



## Tom Ramsey Q&A

Q: *When did you start cooking?*

A: As early as I could reach the knobs. I got my first cookbook, "Better Homes and Gardens Junior Cookbook" for Christmas when I was eight years old. I was so fascinated by it that I abandoned my GI Joe Mobile Command Center and read through the cookbook cover to cover. Without telling anyone, I went to the kitchen and made a dish from the book. It was for "Cinnamon Twists." When I brought them into the den, everyone was amazed that I did it myself and I've been hooked ever since.

Q: *So when did you start cooking for a living?*

A: That took a while. After high school I went to college like all my friends were doing. I didn't even know there was such a thing as Culinary School and becoming a "chef" wasn't a career choice that I thought was available to me. I studied film and theatre but ended up in investment banking where I spent most of my professional career. But I never stopped cooking. I did it for fun and family. I cooked most of the meals for my family, did a whole lot of food writing and cooked for charity events, but I didn't start cooking professionally until 2008.

Q: *What was that switch like...going from investment banking to cooking?*

A: It wasn't exactly a direct move. After I left the finance world, I had a cigar manufacturing and importing business and spent a few years as a lobbyist and *then* (naturally) started cooking professionally. My wife Kitty convinced me to take the leap and without her support, it wouldn't have happened. I tell people all the time that the only thing I miss from the investment banking days is my NetJets card. The rest of it I can happily leave behind. The hours are about the same and the work just as tiring, but in a different way. My knees didn't hurt every day as a Mergers and Acquisitions specialist and I certainly cut and burned myself fewer times before I traded my suits for a jacket with my name on it. I like to say that the main difference is that I now take a shower **AFTER** work.

Q: *How would you describe your style of cooking?*

A: First, I'd never claim it as "my style." But the way I'm cooking now has really come full circle. I learned how to cook from non-chefs. I admired the fancy cooking and plating techniques of culinary "masters" and tried to emulate what I saw in fine dining restaurants or on PBS's *Great Chefs of Europe*. When I first started cooking professionally, I was pretty unsure of myself and spent a lot of time and energy trying to be "clever" or "exciting." That's all worn off and what I like to do now is just keep it really simple. Just using a few great ingredients and looking for taste and balance. I've pretty much retired my tweezers. Coco Chanel said that if you want to be perfectly dressed, get yourself ready to go out then look in the mirror and take one thing off – that's how I feel about my cooking. If a component is adding something to the dish in a meaningful way, I just leave it off. If I have to explain the dish, or how you should eat it...just, no. I'm not discounting or knocking what some chefs are doing with beautiful plating and complicated, elaborate flavors...it's just not where I am right now.

Q: *What's the best meal you ever had?*

A: I get asked this a lot and there really isn't an answer regarding the food. I've had burgers that I can still taste to this day if I think about it. I've had elegant multi-course meals from Michelin-starred chefs and I've enjoyed them equally. But there is one night that I can say was the best dinner of my life and the food was just a tiny part of it. It was at the Mayflower in Jackson, Mississippi so I'm assuming I had some broiled oysters, a salad with Comeback dressing and a nice piece of broiled fish with lemon, Worcestershire sauce and butter, which is great, but that wasn't what made it special. I was going through a divorce and was pretty much a miserable human. My friend Malcolm White called me and asked me to come out to dinner with him before a concert at his nightclub, Hal & Mal's. I groaned and protested until he said that dinner would be with a musical hero of mine before the show. That changed my tune and I got dressed and met him at the Mayflower. I was expecting sort-of a press junket deal with lots of folks at a big table and the musician holding court, but it wasn't. It was just the musician, Malcolm and me. We ate and hung around as long as we could until it was time for my musical hero to head up to the venue and play. So yeah, that was the best meal of my life.

Q: *What chefs do you most admire?*

A: There are a bunch. My friend Dan Blumenthal taught me more than pretty much anyone else. I'm sure he got sick of this "civilian" always wanting to hang around and ask questions about everything. Jesse Houston is one of the most talented chefs I've ever met – our styles are completely different, but his raw talent blows me away every

time we cook together and every time I eat in Saltine. My parents were both good cooks and real foodies before that was a word and their friend Lauren Stamm was the first person I met who made a living writing about food and cooking, but not in a restaurant. Carrie Nahabedian, Seamus Mullen and Matthew Accarrino are badass as are Ludo Lefebvre, Marcus Samuelsson, Tristen Epps and John Currence. Ryan Hughes, Alex Harrell and Toby Rodriguez have become great friends and mentors...really there are just too many to name. But when I look at what I'm cooking now, simple food with no pretense, I have to say that the two women who I admire most are long dead. Marie Bowman and Ernestine Bailey both cooked for my family when I was growing up. Ernestine at my Dad's hunting camp and Marie at home. These ladies could do so much with just a few common ingredients. They wouldn't have even know what the term "plating" meant, but they cooked with heart and love and caring. I would love to be able to cook with both of them today. I hope I would make them proud.

Q: *Is there anything in your kitchen you "can't do without?"*

A: Probably not. I love my knives and I love great carbon steel "French" pans and black iron skillet, but those are just tools. You can always make due with what you've got.

Q: So what's next?

A: Since I closed my brick-and-mortar restaurant last year, I've been doing a series of popup restaurants around the country. We call it *stäge*, which is short for *stagiaire*, the French term for "apprentice." I'm getting to cook with some great chefs and I'm learning a lot. Regina Charboneau, who owns the King's Tavern and Twin Oaks in Natchez, Mississippi, and I are co-authoring a cookbook...actually a series of cookbooks called the "Southern Staples Series." The first one, *Grits and Greens*, should be finished any day now and off to the publishers who will decide its fate. I've got my fingers crossed. I've got a QSR [quick service restaurant] concept called *bōl* that I'm rolling out as a licensing and franchise deal. It's like a cross between Subway and Chipotle – healthy stuff served in a bowl. But when those are up and running, they don't need anything from me but some guidance. I'm enjoying the travel and consulting and the personal appearances, but I do miss being in the kitchen every day. Who knows...we'll see



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