

The Chef's Celebrated Creations

A Jackson Jewel: Three Passions for Perfection

by Mary Margaret Storey

Chef Gary Hawkins of Sophia's Restaurant in The Fairview Inn is an important component of the success of the historic complex which includes the inn, a full service spa and a gourmet restaurant. On a recent trip to Jackson I had the pleasure of sampling some of the most requested selections on the current menu, each merit more superlatives than I could put into writing. Every item from the house salad to the lamb served with sweet potatoes to the bread pudding is not only excellent but also unique in taste and presentation. As for the personal favorite selections of the chef, those include spinach and okra salad and the rack of lamb with sweet potatoes with a pecan and molasses crust. It is for this reason at least in part that The Fairview Inn and Sophia's Restaurant are popular places not only for individual dining but also for meetings, social events and weddings.

Hawkins graduated from the Memphis Culinary Academy in 1993 and spent the next eleven years learning his craft at such notable restaurant as Paulette's, McEwen's on Monroe and Lolo's Table. And his preparation for his calling has served him well even though he adds the following disclaimer: "You are really only as good as your last meal served, so the freshness of ingredients is very important. Never cutting corners on quality or service to the guest is an absolute must because they will know."

Hawkins said he very much enjoys the creative outlet which his work provides and being able to try new items all the time and the casualness in the kitchen versus a board room. Most people in restaurants have very different backgrounds and it always makes for interesting conversation which Hawkins said he enjoys very much. He added there is always the other side of the experience which is the time away from family which can be tough especially on the weekends.

"Some people think that smaller groups are easier to manage and serve than large numbers of guests or big events," Hawkins commented. "But I have to say that is simply not true. The size of the party or event simply does not matter. I have had receptions for 300 or 400 people go really smoothly and a party of 30 be difficult and vice versa."

How did Chef Hawkins come to be chef at The Fairview? He was looking for a change in his career and he was surfing the web when he came upon the ad for a restaurant in Jackson. One thing led to another and he was soon directing the kitchen at Sophia's where the most impressive décor on the walls is a portrait of the innkeepers' daughter Sophia for whom the restaurant is named.

Coming as a surprise, this chef does not always like to be in charge of the menu.



Courtesy Pic
Chef Gary Hawkins

"I will always be a fan of someone else cooking," Hawkins said. "At home we love to cook out as much as possible, so simple food is always good. We do enjoy the local chefs and their food, it helps to inspire me, to see what someone else is doing. And eating out is a part of a child's education, too. We have a six-year-old daughter, and we have always made her eat from our plates. Even if she did not like it, she had to try it. She loves shrimp and Asian food. I think you should always try to bring new food into kids' palates."

In conclusion, the chef said wedding receptions, rehearsal dinners, bridal luncheons, afternoon teas, corporate meetings or events and fundraisers may all call for special menus or creations; however, at the present time from the diners' favorites include lamb, redfish, shrimp and grits, crab cakes, key lime pie and bread pudding which are all unique in some way or other and are all delicious.

I look forward to being back in the near future and doing further research on the menu myself in between spa treatments and residing in accommodations truly fit for royalty.

<http://www.thenewsstar.com/article/20090324/DELTASTYLE07/90303033>