# [***FRIENDLY COMPETITION;***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:47MP-2N80-0094-D1DB-00000-00&context=1516831) [***FORMER SCHOOLMATES TAKE DIFFERENT PATHS TO RESTAURANT WORLD***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:47MP-2N80-0094-D1DB-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

At a table in the St. Christopher's School cafeteria, Chris Schlesinger and Steve Johnson forged a friendship that took them to picnics, pig roasts and beach parties at Sandbridge.

Nearly 30 years later, they still meet for meals - but they are more likely to eat Schlesinger's chili-glazed jumbo shrimp or Johnson's five spice-smoked spareribs with ginger, soy and sesame. Each one has become an award-winning chef and restaurateur in the Boston area.

Though they own competing restaurants in Cambridge, Mass., they are such good friends that Schlesinger knows Johnson's home, restaurant and ***cell phone*** numbers by heart. When they get together, they might tease each other about inhaling Jell-O years ago, but more than likely, they talk shop.

With his animated gestures and easy laugh, Schlesinger is a natural raconteur. Johnson, a former French language and literature major who lived in France for a few years, is more reflective but equally articulate. Both are somewhat amazed to find themselves at the forefront of one of the nation's most vibrant restaurant scenes outside of New York and San Francisco. Their Southern accents may have faded, but both are still influenced by their Virginia roots.

Both chefs have become well-known through their restaurants, as well as their appearances at Boston charity events. "Both Chris and Steve have really helped mold Boston's cuisine scene. They both have a strong sense of who they are as restaurateurs and chefs," said Ellen Albertson, co-host with her husband of "The Cooking Couple" show, a popular Boston radio program about food. "Chris has been a major force in mentoring many chefs who have gone on to open their own successful restaurants. Steve has been a pioneer in the area of world cuisine."

Neither imagined becoming a professional chef when he graduated from St. Christopher's in 1974. "A chef was not the proper career path to choose," said Schlesinger, whose extended family includes Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Chris' only hint of his future career was the Kool-Aid stand he set up one summer on Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg, where he grew up. "I guess my entrepreneurial spirit was strong, because I had three kids working for me. One day, we made $300." When officials shut down the stand, Schlesinger posed in the stocks for a picture in the local newspaper.

After dropping out of college, Schlesinger started restaurant work by chance when his grandmother told him of an opening at Blue Petes, a fried seafood emporium in Virginia Beach, near the family's vacation house. He started washing dishes, and, to his surprise, thrived in the fast-paced atmosphere. "What drove me then, and still does today, is that I love being in the kitchen," he said. He eventually went on to earn a degree from the Culinary Institute of America.

After traveling and surfing around the world, Schlesinger settled in Boston, opening The East Coast Grill and Raw Bar in 1985. The window is playfully decorated with neon red flames and a blue cocktail glass. The menu - mostly grilled foods with bold flavors, emphasizing locally caught seafood - is written on a chalkboard. In 1996, the James Beard Foundation named Schlesinger Best Chef in the Northeast. Until a few months ago, Schlesinger also owned for several years a second restaurant, The Back Eddy in coastal Westport, Mass.

Though Schlesinger spent several years behind the stove, he now lets other chefs cook most nights, while he focuses on running the business and related projects. He has co-authored eight cookbooks and dozens of articles with John Willoughby, now executive editor of Gourmet magazine. Their first book, "The Thrill of the Grill" (William Morrow, 1990), has become a classic introduction to barbecue and grill techniques. When the book was first published, Schlesinger sent a copy to his English teacher at St. Christopher's who mistook him for a foreign student because his writing was so clumsy.

Schlesinger and Johnson stayed in touch over the years, especially as they both started careers in the food industry. "Chris was one of the first people I knew to go to cooking school," said Johnson, picking up the story. "It was more mainstream to do as I did. I worked at a restaurant and then took it from there."

"Yeah," Schlesinger said, jokingly. "You were too busy going to college first." Johnson's first job was at Grace Place in Richmond, a natural foods restaurant in the Fan that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s. He then became a caterer in Vermont before moving to Boston and working for some of the city's up-and-coming chefs.

When Johnson was shopping for a restaurant of his own, by coincidence, Schlesinger was ready to sell The Blue Room, another restaurant he owned. Johnson kept the name, and became chef and co-owner with partners in 1996. He uses a wood grill to create New England-, Mediterranean-, Latin- and Asian-accented dishes with top-of-the-line ingredients. Working closely with a group of chefs who support local agriculture, he makes a point of ordering New England-grown ingredients. In 2001, Boston magazine named him the best chef in the city.

