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THE RUBBER BAND DOOR KNOB

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Reinvention

It is the new year and we have begun the process of making our new year's resolutions. Is this a way to renew our interest in ourselves and try to overcome all of the bad little things we did the year before? Some say it is our annual journey to reinvent ourselves. I, for one, have thought about this over the last few months and ended up with this question: How can you reinvent yourself each year if you don't know who and what you are in the first place?

Is this a cynical attitude or just a realization of the truth? For years I have said I am going to take the Certified Master Chef (CMC) test. For those who think about the test or have put themselves in a position to consider the challenge, it is first and foremost a personal journey. It is not about the letters at the end of your name, but about the work and dedication you have put into your craft. It is about knowing you have the mental constitution and ability to use your hands and simple tools to cook at an extremely high level. I have never wanted to take the test to further my earning potential or to stick a set letters under someone's nose. Why would you want to take a test which covers nearly 10 days, countless hours of preparation with little sleep and a substantial investment of your personal finances? I am not as fortunate as some candidates to have an employer's sponsorship as I am basically sponsoring myself! The CMC test is about the challenge you have with your own mind and body. By showcasing a lifetime of learning, practice and commitment to a craft over a series of culinary subjects, you are taking part in a process that is supposed to prove beyond a doubt that you are a master culinary craftsman. There are other ways to do this, and plenty of other crafts that recognize its masters do so. This is not a critique of the process but of one part of this particular path. Self-actualization is a key part of understanding who you are. One of the recurring themes you hear from those who have taken the test and passed (whether the first time around or even the second), you need to develop a personal style. This is where I started to think about this annual process of writing goals and resolutions to become the better me.

Whether it's the clothes you choose, the colors you pick for you bedroom walls or even the music you listen to, those things contribute to your style and no one else's. Do you need to justify it to others? Probably not, but you should be



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able to articulate the reasons why you care about those things in a clear fashion. As with all things, personal style is subjective and this can be scrutinized by others and used against you as they see fit. This is the same challenge of subjective analysis in competitive cooking and the testing process we have adopted in the American Culinary Federation. However, there is an argument that cooking can be very objective and that we can have a clear set of rules to play by. My answer to that is that cooking will always be subjective, especially if you have a wide range of opinions looking at the same thing. Even the ingredients you are cooking with are subjective. For example, a banana is going to look and taste different tomorrow than it does today. You can't cook at it the same way each time. It is how the craftsman studies it, knows its continual evolution of taste and texture, learns its place in time and then applies a certain set of rules to it. What does that mean? The rules are yours and are based solely on how you approach cooking. Ultimately, you need to be judged on your life-learned experiences of cooking food at a level that others have yet to achieve but some day will. There is not a finite number of seats at the table, nor should there be

We have all heard television chefs claim that they cook simple food, however it's the processes they used to get there that is the differentiator. I have been enthralled with a pasta dish I have eaten several times at Scott Conant's restaurants. It is spaghetti, tomato sauce, basil and bread crumbs. Simple right? How many of you are going to think that sounds good, but question if it is too simple? If you make this dish with boxed pasta, whether Italian or generic brand, organic canned tomatoes and off-the-shelf bread crumbs (even it is from the "Whole Pay Check" down the street), it is still a boring dish. Why is Chef Conant's so different? It is the fact that he made it his own and is committed to serving that dish in the style of his restaurant. How many places do you know of that serve you spaghetti in a bowl with a glass dome over it? The pasta is made fresh, the sauce made-to-order and the basil grown and picked daily. It is always, **always** perfectly executed. I am totally confident that the new cooks working the line in his restaurants are scared "shitless" the first time they have to make it. That's because it is so simple that it has to be perfect. This is the essence of cooking at the highest level. A perfectly cooked chicken will always set you apart from overcooking a \$50.00 per pound prime American Waygu strip steak. It is about understanding the ingredients you have and showing them in the best possible manner.

This is why I can't reinvent myself just yet. I am okay putting on a little weight, especially when I pour a beer as it should be, enjoy a loaf of fresh bread the day it was baked and eating the whole charcuterie board the next time I go out. I am not going down a path of destruction; I am planning to enjoy things a little differently. If I am going to cook, I am not mailing it in and thinking it's good enough. What I create won't be over-processed, frozen, cooked in a bag or

RECIPE

Tomato-Basil Spaghetti



Here is a link to Scott Conant's home cook's version of his restaurant specialty; **Scarpetta's Tomato-Basil Spaghetti**.

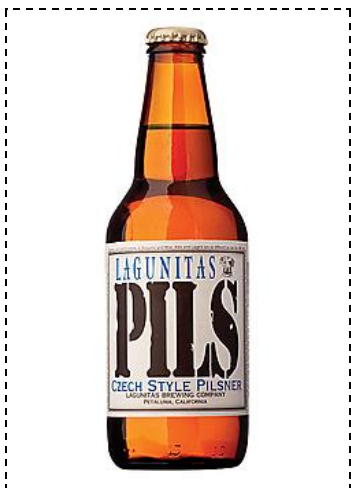
handled in a way that the food really can't be recognized. It will be this devotion to great cooking for my family and guests that will define my style. So don't worry, I am definitely not shaving off the mustache as a sign of the "New John Reed."

Happy New Year.

- Chef John Reed, CEC, CCA, ACE

BEER

What To Drink With Spaghetti & Tomatoes



It is not a wine but something simple. Try an American-inspired pilsner such as **Lagunita's Pils**.

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