

Lauren Rigney
Word Count: 1,904

Name: Robert Wemischner
Date of Birth: July 11, 1951
Hometown: Springfield New Jersey
Current Residence: West Los Angeles
Education: University of Pennsylvania Class of 1972, B.A. in Asian Studies
Profession: Culinary educator, food writer
Interesting Fact: His least favorite dessert to prepare is cheesecake



Amidst a sea of impressively white chef coats and matching caps, a single hat clearly stands out at an easy half foot taller than the rest. The man beneath the hat is furrowing his brow, his thin frame hunched over a wooden prep table to concentrate on his demo of a strawberry custard tart.

The sticky hot classroom he's working in is chaotic and stridently loud, but a small group of students is patiently gathered round to jot notes and snap pictures of the dessert with their cell phones.

Occasionally, someone from the other side of the room shouts “Chef Bob! Chef Bob!” and interrupts the flow of his tart demo to ask if their own pie is ready to take out of the oven or if their meringue will be true to form. Barely raising one of his bushy eyebrows, 58-year-old Robert Wemischner responds to each question in a cool, collected voice just loud enough to be heard over the classroom chaos.

“His multi-tasking abilities are amazing,” student Charlene Patterson gushed. “He’ll be doing something and then somebody’s gonna say, ‘Chef Bob, I gotta tell you something,’ and he’ll say, ‘Yes, I’m listening,’ and he’s actually listening!”

Patterson is one of the 35 students in Wemischner’s first semester baking course at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College, where he’s been teaching since 1991. Students can graduate with a certificate in professional baking in two years, and at a price of \$20 per unit, they’ll spend less than \$1,100 for their education. Contrast this to cross town rival, Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts, where students are set back nearly \$28,000 for a comparable diploma in patisserie and baking.

“It’s a different, much more privileged environment,” Wemischner says of Le Cordon Bleu. “Just because you’re paying a lot doesn’t mean you’re passionate, and just because you’re paying very little doesn’t mean you’re not.”

As an affordable community college in downtown Los Angeles, Wemischner’s classes at Trade-Tech attract an incredibly diverse array of students. And their motives for studying professional baking are just as diverse as they are.

Some, such as Patterson, are fresh out of high school and want to study something fun and interesting. Others in the class have had more than a few jobs and are back in school to learn a new trade or pursue their near-abandoned dream of opening a bakery or catering company.

“I’ve had husbands and wives. I’ve had sisters and brothers. I’ve had autistic, I’ve had blind,” Wemischner says of his students. “There’s no barriers at a public school. There are many cases reinventing themselves from previous life, which could be anything from being in jail, to addiction, to trouble with the law.”

Wemischner, who’s frequently described in the classroom as a role model, often forms strong friendships with his pupils. He currently corresponds with a former student who’s been in prison for the past five years. “He will be out this year and he promises in his letters he’s coming back to Chef Bob,” Wemischner says.

Despite the nearing of his twentieth anniversary at Trade-Tech, Wemischner’s own culinary path began far away from Los Angeles, and reads somewhat like a gastronomic novella.

To talk through his mazy past, he takes me to the Trade-Tech cafeteria and orders a plate of roasted Brussels sprouts for lunch. His chef coat stays on, but the tall hat is removed to show a crown of snow-colored hair.

Wemischner was born and raised in New Jersey. When his mother died at a young age, two aunts stepped in to care of him and his older sister, Marge. These are the same women that would later on help him open his first catering company.

According to Marge, Wemischner was a very curious child, but food was just one of his many interests. He enjoyed the arts from a young age, and his mother would often take the two kids into New York City to watch theater.

“He was very crafty. Arts and crafts were his thing, so the food business was an avenue to take,” Marge says.

Wemischner began experimenting in the kitchen as a young adult, but it wasn’t until he attended the University of Pennsylvania that his interest in food became a full-fledged passion.

As an Asian Studies major, he spent a lot of time with the university's Japanese community, and together they'd often drink green tea. Not content with simply drinking tea as a casual pastime, he turned his interest into a personal pursuit. In 2000, 38 years after graduating from Penn, Wemischner published a cookbook titled "Cooking With Tea," which has led him to many adventures, including visiting tea estates in India as an official guest of the Indian government.

When he wasn't studying or dining out with friends who appreciated quality cuisine as much as he did, Wemischner spent his time editing and writing for a student-run magazine called "34th Street." He was the magazine's Associate Editor, and shamelessly used this position to meet up with some of the largest names in the food industry.

"I had a goal to apprentice myself to good chefs. I met a lot of very influential people in the food world who I had the guts to contact and say, 'I want to interview you.'"

Among those he met were Gael Greene, who served as the New York Magazine restaurant critic for 30 years, and America's first male food critic, Craig Claiborne, who wrote for The New York Times. Claiborne even invited Wemischner to his East Hampton home for a meal prepared by his personal chef.

Realizing at this point in life that he wanted to make a career out of his passion for food, Wemischner asked his new friends in the industry to reach out to their connections in France, where he hoped to apprentice.

