

Chef thrives on creating food to fit the senior lifestyle

By Lisa Ackleson | Daily Herald Columnist

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David Koelling of Lake Barrington, twice nominated for Inc. Magazine's entrepreneur of the year award, never thought about being a chef when he was younger.

He attended Michigan State University in East Lansing, Mich. and graduated with a degree in hotel restaurant management planning to utilize his business acumen in the food service industry, but he always enjoyed cooking.

"I gravitated to the kitchen," recalls Koelling, "even when I wasn't supposed to be there."

Koelling's culinary interest combined with his entrepreneurial spirit paved the way to his current position as Corporate Director of

Hospitality and Dining Services for Senior Lifestyle Corp., where he oversees food service operations for 52 communities in 15 states.

Along the way, Koelling managed operations for Commander's Palace in New Orleans where he hired a young Emeril Lagasse, opened two restaurants (The Greenery in Barrington and Biloxi Grill in Wauconda), and consulted for high-profile operations including Michael Jordan Golf Centers, Jack Nicholas' Wynstone Country Club and Peapod Grocery.

Koelling, 48 and the father of four teenagers, finds his current position rewarding, considering it a bonus to work with the seniors.

"They add to your life when you spend time with them and hear about the lives they've lived," says Koelling, who wants to be the leader in the senior living industry setting a new standard for hospitality.

What responsibilities did you have as a consultant in the food service industry? I put together operational plans, developed menu programs, designed kitchen space and attended to staffing. You have to make money doing what you do. It's not just about passion for food and flavors; it's a business and if you can't combine the two. It's a rough road.

You have opened two restaurants. What are the biggest challenges you faced as chef/owner? It all comes down to people. All the time spent developing menus and designing the interior will be lost if you don't have the right people. If you put the right team together, you move ahead. As a chef, I'm in the kitchen and I'm counting on the staff that has

customer contact. I have been asked, "How do you train people so well?" I tell them that we didn't, their moms and dads did.

Describe your responsibilities with Senior Lifestyle Corp. The industry I'm in has changed exponentially from what was once known as clinical/nursing homes to retirement communities to resort living. We offer every range of product from jacket-and-tie-required-dining rooms to commissary kitchens where meals are prepared and delivered to income-qualified communities. We try to engage and delight customers as if they were at a resort. Gone is the Jell-O and tapioca; we offer fine dining entrees including fresh seafood and health-specific menus. The boomers want more and more, and we provide it. The change is really dramatic.

What do you enjoy most about your profession? Exciting people. We have the ability to make somebody's night. It's great to hear, "This is the best meal I've ever had," and you made it, you thought of it, you produced it; that's just a high. No one in this business can succeed without that kind of passion.

What is your favorite cooking memory? Eleven years ago at The Greenery and again six years ago at Biloxi Grill, we opened on Thanksgiving Day for free. A lot of seniors came in that could afford a meal, but had no one to share it with. It was not just a meal, but an event that we made special using linens and good china. We had all volunteers in the kitchen, and working with them stands out as one of the most memorable times of my life.

What culinary trends do you support? Back in 1985 I began to focus on sourcing, working with local and regional producers to get the best product. It brings to the table the best food we have and provides producers with a customer base in order to survive.

Who does the cooking at home? I do all of the cooking when I'm home. I try to keep the staples stocked so that all I need to do is make an occasional quick stop on my way home from work. When I travel and come back, there's usually a lot of to-go containers in the refrigerator.

What was the last meal that you cooked? For hors d'oeuvres we had goat cheese, les lecques olives, a dragon roll and fresh bread. I then made pan-seared mahi-mahi, ginger-fried rice and sauteed zucchini and yellow squash with basil and cilantro. We eat nice, multi-course meals together. My wife and I try to keep the kids at the table as long as possible.

Where do you like to eat when you dine out? I eat out things that I don't make, usually ethnic food regardless of what type. Small, authentic places are fun and exciting.

What do you like to do in your spare time? We are super active. I love golf, tennis, snow skiing and fishing. Travel is No. 1 on our list.



Pan Seared Salmon with Avocado, Nectarine Salsa and Ponzu Sauce

Tell us about this recipe: When making the Pan Seared Salmon with Avocado, Nectarine Salsa and Ponzu Sauce, choose fruit for the salsa according to season and availability. Refrigerating the salsa and ponzu sauce for one hour allows the flavors to develop.

1 pound salmon fillets

1 tablespoon olive oil

Salt

Cracked white and black peppercorns

Salsa

1 avocado

3 nectarines or clementines, sectioned and diced

1 small sweet onion

1 tablespoon fresh cilantro, chopped

1 lime, juiced

½ teaspoon chili powder

1 teaspoon hot pepper sauce

Salt to taste

Ponzu sauce

1 cup seasoned rice vinegar

¼ cup fresh lemon juice

2 tablespoons soy sauce

1 teaspoon sesame oil

4 slices (thin) fresh ginger

For the salsa: Dice avocados, nectarines or clementines (choose fruit according to season) and onions into ½-inch cubes and combine in a medium bowl. Refrigerate for 1 hour.

For the sauce: In a medium bowl or jar, combine the rice vinegar, lemon juice, soy sauce, sesame oil and ginger. Refrigerate 1 hour.

Salt and pepper salmon fillets. Heat saute pan over high heat; add olive oil and salmon. Sear until a crust has formed on each side.

Spoon the ponzu sauce over the salmon fillet and serve with salsa. Garnish with fresh cilantro and additional ponzu on the side.

Serves three to four.

Chef David Koelling, Senior Lifestyle Corporation, Chicago