

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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All the President's Menus

Catering D.C. dinner parties, ex-White House chef cooks—and tells

By CHRISTOPHER COOPER

IT'S A WASHINGTON SAGA that encompasses leaks from the Bush administration and a former government employee profiting from political connections. Oh, and also the recipe for beef with three peppercorns.

The leaker is Walter Scheib, a onetime White House executive chef. Mr. Scheib was cashiered last year after more than a decade in the job, in part for what some staffers said was a tendency to serve scallops against the first family's wishes. Now, in the grand tradition of Washington insiders finding a second act in the private sector, Mr. Scheib is catering dinner parties, where his \$4,200 minimum fee also covers helpings of dish about the president and his dishes.

Which means guests at some D.C. fetes lately are being treated to revelations about what the commander in chief orders for lunch (peanut butter-and-honey sandwiches are in heavy rotation) and the menu at breakfast meetings (cereal for President Bush, which prompted cabinet members to follow suit).

They're also getting an unusual peek into a corner of the bureaucracy rarely scrutinized. The kitchen has its own budget policies, which require handing bills to the first lady if the monthly food tab exceeds a government-approved limit. There's also, of course, red tape. Mr. Scheib says he and his staff dutifully kept a logbook to track the Bushes' food preferences. And occasional bipartisanship: Mr. Scheib once helped his caterer wife whip up dinner for the Clintons at

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All the President's Menus

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their home in northwest Washington.

The White House has had little to say about Mr. Scheib's endeavor, other than to wish him good luck. Spokeswoman Susan Whitson said the notoriously private family trusts Mr. Scheib to be discreet as he pursues his new endeavor. As for the circumstances of his dismissal, officially the White House says it was nothing personal: Mrs. Bush simply decided to head in a new direction. The White House declined to comment on Mr. Scheib's characterizations of Bush family food preferences.

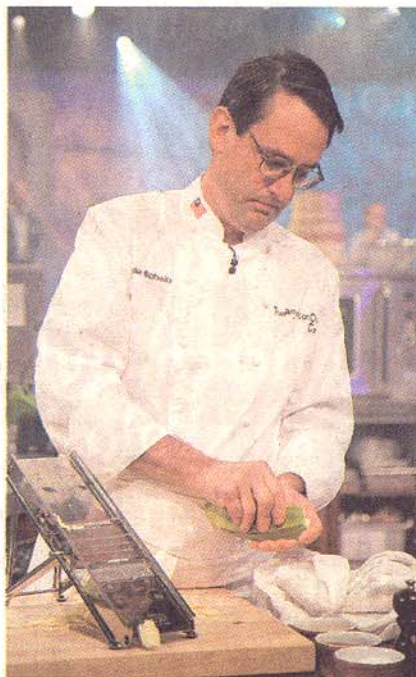
For Mr. Scheib, this Beltway tale began in 1994, when he was hired away from his position as executive chef at the Greenbrier resort by Hillary Clinton. He stayed on as executive chef at the White House for 11 years, through the first Bush term, until he was given his walking papers early in 2005. His take: "It was all about leaving a legacy, and Mrs. Bush can't do that with Mrs. Clinton's chef."

Shortly after leaving the White House, he trademarked himself as "The American Chef" and launched a business cooking dinners at private homes. The idea of adding insider chat to the menu came in June 2005, as Mr. Scheib was serving a meal at real-estate agent Ryall Smith's condo. Mr. Smith had won the American Chef's services at a charity auction. After dinner was served, the chef mingled with the crowd and began to tell stories about White House life. The guests liked the food, but what they really liked was the conversation. And Mr. Scheib's gimmick was born.

One recent rainy night, Mr. Scheib was back at Mr. Smith's condo, with its stunning view of the Capitol dome. The tables were set in lavish style for 13 guests, including a local condo developer and several people who had used Mr. Smith to purchase their homes.

