

Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital's young chef achieves Certified Chef de Cuisine designation from Culinary Federation

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Meal Recipe Nick Mercogliano's recipes for Pan Roasted Frenched Chicken Breast with Wilted Spinach, Mashed Potatoes and pan sauce (yields four):

Chicken breast, frenched, 4 each

Salt, kosher to taste

Pepper, Black to taste

Olive oil, 2 tablespoons

Garlic, peeled, 6 cloves

Carrots, medium diced, 4 ounces

Celery, medium diced, 2 ounces

Onions, medium diced, 2 ounces

Rosemary, sprig (whole), 2 each

Thyme, sprig (whole), 4 each

Sage, leaves, 6 each

White wine, 4 ounces

Flour, all-purpose, 2 ounces

Chicken stock, 2 Cups

Method:

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Turn the bird skin-side up and wrap the wing bone in foil. Generously season both sides with some salt and pepper. Heat a large, heavy skillet over medium-high heat, add the oil, and heat until shimmering. Add the chicken skin-side down and cook until nicely browned on one side, about 7-8 minutes. Reduce the heat to medium; add the garlic, carrots, celery, onions, rosemary, thyme and sage.

2. Place the skillet in the oven, and roast the chicken until a thermometer inserted in the breast reaches 165°F, 35 to 40 minutes.

Let the chicken rest out of the oven for 10 minutes. Remove foil, then slice.

3. While the chicken is resting, return the pan to the stove over medium-high heat and deglaze with white wine. Add the flour, to make a roux and cook for 3 minutes. Then add chicken stock and cook until slightly thickened, about 10-15 minutes. Season the pan sauce with salt and some pepper to taste. Strain and serve on the side or over the chicken.

Mashed Potatoes (yields four):

Milk, whole 2 1/2 ounces

Butter, 3 ounces

Potatoes, Russet, 1 1/2 pounds

Salt, kosher, 2 teaspoons+ to taste

Pepper, black, to taste

Method:

1. Warm milk and butter in a small saucepan over low heat until butter melts. Remove from heat; cover to keep warm.

2. Simmer potatoes, uncovered, in a large pot with cold water to cover (by 1 inch) and 2 teaspoons salt until tender, about 15-20 minutes.

Drain, return to pot, and toss over medium heat until moisture evaporates. Remove from heat; add the milk mixture in increments for right consistency, and mash potatoes until slightly chunky. Season with salt and pepper to taste, then serve.

Wilted Spinach (yields four):

Spinach, baby, 2 pounds

Olive oil, 2 tablespoons

Garlic, minced, 2 cloves

Shallots, minced, 1 each

Salt, kosher, to taste

Pepper, black, to taste

Method:

1. Remove and discard the spinach stems. Fill a large bowl with cold water and wash the spinach, lifting it out of the water to leave the dirt and grit in the bowl. Drain in a colander.
2. Peel the garlic and shallot and chop very fine (minced). In a large skillet over medium heat, add the oil. Add the garlic and shallots stir. Add the spinach, stirring with tongs to wilt. When all the spinach has been added, season with salt and pepper and cook, covered, for 3 minutes. Drain the spinach in a colander or remove with tongs taking care to leave excess water in the pan. Serve.

Nicholas Mercogliano had his sights set on a career in the culinary arts as a young boy, and now, at the ripe age of 21, he already has achieved the coveted Certified Chef de Cuisine (CCC) designation from the American Culinary Federation (ACF).

One could say his dream started as he learned at his grandmother's apron strings.

"She became sick," said Mercogliano, a Marlboro resident who has a fast-paced career as chef at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick.

"She directed me on how to cook a lot of the family's favorite recipes," he said, adding that he swiftly and proudly learned how to carry on his family's culinary traditions.

Admitting that he was never amenable to the conventional ways of schooling, Mercogliano opted to pursue his career path early when he attended the culinary arts program at Freehold Borough High School. From there, he graduated from the prestigious Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. He was heavily influenced by the mentorship he received while working at Christopher's Café & Restaurant in Colts Neck.

At 17, Mercogliano earned the Certified Culinarian title in 2009 from the ACF. The honor designated him as an entry-level culinarian with a commercial food-service operation responsible for prepping and cooking sauces, cold food, fish, soups and stocks, meats, vegetables, eggs and other food products.

Upon graduation, he was employed in the food services at Kean University and Monmouth University, before finding his home at RWJUH.

"Every day is different at the hospital," he said. "I work for Patient Services, so when a patient calls in, everything is cooked to order. I imagine the face of the patient on the other end of the telephone, and I want to make them happier by the food I prepare."

After hours, Mercogliano, who is a member of Jersey Shore Chefs Association, challenges himself with recipes he prints out from the computer, testing them in his home kitchen.

"Everything from focaccia to curing and smoking my own salmon," he said.

To earn the CCC designation from the ACF, which is the nation's largest organization of professional chefs, Mercogliano had to complete a rigorous series of examinations, coursework and demonstrations.

The ACF operates the only comprehensive certification program for chefs in the U.S., and currently certifies nearly 9,000 professionals worldwide. Candidates for ACF certification must have a high level of work and educational experience, and pass written and practical examinations. They also must complete coursework in food safety, nutrition and supervisory management.

Mercogliano was required, during the practical examination, to create consommé, two fish dishes using flat fish such as flounder, with seven different "mystery basket" ingredients, as well as two chicken dishes, velouté sauce and espagnole sauce.

"It was nerve-wracking," he said. "One of the chefs who was overseeing the cooking told us, 'Slow down, take your time and do what you do best.' And that's just what I did."

Earning CCC designation has been a dream realized for Mercogliano.

“There is nothing like having that designation,” he said, “especially at such a young age.”

His advice for youngsters who hope for a career in the culinary arts?

“Follow your dreams,” he said. “Never give up on what you want.”