week, Monday mornings find Adam Siegel bursting with energy, ready to start a typical 12-hour shift as executive chef of not one but two Milwaukee restaurants. Siegel's days are filled with menu development, testing and supervising his team of sous chefs, who strive to perfectly execute Siegel's recipes.

Seated in the bar at Bacchus, a Continental-style eatery on the lower East Side (his other spot is nearby Bartolotta's Lake Park Bistro), Siegel's casual demeanor contrasts with the sleek, retro-cosmopolitan vibe of the space. It's here where he dreams up sublime small plates like beer cheese soup and foie gras with cherries, French toast and quail egg.

What's his secret? "I wait for each day to come to me and then I tackle it," Siegel says. Considered one of the city's best chefs, Siegel received wider recognition when he won the James Beard Award for Best Chef Midwest in 2008. It marked only the third time a chef from Wisconsin had won the prestigious award (Odessa Piper, formerly of L'Etoile in Madison, and Sandy D'Amato of Milwaukee's Sanford preceded him).



EXECUTIVE CHEF ADAM SIEGEL
IN THE KITCHEN OF BACCHUS.
OPPOSITE: PEPPER-CRUSTED
TUNA ATOP AN ARUGULA-
FENNEL SALAD WITH CITRUS
VINAIGRETTE AND PICOILLO
PEPPERS



Siegel exudes cool confidence running the show. It's a slow night due to a late winter blizzard, and as he strolls the stations, he chats up the cooks and sips coffee from a goblet (a nightly habit, he says). He never raises his voice or expresses concern—he's got everything under control and he knows it. His attitude rings not as cocky, but relaxed. "I'm sitting here waiting for it to get going," he says, referring to the rush of orders that will soon hit.

When orders start to arrive, he reads each one in a commanding, articulate voice, and the chefs, in turn, lean forward attentively. "I want them to do this from memory," he says—and they do. Afterward, Siegel gives their culinary creations a once-over to ensure their quality.

Siegel's kitchen abilities were developed from a young age. His stepfather owned a restaurant in the Chicago area, so he was exposed early on to the idea of a culinary career and had no fear of cooking his own meals. "It was easier to make it myself than to ask for it," he explains. "If my mom was busy doing something, I wasn't afraid to go into the kitchen, turn on the stove and crack an egg. I was always the kid that wanted to be in the kitchen helping out." Not satisfied with being kitchen assistant, he enrolled at Chicago's School of Culinary Arts at Kendall College and worked at Chicago's famed four-star Italian spot Spiaggia. After graduation in 1994, his career path led him to Florida, Italy, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and, ultimately, Milwaukee.

He came to Wisconsin 10 years ago at the urging of Paul Bartolotta, a James Beard Award-winning chef himself and a mentor for Siegel when the young chef worked under Bartolotta at Spiaggia. Bartolotta and his brother Joe, Milwaukee natives, own The Bartolotta Restaurant Group, which comprises five Milwaukee area restaurants, including Bacchus and Lake Park Bistro, where the brothers gladly put Siegel in charge.

Besides Siegel's penchant for locally inspired dishes—like an all-Wisconsin cheese plate and area pasture-raised lamb and veal—Siegel incorporates European-style savvy gleaned from a year cooking at Ristorante San Domenico di Imola in Italy, a brief tenure at La Regalade and L'Ardoise in Paris, and regular culinary missions to France and Italy. "I have



Siegel recalls the day he heard about the award: "That was quite a shocker. It was the furthest thing from my mind when I found out," he says. "I didn't even know I was nominated. It brought a revival in me, to be recognized by my peers." But he's being modest. Siegel's star was already rising by then: In 2006 he had graced the cover of USA Weekend, offering readers tips on meat and gravy for holiday entertaining, and he's also been written up in *Travel + Leisure*.

Despite the accolades, Siegel has chosen to remain in Milwaukee, a city that's "a lot more worldly than people can imagine," he says. Though small compared to Chicago or New York City (where his wife hails from), "It's an easy place to live," he explains. "It's considered a big city, but you never feel like it's a big city. I like having a more mellow pace of life." Siegel, who has two children, professes to be a family man. His favorite things to do on a rare day off? Building with Legos with his 9-year-old son and, yes, spending time in the kitchen with his family. "They like to get into the kitchen too. ... There's always some kind of cooking going on in our house."

Siegel is clearly at home in any kitchen. On a recent weekday evening at Bacchus,

"My approach always with food is simplicity," says Siegel. "I like all the flavors to blend and marry well together, and not overpower."



very strong European training, so I bring that in here, mainly based on seasonality and what's available," Siegel says. "My approach always with food is simplicity. I like all the flavors to blend and marry well together—and not overpower."

Siegel's continued dedication to his craft has earned him high marks not only with customers, but with the Bartolottas. In 2005, Paul Bartolotta flew Siegel and several other Bartolotta Group chefs to Las Vegas to help open Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare at the Wynn Resort.

"Adam was awesome," says Bartolotta; "he jumped in on the meat station." They worked from early morning to the wee hours of the night, cooking for celebrities like Manolo Blahnik, Steven Spielberg and Barbara Walters. "At the end of the day, these guys were walking back to their hotel ... They never asked for cab fare or anything. Without Adam and the rest of the team, I would not have had that successful of an opening. It was kind of like putting the band back together."

Having Siegel man the two restaurants in Milwaukee is a huge relief for the

Bartolottas. "With Adam in Milwaukee, I don't need to be there as often," says Paul. "I'm allowed to live my life the way I want because of Adam ... and we have a ball together. We've been friends for 15 years now."

"Either you have it or you don't," Bartolotta says. "And [Adam] has tremendous drive and passion, and an amazing work ethic."

That passion has helped build Bacchus into one of the city's most popular spots, but Siegel isn't sitting on his laurels. Ongoing menu tweaks include a new seasonal cocktail menu, featuring a series of dinners that pair five courses with hand-crafted drinks.

Fancy cocktails and foie gras aside, Siegel himself is very down-to-earth. One of his favorite indulgences, in fact, is an old classic: "I'm a PB and J kind of guy," he says. "I love those. And game meat." It's this approachable personality combined with an appreciation for fine foods—not to mention that get-up-and-go energy, even on Mondays—that has earned Bacchus and Lake Park Bistro their acclaim, with Siegel decidedly at the helm.

GETTING READY FOR SERVICE AT BACCHUS. OPPOSITE FROM TOP: VEAL CHOP WITH BABY POTATO SALAD AND MUSTARD VINAGRETTE; PREPARING A COCKTAIL IN THE FRONT BAR AT BACCHUS

ESSENTIALS

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