In the kitchen, as Mr. Scheib carefully sectioned a blood orange and monitored the progress of his sous-chef, who was dropping fresh lobster tails into a pot of boiling water, he invoked a decree that he said had come straight from President Bush himself. "No 'wet fish,'" the chef said. "No poaching. No sauces. No sushi." At the Bush table, all seafood arrives at least broiled or preferably fried. This meal would make the "no wet fish" cut. The lobster would be served in a dry satay style, paired with a sweet-potato soup Mr. Scheib invented in 1996, when Chelsea Clinton went vegan.

When he left his White House post, Mr. Scheib gave up a public salary far larger than any given to the president's men. He made \$196,000 in his last year of



On His Own: Former White House chef Walter Scheib shares tales of his old job.

service, compared with the \$161,000 earned by Mr. Bush's top political adviser, Karl Rove. But if Mr. Rove ever decides to hang out his shingle as a K Street lobbyist, the tables almost certainly will be flipped. Mr. Scheib says he's currently making less than his old salary. Mr. Rove would almost certainly earn many multiples of what he's paid now.

Still, hope springs eternal in the world of celebrity chefs. "Hey, they say Emeril Lagasse makes \$30 million a year," Mr. Scheib says. "I'd settle for a piece of that." And tonight, at the Smith residence, Mr. Scheib can look forward to a decent payday—about \$4,500.

The dinner is a riff on White House noshes past: rack of lamb, which was Mrs. Clinton's favorite; her daughter's curried sweet-potato soup; and a salad featuring the roasted beets both first ladies adored. The goat-cheese tart was wrapped in a thin skin of ground corn. "We tip our hat to the Bushes with the tamale dough," Mr. Scheib said.

Not apparent is anything the Bushes' twin daughters may have inspired. "There's a tequila glaze on the lamb," Mr. Scheib said with a wink, in a not-so-subtle reference to the young women's documented penchant for partying.

As a conversationalist, Mr. Scheib is a fine chef. He occasionally flashes annoyance during the question-and-answer session, as he did when a slightly tipsy

guest belted out a question on the minds of many: "What about the scallops?"

Nonsense, Mr. Scheib said. After consulting his records, he said, he'd determined that he had served scallops to the Bushes less than 11 times over four years. If anyone in the family didn't like something, he said, it wouldn't be served again.

As the evening unfolds, there is talk of Mrs. Bush's fondness (and Mr. Bush's wariness) of organic foods, and a subtle dismissal of the current administration's palate—Mr. Scheib notes that a favored Bush dish, cheese grits, called for using canned hominy instead of the vastly superior pozole.

If pressed, Mr. Scheib lets out a few details about life with the most powerful man on the planet and his family. Mr. Scheib's nickname, not surprisingly, was "Cookie." When the president doesn't want peanut butter for lunch, he has his choice of a cheeseburger, a BLT or a grilled-cheese sandwich. After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, and through the first term, lavish dinners all but disappeared from the White House routine, replaced by working lunches and small meals in the residence.

Mr. Scheib dribbles out a little on the Clintons as well. Even during the darkest days of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, he says, Mrs. Clinton never lost her temper with the president in front of the staff. At the morning call for breakfast, "she didn't order her meal and then shove the phone at the president and say, 'Here, order what you want,'" Mr. Scheib says.

During one particularly raucous Christmas, when about 20 guests settled in for a weeks-long stay at the White House, the Clintons racked up a \$20,000 personal food bill, which Mr. Scheib presented to Mrs. Clinton after the festivities were over. "I said, 'We worked the edges and tried to serve leftovers and did what we could,'" Mr. Scheib recalls. "She wrote me a check on the spot." He admits to feeling a special bond with Mrs. Clinton, because she gave him his big chance—one reason, perhaps, he gave his wife a hand with that Thanksgiving dinner for the former first family.

But despite the occasional nugget, the gossip Mr. Scheib dispenses isn't exactly Page Six fare. After letting slip that he secretly brought in nutritionists to critique the fad diets that female White House residents sometimes tried, Mr. Scheib clammed up when asked who it was that was trying to shed a few pounds. "Oh, you know women," he said vaguely, "they're always trying to lose weight."

Mr. Scheib said he has no intention of really dishing the dirt, if such a thing even exists: "Mrs. Bush and I are cool."

