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Communicating in the Kitchen with Chef Tom Van Lente



By Melissa Smith

The warm color scheme, low-hanging lights and reclaimed wood décor lend a homey feel to Two Restaurant and Bar. The barn doors adorning the walls paired with the Near West Side Chicago location perfectly encapsulate the heart of the restaurant—rural Midwestern with a hint of urban flair. “What we do here is a pretty refined version of what you would find at somebody’s house, yet extremely familiar,” says Executive Chef Tom Van Lente (CMN ’05). “That’s part of what we wanted our image to be.”

From day one, Van Lente helped craft the identity of Two. “I had the fortunate opportunity to take charge, build a team and put out a product that we’re super proud of,” he explains. “The menu changes constantly—everything is sourced as locally as possible, which is a real challenge in Chicago sometimes.”

“I knew that having a degree in communication was only going to make me that much better. If you know how to talk to people, that can get you pretty far.”

While seafood is imported year-round, he sets the majority of the menu based on what produce is in season. “In the middle of winter, when we are cooking with lots of beets and potatoes, it gets a little redundant, but we come up with new ways to do it, and that really helps us as a team,” he notes. Van Lente works closely with Chef de Cuisine Kevin Cuddihee (LAS ’04) to develop palatable dishes that both satisfy customers and challenge the cooks. “I owe a world of credit to my team,” he adds. “They make me look good on a daily basis, and I’m forever grateful for the work they put in and the pure energy they bring every day.”

On a busy night, Van Lente runs on “pure adrenaline,” watching

the never-ending stream of orders come in “and having the utmost faith in [his] cooks” that the dishes will be just right. “It can be intimidating in the kitchen,” he says. “It’s high stress, high pressure. It’s every emotion rolled into one, but the most important thing is that it’s fun.” Van Lente was raised in the kitchen, getting his “unofficial” start at the family business, Drury Lane Theatre and Conference Center in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill. “Watching what the staff did every day built my interest,” he remembers. “But

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EXTRAS**

Master the art of making mussels by watching Two’s Executive Chef Tom Van Lente prepare them in this step-by-step video: bit.ly/vanlente.

at the time, I wasn’t certain that this was what I wanted to do.” He attended DePaul in hopes of finding out.

“I knew that having a degree in communication was only going to make me that much better. If you know how to talk to people, that can get you pretty far,” he asserts. Van Lente mastered public speaking and interpersonal communication skills with aplomb. “I’ve always been outgoing,” he says. “Majoring in communication gave me practice in gathering information about the way I and others communicate, and that transfers to what I do.”

From reading both verbal and nonverbal cues to understanding the importance of time management, Van Lente applies much of what he learned at DePaul to his work in the kitchen. “Nobody at DePaul said, ‘If you want to be a cook, you should learn this,’” he explains. “But my degree helps me immensely because the way people communicate is important to any manager.”

Equally important to Van Lente was the DePaul experience as a whole. “I loved the fact that DePaul provides a great education, but the experience of living in the greatest city, the challenges that are going to occur and the friends you are going to make—that’s not in any college curriculum,” he emphasizes. “DePaul said, ‘We’ll teach you everything out of the books, but everything else you have to figure out on your own.’ That’s the experience I think everybody needs to have.”