While his classmates spent their summers working for minimum wage or soaking up the early seventies, Wemischner was in Lyon, laboring in the kitchens of France's top chefs. He casually name drops Alain Chapel, former Michelin three-star restaurant owner, and Paul

Bocuse, whose cooking earned him the French Legion of Honor, which is the highest decoration awarded by the French government to a citizen.

“It was peeling vegetables. In France there’s quite a hierarchy of training. You’re at the low bottom of the totem pole so you’re watching and you’re learning, and you’re observing. It was a very humbling experience, but a great educational one,” Wemischner says.

His apprenticeships also offered him a new appreciation and reverence for fresh food. The only problem was, when he came home to the States at the end of each summer, he returned to a nation that was still stuck on canned foods and casseroles.

“We weren’t ready for what I had seen there,” Wemischner says. “I came back very excited about opening a specialty foods store, gourmet to go, catering, and then the first stumbling block was the ingredients aren’t available here. You could not get fresh basil!” He says emphatically, hands banging on the table.

Despite Americans’ overall disinterest in fresh food and gourmet cooking at this time, he was determined to open people’s minds and lead them to the light of his kitchen.

Immediately after graduating from Penn in 1972, a 20-year-old Wemischner opened a catering company in New Jersey with a little financial help from his aunts. Marge worked for Wemischner, helping where needed and learning from him about food.

“I think it was a very good thing. He was just starting to build his pyramid, and being young you can learn a lot from your experiences,” says Marge, who still makes many of Wemischner’s recipes from their catering days.

The brother-sister duo united again in 1975 to start another food business – this time in Beverly Hills, California. Wemischner says that after his time abroad, he was set on opening a “gourmet to go” shop based on the ones he saw in Europe. The idea was to offer busy

professionals a place to pick up or stop by for a quick, but gourmet, fresh meal – much like the tens of cafes that now line streets like Rodeo Drive.

But back in 1976, when Le Grand Buffet officially opened its doors, customers were hesitant to taste Wemischner's French specialties, such as duck pates and garden salads packed with fruits, nuts and other seasonal ingredients.

"You get a big surprise when there's a lot of education needing to be done, because people were not ready for what I had in mind. This is what I saw everyday in France, but here that was such a rarity. You really had to sample it out, taste it out," says Wemischner.

Le Grand Buffet marked its place in Beverly Hills, but the long hours and high stress did not lend itself to raising a family. He married Penn classmate Leslie in 1982, and after closing the shop in 1985, Wemischner later became father to a son and a daughter.

Marge says that because her brother is so family oriented, it seemed natural for him to take on a teaching position. Trade-Tech first seemed like a good option because the four day work week and eight month school year gave him more time at home.

But now that both his kids are away at college, Wemischner fills his free time writing and promoting his four books. "It's a nice balance because the writing feeds the teaching, and the teaching feeds the writing. It's a back and forth. What I write about I use in my teaching, and what I'm teaching leads me to questions that I need to answer in my writing."

Back in the classroom, students are brimming with their own questions for Wemischner. With such an assorted student body in such an atypical classroom, patience is golden.

He stops by a group making whipped cream to point out that it's granulated, not powdered sugar, that they should be using. And when one girl pulls a soupy custard out of the oven, he softly tells her that they'll try again tomorrow, this time with more eggs.

“I’ve made this class my focus of these months because I know what a treasure he is. He’s a lemon, squeeze him,” student Susan Silverberg says.

Wemischner’s most recent book, “The Dessert Architect,” shows off his technical skills as a pastry chef. This isn’t a cookbook filling the shelves of soccer mom; it’s being used as a textbook in advanced baking classes across the country.

“He thinks outside of the box. He has a very, very, very complex mindset that makes him very talented in the field of baking and cooking,” Marge says.

Older sisters may like to brag, but Wemischner has proved that his wit carries outside of the kitchen. A trivia buff and puzzle fanatic, he’s been doing a daily crossword puzzle since junior high, and has competed in the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. Marge claims he can finish the New York Times puzzle in less than five minutes.

Wemischner says there’s a relevance to his two talents. “The kind of intelligence you need, the kind of detail-consciousness you need to do that [crosswords], is very related to pastry and dessert.”

While crosswords will most likely remain a hobby for Wemischner, his passion for food only seems to be growing. He has another book coming out next year and is frequently seen around Los Angeles speaking or stepping in as guest chef.

Bibliography

Robert Wemischner

- Spoke in person on February 23rd at L.A. Trade-Tech College and on March 6th at a café in Venice
- Emailed each other upwards of 10 times

Marge Zacharczyk (Sister of Robert)

- Spoke on the phone on March 16th (Marge lives in Washington)

Susan Silverberg (Robert's student)

- Spoke in person on February 23rd in the Trade-Tech classroom

Charlene Patterson (Robert's student)

- Spoke in person on February 23rd in the Trade-Tech classroom

Starvis Rogers (Robert's student)

- Spoke in person on February 23rd in the Trade-Tech classroom

Nato Sanchez (Robert's student)

- Spoke in person on February 23rd in the Trade-Tech classroom

Rodney Veal (Robert's student)

- Spoke in person on February 23rd in the Trade-Tech classroom