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Great Cooks Think Alike

By Laura Donnelly

(7/08/2008) Jeff Salaway always knew what he wanted for his children and the other students at the Hayground School: an education that was fun and experiential, not static like the public school education he received growing up in Yonkers.



Morgan McGivern Photos

Joey Realmuto, the chef at Nick and Toni's, worked with a student in Jeff's Kitchen at the Hayground School.

He felt equally passionate about the food they ate. When he saw one student's lunch of canned ravioli and white bread, he ran off to make him a proper, nutritious lunch.

The Hayground School in Bridgehampton opened 12 years ago, and Jeff Salaway was killed in a car accident 5 years later. At the time of his death, he was working on building a kitchen for the school. He envisioned a garden, greenhouse, and cafeteria in which students could learn to appreciate where their food came from as well as the importance of healthy eating.

In 2003 Mr. Salaway's friends, family, and colleagues banded together to plan a fund-raiser to make Jeff's Kitchen a reality. Lizz Salaway, his sister, said that they figured it would take quite a few years to raise enough money, but that the first event would be a good start.

They knew Mr. Salaway was highly regarded by his fellow restaurateurs, but they had no idea how much. The first fund-raiser, held at the Five Points restaurant in Manhattan, and featuring his friends Bobby Flay, Larry Forgione, Marc Meyer, and Jonathan Waxman, raised over \$300,000, enough to build the kitchen. Five years later the school has several gardens, a budding culinary education program, and a greenhouse that was recently donated by the Slow Food movement.

There will be another Great Chefs fund-raiser on Sunday at Nick and Toni's restaurant in East Hampton (details are in the benefits calendar on C14). The core group of chefs who were friends of Mr. Salaway's are once again participating, along with some other culinary luminaries who didn't even know him.

Eric Ripert, the Frenchman wowing customers at Le Bernardin in New York City, has a house in Noyac. He plans to make lobster with white asparagus and gribiche sauce. "I love Nick and Toni's," he said. "I didn't know Jeff but I have heard so much about him. It is a pleasure to be able to participate."



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Tom Colicchio, a chef (Craft in New York City), author, and a judge on “Top Chef,” the cooking competition show on Bravo, spends a lot of his life traveling among Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Even so, he had time to talk about his old friend.

“I loved him,” Mr. Colicchio said. “Cooking for this event is the least I can do. I also like the fact that all of the money goes to Jeff’s Kitchen, not some large organization.”

Lately Alfred Portale of Gotham Bar and Grill has been creating new recipes and menus for Singapore Airlines. He has participated in every fund-raiser, except one, for Jeff’s Kitchen so far. He also has offered cooking demonstrations at the Hayground School.



The school’s garden is part of the culinary curriculum developed by Miche Bacher and Joey Realmuto for Hayground students.

“ He was such a great friend,” Mr. Portale said. “He was dynamic and had a generous, generous heart. One of the things that appealed to me most about him was that he studied sculpture. They are all really good friends of mine, everyone at Nick and Toni’s. Joey, Mark, Toni, Kirsten, Bonnie.”

Miche Bacher is a parent at the school and a pastry chef whose company, Sacred Sweets, will help the Hayground students make food for the benefit. Along with Joey Realmuto, the executive chef at Nick and Toni’s, she has helped devise a culinary curriculum for the sixth through eighth grades.

Starting with knife skills and kitchen safety, then moving on to soups and stocks and vinaigrettes and roasting and braising, she sees the kitchen as “a great big metaphor for life.”

“Be prepared. Mise en place: Everything in its place,” she said. “The garden teaches the children cause and effect. They learn about biology, sociology, anthropology. Last year we studied grain-based societies. They learned about why different cultures eat spicy foods.”

“I wish Jeff could have known Miche,” said Toni Ross, Mr. Salaway’s widow and one of the founders of Hayground. “He really wanted kids to understand where food comes from. Kids have lost touch with food nowadays.”

“He was fascinated with food science and anthropology,” she continued. “There was always a big stack of books by our bed. He was reading ‘The History of God’ and ‘The History of Cod’ at the same time! When we first formed a committee to start the school, all of our discussions and ‘disagreements’ were resolved around food, sitting down and sharing a meal.”

“He wanted us to realize where we put our energy,” said Jon Snow, another founder of the school, who remembers many discussions with Jeff about what he envisioned for the students.

“Jeff had his finger on something that transcends elementary education and food itself,” Mr. Snow said. “He didn’t want his children to have the same experience. He wanted them to have the unifying experience of growing and cooking and learning to appreciate eating together.”

When Hayground students attend the benefit, which will feature their pistachio-rose shortbread in the gift bags, they may be unaware of the reputations of the

chefs they are working with: Toshio Tomita of Nobu restaurants, Laurent Tourondel of BLT restaurants, and all the others.

Mr. Realmuto has created a curriculum for the students, and he and Ms. Bacher hope that a full-time culinary program could be the next step, along with a cafeteria for the students.

Asked what she thought her brother would have said about how far Jeff's Kitchen has come, she said, "Thank you. I'm sorry it's not me there with you."

"But I gave you an idea and I'm glad. Wow!"