On a typical Saturday night, Johnson gracefully glides from dining room to kitchen, his white chef's coat gleaming under halogen lights turned low. The exposed brick walls and bare beams look a bit like a renovated Shockhoe Slip warehouse. He is clearly in his element as he checks in with customers, inspects finished plates and restocks supplies as cooks bustle in the restaurant's open kitchen. "Running one restaurant really well is what I want to be doing," he said. "It's the old-school mentality. You open the doors, make the customers happy, then you go home."

Both chefs still draw on the flavors of Virginia and the South. The East Coast Grill offers Tidewater coleslaw, buttermilk-fried oysters and oak-smoked pit barbecue platters. In season, Johnson makes sauteed Virginia striped bass, serving it with haricots verts and a fennel risotto. He also pairs grilled sirloin with mashed sweet potatoes and collard greens. Schlesinger pointed out that the Southern way of life has helped him, too. "I was brought up to be polite and courteous. It has unintentionally contributed to my success in hospitality. I built a reputation as one of the friendliest and most polite restaurants in the city." Johnson added with a smile, "I still catch myself saying 'Yes, ma'am' and 'Yes, sir.'"

Johnson also says his experiences during the first years of busing at Huguenot High School, before he attended St. Christopher's, help him manage a diverse kitchen staff. "I learned to get along with all kinds of people in the public schools. That's important because so many people on my kitchen staff are Hispanic. I speak more Spanish - badly - than French now," he said.

Schlesinger said his Westport restaurant, on the coast several miles west of Cape Cod, reminded him of Virginia Beach and Tidewater. "I guess all my life, I've been trying to get back to that very first job at Blue Petes."

Chris Schlesinger's Grilled Pork Tenderloin with Roasted Corn-Bacon Relish

Makes 4 main-course servings.

Relish:

3 ears corn, shucked

4 tablespoons maple syrup

3 slices bacon, diced small

1 large yellow onion, diced small

1 teaspoon chopped fresh sage

Salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste

Pork:

3 10- to 12-ounce pork tenderloins

Salt AND freshly cracked black pepper to taste

Relish: Cook the corn in boiling water for 4 minutes. Remove it and allow to cool to room temperature.

Over a medium fire, grill the corn 2 to 3 minutes, or until lightly brown. Brush on the maple syrup and continue to grill for 2 to 3 minutes longer, or until the syrup begins to caramelize (it will turn golden brown). Remove the corn from the grill and let cool. With a sharp knife, remove the kernels from the cob.

In a saute pan, cook the bacon over medium heat until crisp, about 5 minutes. Add the onion and cook 4 to 5 minutes, or until the onion is translucent. Add the corn and cook 2 minutes longer.

Remove the corn mixture from the heat, add the sage, then season to taste with salt and pepper. Stir well and set aside.

Pork: Rub the tenderloins with salt and pepper to taste, and grill over a medium fire for 12 to 15 minutes, rolling them every 3 to 4 minutes to ensure even cooking. (I prefer to eat this cut slightly pink, but if you like yours cooked completely, leave it on 4 to 5 minutes longer).

Remove the tenderloins from the grill, allow them to stand for 5 minutes, then carve each into 1/2-inch slices. Spoon some relish over each portion of the sliced pork and serve.

Nutrients per serving: 404 calories, 48 grams protein, 30 grams carbohydrate, 11 grams fat (23 percent total calories), 145 milligrams cholesterol, 3 grams fiber, 338 milligrams sodium.

- "The Thrill of the Grill" by Chris Schlesinger and John Willoughby

Steve Johnson's Lemon-Buttermilk Pudding

Makes 10 servings.

4 cups granulated sugar, divided

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 cup lemon juice

Minced zest of 3 lemons

3 cups buttermilk

1 cup heavy cream

9 egg yolks

9 egg whites

In a large bowl, using a whisk, stir together 3 cups of the sugar, the salt, flour, lemon juice, lemon zest, buttermilk, heavy cream and egg yolks.

In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites with a whisk until they hold medium peaks. Gradually whisk in the remaining 1 cup of sugar until it is completely incorporated.

Fold the beaten whites into the yolk mixture in three additions, allowing the last addition to remain only partially mixed in.

Transfer the mixture to a 9-by-13-inch pan. Make a water bath by placing this pan in a larger pan and filling it with water to come halfway up the sides. Bake in a convection oven at 300 degrees for about 50 minutes, or in a regular oven at 350 degrees for about 1 1/2 hours, until the pudding is golden brown on top and starts to set. It will remain slightly loose when shaken. Chill for one hour before serving.

Nutrients per serving: 538 calories, 10 grams protein, 92 grams carbohydrate, 15 grams fat (25 percent total calories), 224 milligrams cholesterol, 0.33 gram fiber, 225 milligrams sodium.

**Graphic**

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