President Bush's Favorite: Beef With Three-Peppercorn Sauce



Yield: 4 servings
Active preparation time:
40 minutes
Cooking time: 25 minutes

For the sauce:

1 tablespoon olive oil
1 small carrot, chopped
½ small onion, chopped
½ leek, thinly sliced,
white part only
1 small shallot, chopped
1 garlic clove, minced
1½ teaspoons crushed mixed
peppercorns (black, green
and/or pink)
2 sprigs fresh thyme
½ bay leaf
2 tablespoons cognac, optional
2 tablespoons red wine, optional
1½ teaspoons balsamic vinegar
2 cups low-sodium, store-bought
beef stock or broth

For the beef:

1 piece, beef tenderloin, 1½ to 2
pounds, center cut, trimmed
and tied at 1-inch intervals
with kitchen string

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon olive oil

- Preheat the oven to 425 degrees.
- Heat the oil in a small, heavy-bottomed saucepot over medium-high heat. Add the carrots, onions, leeks, shallots, garlic and peppercorns, and sauté until the vegetables are softened but not browned, about 3 minutes. Stir in the thyme and bay leaf and cook for 30 seconds.
- Pour in the cognac and red wine, if using. Bring to a boil and continue to



Steve Giralt (photographer); Vivian Jao (food stylist); Michelle Hatchkiss (prop stylist)

- boil until almost completely reduced, about 3 minutes.
- Pour in the vinegar and stock, raise heat to high, bring to a boil, then lower heat and let simmer until reduced to one-third, about 20 minutes.
- Strain the sauce through a fine-mesh strainer set over a bowl. Discard the solids. Set aside and keep warm.
- Make the tenderloin: Season the beef generously with salt and pepper.

- Heat the oil in a large, heavy oven-proof skillet over medium-high heat. Sear the tenderloin until browned on all sides, about 8 minutes.
- Transfer the skillet to the oven and roast until an instant-read thermometer inserted to the center of the tenderloin reads 140 degrees for medium-rare, 20 to 25 minutes, or longer for more well done.
- Transfer the tenderloin to a cutting board and let rest for about 7 minutes.
- While the tenderloin is resting, place the hot skillet (wrap a pot holder around the handle) over medium-high heat. Ladle in ½ cup of the sauce into the hot

- pan and cook, scraping the bottom of the pan to loosen any flavorful bits. Bring to a boil and let boil for 2 minutes. Strain the liquid through a fine-mesh strainer and stir into the sauce.
- To serve: Snip off and discard the kitchen string from the tenderloin and slice the tenderloin into ½-inch slices. Place 2 or 3 slices on each of 4 dinner plates. Spoon some sauce over each serving and pass any remaining sauce alongside in a sauceboat.

Walter Scheib's 'Nonpartisan' Roasted-Beet Salad



Yield: 4 servings
Active preparation time:
15 minutes
Cooking time: 45 minutes

1 pound small golden and red beets
or large, quartered
½ red onion, thinly sliced
¼ cup dry-cured black olives, cut
in thin slices
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons white-wine vinegar
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
1 small clove garlic, minced
1 tablespoon chopped cilantro
leaves
1 tablespoon chopped flat-leaf

parsley leaves
1 tablespoon chopped mint leaves
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon ground cumin
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 cups (about 1 five-ounce bag) baby
spinach leaves or regular flat-leaf
spinach, cut in thick ribbons
½ cup crumbled feta cheese

- Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
- Place the beets, whole or in quarters, depending on their size, on a large piece of aluminum foil in a single layer. Gather up the sides of the foil to enclose the beets completely. Transfer to a baking sheet and roast until soft to a knife-tip, about 45 minutes, again de-

- pending on the size of the beets.
- While the beets are cooking, put the onion, olives, oil, vinegar, lemon juice, garlic, cilantro, parsley, mint, oregano and cumin into a large bowl and stir together. Season to taste with salt and pepper.
- Remove the beets from the oven and let cool. Once they are cool enough to handle, but still warm, peel them and cut them into bite-size wedges. Add the beets to the bowl and toss gently to coat with the dressing. Add the spinach and toss again.
- To serve, divide the beet salad among serving salad plates and sprinkle the servings with equal amounts of feta cheese.