

Fresh Arctic Char from Fisherman Ted is prepared on a bed of stewed eggplant, red pepper puree and Panisse chickpea polenta cakes.



Steamers chef Mason has trained with some of the best

It's not too often the opportunity to eat a meal prepared by a young man who has been trained in the kitchens of two of the world's best chefs comes along in Muskoka. That experience is available in Huntsville.

Since the start of the 2015 golf season, Steamers Steakhouse & Bar at Deerhurst Resort has been employing one of Muskoka's best-kept culinary secrets – until now.

His name is Solomon Mason, and at only 22 years old, Mason has already worked in the kitchens of two of the best restaurants in the world and has trained under some of the most sought-after chefs in the restaurant industry.

And for the rest of the golf season, he is sharing his own experiences on plates he is serving up at Steamers Steakhouse.

Originally from North Bay, Mason knew from a young age that food was his passion. He had a drive to pursue a career in the industry “no matter what it took,” he says.

Following high school, Mason completed a two-year Culinary Management program at Canadore College in North Bay. After completing his college training, he immediately started writing letters to chef Thomas Keller at The French Laundry in Napa Valley, California – arguably one of the hardest places to get a dinner reservation in the entire U.S. – in hopes of landing a highly-coveted job and the culinary training experience of a lifetime.

Mason wrote letters asking for a chance to go and work with Keller and his team in Napa but was initially unsuccessful in his efforts.

Despite this, Mason set his eyes on another world-class restaurant that was a little closer to home.

“I wanted to work with the rock stars of the culinary world,” says Mason. “After being initially rejected by The French Laundry, I started writing letters to chef Grant (Achatz).”

Achatz's Alinea in Chicago is another infamous dining mecca where foodies from around the globe flock to experience cutting edge cooking techniques that produce flavours, textures and plates that are unmatched by other restaurants in the world.

Mason started sending letters to Achatz in Chicago, just as he had to Thomas Keller, asking for a chance at a job or an internship.

“I sent one letter every day,” says Mason, smiling. “I figure I sent a total of around 83, including a mixed

tape with the song Why Can't We Be Friends? on it.”

Mason's letters and tapes got the attention of Achatz and his team at Alinea in Chicago, and Mason was given a 3.5-month unpaid internship in the Windy City.

“It was a really great experience working in Chicago,” says Mason. “Working in a kitchen like Alinea was incredible.”

Throughout this time, Mason didn't give up on his dream of working at The French Laundry.

“I went back to writing more letters to Thomas Keller,” he explains. “After a couple of weeks of the letter writing, I was offered a chance at a hands-on probationary period in the restaurant in Napa and was given a job.”

Mason was at The French Laundry

for two-and-a-half months working with some of the best culinary minds in the industry until he ran into issues with his work visa and had to return to Canadian soil, but he didn't let that get in his way of doing what he loves to do.

While Mason was in Ontario, he worked at a very well-known restaurant in Ottawa called Atelier, which is operated by chef Marc Lepine, who also worked for chef Grant Achatz in Chicago at Alinea for a brief time.

"I was able to stage at Atelier on several occasions throughout the years," Mason says. Staging is where a cook goes to another restaurant and works for free in order to gain experience, and it was very common years ago for a chef to send their apprentice to other restaurants to do this.

"His (Lepine's) restaurant is a 22-seat avant-garde restaurant utilizing new techniques, and is said to be Canada's Alinea," explains Mason.

Approximately eight months later, and only 21 years of age at this point, Mason was back in the United States working in yet another world-renowned kitchen in New York City – Thomas Keller's east coast fine dining mecca called Per Se.

