

# American star chef William Dissen shares his secrets to garden-inspired menus

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US chef William Dissen and Kiwi cook Annabel Langbein demonstrate some techniques to food enthusiasts at Le Cordon Bleu in Wellington for Wellington on a Plate.

Growing up, William Dissen ate his share of fast food, but today the American star chef represents a new generation creating farm-to-table cuisine.

In Wellington as a guest of the US Embassy, the North Carolina chef is here as part of the United States prestigious American Chefs Corps which was set up by Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in her former role as US Secretary of State to foster culinary diplomacy.

Clinton said: "Food isn't traditionally thought of as a diplomatic tool, but I think it's the oldest diplomatic tool. Sharing a meal can help people transcend boundaries and build bridges in a way that nothing else can."

In 2013, Dissen was named a Rising Star Chef by Star Chefs, while he was also named one of the "40 Chefs Under 40" by the Mother Nature Network.



Chef William Dissen got to see local produce at Wellington's Moore Wilson's Fresh while in New Zealand.

An advocate of sustainable food production, Dissen has spoken to Congress three times - in 2013, 2014 and 2015 - on sustainable food and food policy. "There is no cuisine without gardens and farmers," he says.

Owner of the North Carolina restaurant, The Market Place, Dissen ate his share of fast food at a time when the food industry became industrialised and small farms were taken over by big corporates. But his grandparents were farmers and he says his generation is returning to farming again.

"We're taking the land back, and farmers are saying, "We're going to do this, we're going to grow biodynamically and

sustainably". Because of that, our food system is starting to get away from the processed stuff."

He makes everything on site, sourcing all products within 100 miles (160 kilometres) of the restaurant. Going to some of the city's 12 farmers markets many times a week, Dissen works with about 50 farmers, visits their farms and plans a menu a season ahead, based on what they will be growing.



Chef William Dissen and US Embassy chef Tom Maathuis at an embassy dinner on Saturday night.

"I'll say, 'I'd love you to grow these items and this is what I anticipate I'll need each week throughout the season', and that way I'm able to create menus that are really inspired by the seasons and fresh produce. You're creating a relationship with a farmer, but you're also creating a relationship with the seasons, and you become more in tune with the environment around you."

A "jeans and t-shirts guy", Dissen bought The Market Place in Asheville seven years ago, when it boasted white table cloths and played chamber music. Turning it into a casual, relaxed eatery, he says: "Craft cooking is getting away from the pretence and is focussing more on the ingredients. We're putting fine dining cooking and technique into the food but we're taking the pretence away."

### **'A FOOD DESERT'**

Dissen cooked for the cast of *The Hunger Games*, which was filmed around Asheville in 2011, with actors like Woody Harrelson picking his restaurant as their favourite dining spot. And while his home city of 90,000 is a culinary hot-spot, his birth place of West Virginia - 550 kms away - used to be the same, but is now what he calls "a food desert".

Riddled with fast food outlets, West Virginia has the second highest obesity rate in the United States, behind Arkansas. "There is a lot of gas station food there, and people are working so hard they've lost the art of cooking too."

California's Monterey Bay Aquarium made him a Seafood Watch Ambassador, appointing him to their Blue Ribbon Task Force, alongside elite chefs in 2014 for his use of sustainable seafood. He also spends time in Washington, DC, lobbying for mandatory GMO labelling. A bill for mandatory labelling recently was passed by Senate.

"Consumers should have the right that instead of just saying corn, soybeans, a package should say GMO corn and soybeans. Everyone should have the right as citizens to know what they are putting in their bodies and feeding their children."

Dissen also advocates using "ugly", blemished produce, even if just for sauces and preserves. "You shouldn't just throw something away because it's blemished. In the United States, 20 per cent of our food is thrown away. That's excessive and almost arrogant, and it's something that I'm working hard to get people to not waste. A lot of people are out there hungry."



Chefs William Dissen and Annabel Langbein cook together.

## **NOSE TO TAIL COOKING**

In Wellington, Dissen cooked with celebrity chef Annabel Langbein at Wellington's Le Cordon Bleu as part of Wellington on a Plate. They created a modern take on American southern food, serving roasted pork cheeks, black pepper agnolotti, a wild mushroom broth and a fresh herb salad followed by winter truffles.

Says Dissen, who studied French and English before venturing into cooking: "It's the idea of nose to tail cooking, which is getting very popular here too, and around the world. It's the idea of not just using the loin, but the offcuts, like the cheeks tonight, which is typically something that you don't find at the butcher shop."

While here, Dissen also cooked a six-course dinner at the US Embassy for the Ambassador and guests, assisted by its chef, Tom Maathuis, who says: "It's been a lovely collaboration and I've been cooking things I wouldn't usually cook at the embassy."

"You can get chef's block so hopefully my menu will reflect William's influence over the coming months."

**- Stuff**

