

CAPITAL CULTURE: Obamas inviting celebrity chefs, award-winning cooks to White House

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Think of it as take-out, but at the presidential level.

Since bringing their well-documented high-end appetites to the White House, President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama have broken new gourmet ground by inviting in a steady stream of the nation's top culinary talents.

It's an experience the chefs say they consider a career achievement.

"You work in the White House and you walk over to the tent and right across to your right, there is the Oval Office," said chef Marcus Samuelsson, who prepared the Obama's first state dinner in November in honor of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

"That's not something that happens every day," Samuelsson said.

Carl Anthony, historian with the National First Ladies Library, said that while inviting guest chefs to the White House isn't unheard of, featuring such famous chefs is new. Anthony sees Michelle Obama using the chefs "to bring attention to the issue of nutrition, especially childhood nutrition."

In fact, Michelle Obama recently appeared on the Food Network special "Super Chef Battle," highlighting her White House garden and talking about it as a way to teach local children about healthy eating. Obama told the show's famous chefs, "We really want you all to be a part of helping us spread that message."

Former White House executive chef Walter Scheib, who cooked under presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, said there's no protocol on guest chefs and the Obamas can invite as many as they like.

Scheib said what it means to be a chef today has changed, and the Obamas and White House are reflecting that. He compared chefs cooking for the Obamas to other artists putting on performances elsewhere in the White House.

"When they do their performance it isn't on a stage in the East Room," Scheib said. "It's in the kitchen."

Koren Grieverson, chef at the Chicago restaurant *avec*, made zucchini onion quesadillas for a healthy kids fair at the White House in October. She described it as an intimidating but beautiful place.

"It's just really surreal when you're on the White House lawn, escorted by Secret Service and trying to concentrate on what you're supposed to do," Grieveson said. "But at the same time it was an honor. It was so much fun."

Celebrity chef Bobby Flay grilled steaks with President Obama last summer and called the experience "probably my greatest professional moment."

"I could feel him walking over to me as my grills were being lit," Flay said recently. "Thirty seconds into it he made me feel like he and I had known each other for a long time."

White House executive chef Cristeta Comerford says she appreciates the talented chefs who visit her kitchen and thinks the exchange makes for good meals.

"Their different style and their repertoire, it's really good to see that," Comerford said. "Seeing the way they work, the message and technique they offer, it's really a great thing for us."

However, former White House executive pastry chef Roland Mesnier said he would feel slighted by guest chefs, who could use their White House experience as a promotional tool or for exposure.

"To me it's a slap in the face. It's an insult," he said.

The Obamas took the trend to television in January when "Super Chef Battle" visited the White House. Comerford paired with Flay to win a battle over the team of chefs Emeril Lagasse and Mario Batali on the program.

While Comerford has been more visible, the position of White House chef has been largely unknown in the past, Scheib said.

"You just don't exist for all intents and purposes," Scheib said. "You are the most famous anonymous chef on Earth. Everybody talks about it, but nobody really knows about it."

With that changing, other chefs have been invited as well.

Last June, famed Hawaii chef Alan Wong prepared traditional luau foods like kalua pig and lomi lomi salmon for the annual picnic for members of Congress and their families. When the Obamas celebrated Hispanic music in October, they invited renowned Latin American chef Maricel Presilla to work with the White House kitchen staff.

Chefs and the food industry will benefit from the Obamas' interest in food and their efforts to dine at different restaurants, says Samuelsson, whose largely vegetarian state dinner made use of herbs harvested from the White House garden.

"I just think it says a lot about the curiosity and the diversity of the restaurants and the chefs that they are inviting in," he said.

Todd Gray, chef and co-owner of Washington's Equinox Restaurant, made trail mix with popcorn, peanuts and cranberries with Parmesan cheese and brown sugar at the October children's health fair. Gray said guest chefs are well taken care of when they cook at the White House.

"The care that they take when they bring you in is nothing less than stellar," Gray says. "There's always plenty of people to help to make sure your needs are being met."