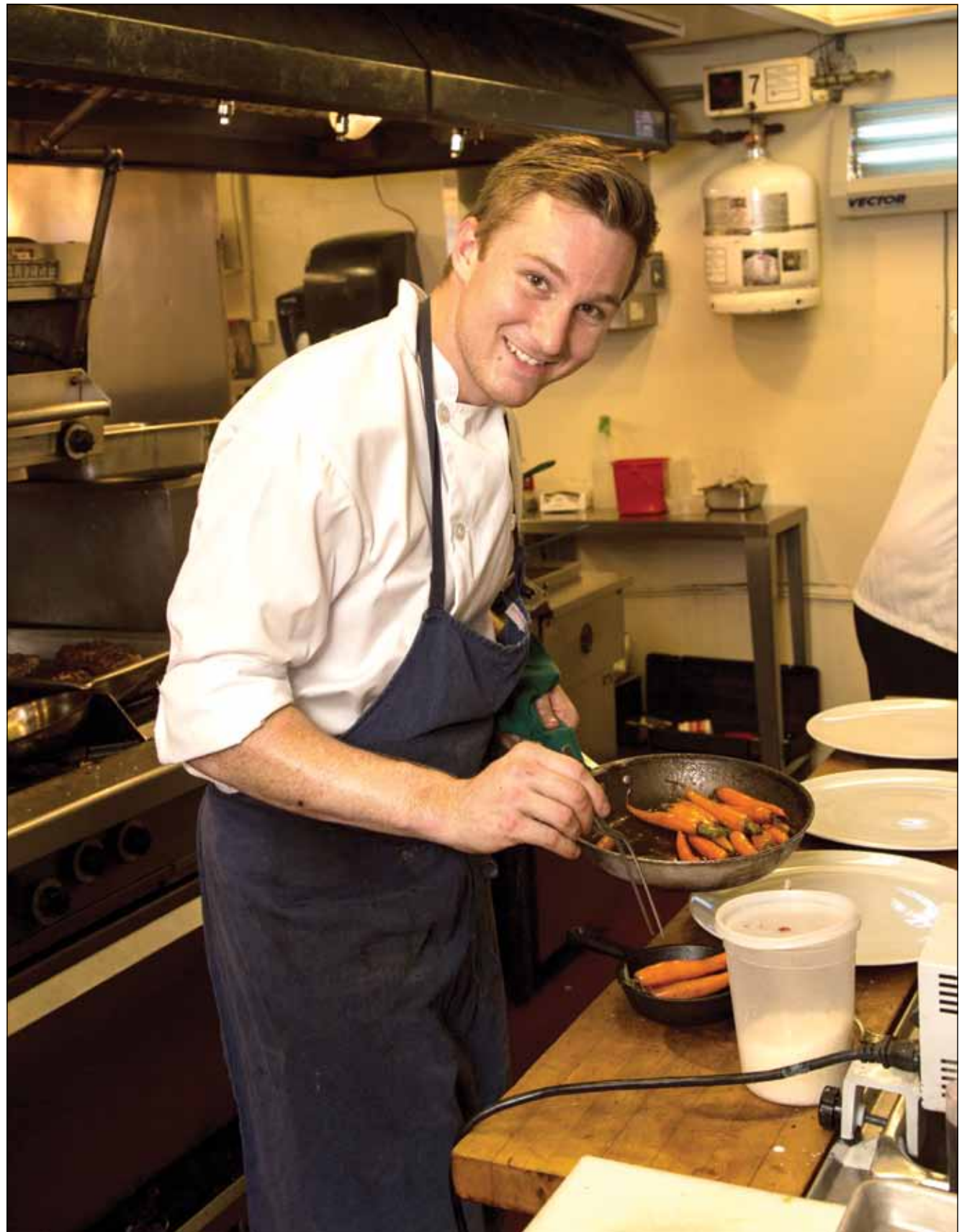
Mason learned more of the ins and outs of different kitchen prep stations and worked many long days and late nights – sometimes 20-hour shifts – before hitting yet another obstacle with a work visa and having to return to Canadian soil again.

