

Chef Jeff

Love of food that started in grandma's kitchen leads Jeff Sommer to Wildhorse

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Jeff Sommer doesn't eat lunch — at least not in the conventional way.

The new executive chef at the Wildhorse Resort & Casino gets his midday calories by tasting food prepared by his sous chefs and line cooks. On a recent day, he wandered through the main kitchen, sniffing and tasting. The room was organized chaos at its finest, though he assured this was nothing compared with preparations for a large banquet. "It gets really crazy in here," he said.

Sommer looked the part with double-breasted white chef's coat, black apron, black slacks and shiny shoes. He stands 6 foot, 4 inches — so tall that he bumps a traditional chef hat against oven hoods and other low-hanging encroachments. Years ago, he traded his chef hat for a black beanie.

Sommer skirted an extensive assortment of ranges, fryers, grills, broilers and the cooks tending them. The whirl of fans mixed with the sound of chopping, stirring and blending. Chef Jeff, as people call him, paused to sample from a pot of huckleberry barbecue sauce.

"The huckleberry isn't strong enough," he advised the cook. "The acidity is there. The sweetness is there. The horseradish is overpowering the huckleberry."

Sommer didn't come off as imperious, just helpful and encyclopedic.

He chatted with another cook who prepared pork loin for pork verde, and then eyeballed a pan of bread pudding and a plate of cinnamon-encrusted tortillas. He tasted from simmering pots of cioppino and jambalaya and offered ideas on how to tweak the flavor.

Such is the life of an executive chef.

Sommer comes to Wildhorse via New Orleans where he was executive chef at the Loews Hotel, a luxury hotel where he learned about Cajon cooking and other regional cuisine. His resume also includes chef at the Overlook Club House on the Reynolds Plantation in Greensboro, Georgia, and various chef positions with the Ritz-Carlton company.

Sommer's love of food and cooking kicked in during boyhood. At his grandparents lakeside cottage in Wisconsin, he learned to prepare fish he and his grandfather pulled from the lake. In the winter, they prepared venison and sauerkraut braised rabbit with game they had hunted themselves. He learned to butcher, smoke and cure. The boy also spent time with his grandmother and mother, tending garden and working in the kitchen.

"I made zucchini bread and jams and jellies with them," Sommer said.

He tried new things on his own, though he admits "some of it got fed to the dog."

See CHEF/4C



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Wildhorse Resort & Casino's new executive chef Jeff Sommer has a long pedigree in the kitchen that includes working in the Ritz-Carlton chain of hotels.

"In this career, you're never going to stop learning. There's always something new out there every day."

— Jeff Sommer, executive chef at Wildhorse Resort & Casino



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
Executive chef Jeff Sommer tastes a cioppino, a San Francisco based seafood stew, while making the rounds in the main kitchen at Wildhorse resort on Wednesday in Mission.