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Hotel Chef Josh Thomsen of The Claremont Hotel Club & Spa

June 2010

Biography

While some young boys dream of becoming astronauts or ball players, Josh Thomsen's sixth grade yearbook listed chef as his career of choice. This New Jersey native and graduate of The Culinary Institute of America credits his ambitions to his father, an accomplished home cook.

Thomsen honed his skills with some of the most prominent chefs in the country, kicking off his career at the Hotel Bel-Air and *Pinot Bistro* in Southern California. He then relocated to Aspen to work at the Little Nell Hotel before moving to Napa to work at *The French Laundry* under Thomas Keller, whom he credits as a major influence on his career.

After two years in Napa, Thomsen was drawn to the lights and culinary hot spots of Las Vegas. There he continued to build his resume at the exclusive "Mansion" at MGM and at Michael Mina's *Nobhill Tavern*. An opportunity at The Lodge at Pebble Beach lured him back to the California coast, but in a few years he was back on the strip as corporate executive chef for Innovative Dining Group. He also helped open the 400-seat Tao restaurant at the Venetian.

In his current role as executive chef at the Claremont Hotel Club & Spa, Thomsen oversees the food and beverage program, including *Paragon Bar and Café* and the recently opened *Meritage* restaurant. Here, he offers a seasonal farm-to-table menu of contemporary California cuisine with an emphasis on locally-sourced ingredients.

Interview

Will Blunt: What inspired you to pursue cooking?

Josh Thomsen: My love of food emanates from my father, Jerry. My sixth grade yearbook says future chef, so either so far so good or I'm stuck in a rut. Two weeks out of high school, I enrolled in CIA. I went right in. I always wanted to do it.

Dad would have every food magazine known to man. He would come home after being a stock broker, and 52 dirty pots and pans later... dinner was always amazing. It was a blast; it was fun. We would go to a restaurant and he would try to send a drink back to the kitchen. My 16th birthday we went to *Lutèce* of André Soltner. I was like "this is so fun." This isn't work, you want to pay me to do this? The meal was incredible, he took the order hand written. I remember my mother saying she wasn't sure if this was something her son should get into. His words back were you have to be married to it.

When I meet younger people who want to get into the business you have to say that to them, but they don't understand. It's unfortunate. The job for us is to find those people who are like us, who eat, drink, and sleep it. It can be grueling for the senses.

WB: Tell us about the evolution of your career. How did you get to where you are now?

JT: At 15 years old, the only place that would hire me was *Friendly's* in Hillsdale, NJ, making chocolate fribbles, out of the bag, into the fryer. You get speed from that. You gain something, oddly enough. Then I went to *Woodcliff Lake Hilton* and I was a grunt in the kitchen. I remember leaving parties in high school because I had to work Sunday brunch. But I fell in love with it. I was bitten so long ago. I was a kid who would have collected baseball cards for chefs if they had them. My mom would get everyone who went out to eat to bring me back a menu. It grew from there and it was like maybe I should do this professionally.

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Recipe

Goat Cheese-Potato Terrine, Slow Roasted Baby Beets, and Aged Balsamic Syrup

Photos

Chef Josh Thomsen of Claremont Hotel Club & Spa 
Claremont Hotel Club & Spa 

I went to the CIA, and that was it. I did my externship at the *Hotel Bel Air* in LA. You had Wolfgang Puck at *Spago* and Michel Richard at *Citrus* and Joachim Splichal at *Patina* whom I worked for. I spent a lot of my career in California. (I never worked on the East Coast or in New York, having been born and raised there.)

I feel very blessed to have worked at *French Laundry* at a time when [Thomas Keller] only had one restaurant and there were only 15 kitchen employees. Every night we would sit around the table and plan the menu for the next day and take everybody's input.

WB: Who have been some of your mentors?

JT: I worked with Thomas [Keller] from 1994 to 1996, then went back to *Hotel Bel Air* as chef de cuisine. I've done three stints there. It's such an amazing property. Everybody stayed there; [it was like] lifestyles of the rich and famous. They had just built this glass-enclosed chefs' table called Table One. It was a lot of fun.

I had spoken to Michael Mina. I knew him because he was at the *Bel Air* back in the day. Michael was opening *Nobhill Tavern* at MGM and I was looking for a change, and he said "help me do this." I was the executive sous chef with no chef, but five sous chefs. He was the chef because he just started to blow up. It was a blast.

I came to *The Lodge at Pebble Beach* to work with Executive Chef Jeff Jake as executive sous chef of the property. He was a true "working chef," he was in the kitchen cleaning and cooking alongside you.

WB: Describe the extent of your food and beverage operation here. Do you do catering, banquets, and room service?

JT: There are 279 rooms plus 33,000 square feet of banquet space. We've got three restaurants but only two are really open to the public. The *Bay View Café* is open to members and hotel guests. (The pool scene from *Mrs. Doubtfire* was filmed there.)

In the summertime it's really going to kick in—outdoor grill, sandwiches, salads. *Paragon Bar & Grill* sort of has a little Southern flare to the menu with items like Sloppy Joe Sliders and Gumbo, as well as plate du jours that have a huge local following. A Jazz band plays Friday and Saturday nights and it's fun and lively. Then there's the signature restaurant *Meritage*. I'm the executive chef of the property but also chef here. I have one sous chef, Manlee, and then seven hardworking guys and girls in the kitchen.

WB: What are your sales? Which of the food and beverage operations requires the most energy, is the biggest income earner?

JT: Revenue here in this restaurant is \$4.3 million. There have been banquets since the day I got here. We just did multiple parties of 300 people [a day] for five straight days. I've never seen it not be busy. I just rolled out the brand new banquet menus that are incredibly seasonal. Room service is obviously a lot bigger on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. There's definitely a million dollars made from room service. It stops at midnight. I'm looking to have overnight cooks stay longer because there's more production value.

WB: Do you have any non-union employees?

JT: Everybody is a union employee except the manager. My sous chef is a salaried manager. Aside from that everybody, all of my line cooks, are union. It's difficult but you find a way to do it. In an eight-hour shift, they have to take a half hour break and two 15 minutes. They come in for eight hours and work for seven hours. We open at 6pm. They get in at 3pm or 4pm to be ready by 6pm. We've been successful in managing.

We're cooking different food and cooking fresh food and we lowered prices on top of that, because you want people who are locals. I want people to come here for special occasion or for no occasion at all. It's a hotel but locals sustain the business. *Meritage* is a new restaurant but the staff has never changed. It's the same employees cooking better food. You don't reinvent the wheel you just spin it in a different direction. A lot of my staff have been here 4 years to 22 years.

Take my garde manger guy, Kitty—he's 62 years old and he bangs out those terrines like nobody's business. If my staff sees something fresher and newer—whether it be a product or a procedure—they're excited about doing something different as long as you're giving them the support. I don't want people to do something I'm not willing to do myself. I break down the boxes, organize the produce, or clean out the walk-in—it's relaxing. It's fun organizing and labeling. Anytime I would go and ask somebody to go do that now they would never say no. There's no way Gordon Ramsay on *Hell's Kitchen* would survive here. You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

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