"Coming back from all of these setbacks made me know what I really wanted," explains Mason. "Having these obstacles and facing challenges and disappointments really solidified my cooking dream, and committing to moving to a foreign country really is reassuring of what you want."

"I'm not from a food-forward family," says Mason. "They are extremely supportive, but they're more meat-and-potatoes type of people. They don't understand what places like Alinea and The French Laundry are all about."

Upon returning late in 2014, Mason looked for work in North Bay, but none of the names of the restaurants on his resumé meant anything to the restaurant owners there.

Fortunately, Mason stayed in touch with one of his teachers from



Chef Solomon Mason works on the line in the kitchen preparing to plate dishes for dinner service. He has worked in the Napa Valley and Chicago and is at Steamers until the end of golf season.

college, Deerhurst's sous-chef Kevin Schmidtke, and was offered a job running the kitchen at Steamers for the 2015 golf season.

According to Deerhurst's executive chef David Bakker, since starting in the spring, Mason has created an inspiring and evolving culinary identity

for Steamers and has spread his passion for food.

"His passion is truly contagious," explains Bakker. "The excitement about honouring local food and local ingredients has spread throughout the Deerhurst community. We're very happy about the legacy he's cre-

ating for himself and for our culinary identity here at Deerhurst."

Following Thomas Keller's mantra of "ingredients and execution," Mason feels strongly about using quality, local ingredients on his menus and is preparing 95 per cent of the items on the menu this season in-



Chef Solomon Mason uses all fresh vegetables and meat bones to make his stock. He starts with 200 litres and when it is all finished, he is left with less than 3 litres of rich, delicious jus.

house from scratch.

Mason explains that Deerhurst has been able to source a huge portion of the produce used in the food outlets on the property, including Steamers, from a Huntsville farmer named Jenny Spring.

“We get first crack at her produce each week before she goes to the farmer’s market,” says Mason. “Her vegetables are so fresh and beautiful and we’re so happy to be able to use whatever she has in season on our menus.”

Mason gushed about another local Ontario food producer. Fisherman Ted delivers fresh, live Arctic char to Steamers once a week and processes the ones Mason selects from a tank in Fisherman Ted’s truck on-site. This ensures the fish served is as fresh as possible.

Foraging is another important part of Mason’s practice, and he has trekked into the woods of Muskoka with his Steamers kitchen team. They pulled out mushrooms, spruce tips, cat tails and ramps that have all ended up on his menus in some form or another.

“While I’m here, I want to ensure we maintain the high quality of food and service our customers are used to at Steamers and that the bar we have

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raised as a team from this season carries on after I leave at the end of the season," says Mason.

"By having relationships with local farmers and producers in place and by passing on my knowledge to the people in the kitchen who work with me, I think Steamers can be a food destination in Muskoka for the future."

Mason is extremely modest when it comes to talking about his accomplishments at such a young age, but he quickly lights up when asked what his plans are after Steamers closes down for the season.

"I'm going back to The French Laundry with a work visa that will enable me to be there for at least a year," he says.

So if you want an opportunity to experience passion on a plate from this young chef before he sets off at the end of the season, do so. You won't be disappointed.

Panisse Recipe (pictured on plate with Arctic char)

Ingredients:

- 250 g chick pea flour
- 20 g olive oil
- 1 garlic clove

- 12 g salt
- 1 litre vegetable stock

Directions:

Combine all ingredients in a blender (in batches if you need) and spin until all the lumps are dissolved. Pour into a wide pot and over medium-high heat, whisk constantly until mixture starts to thicken. Once it reaches a boil, continue to whisk for 3 minutes. When finished, pour into sprayed mold (a cake pan works great) and refrigerate until fully cooled and set (approx. 4 hours). Unmold the panisse and portion into cakes and either deep fry or pan fry in olive oil until crispy.

Pair panisse with roasted summer vegetables, fish, tomatoes or olives.

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Edible nasturtiums grow outside near the restaurant and are used in many of Mason's dishes as garnish.

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