

Chad Durkin

He's 25 and at the top of his game, but just a few years ago he was a culinary student, too. See what you can learn from this rising pastry star and hear his advice for you.

At only 25 years old, Chad Durkin is a poster child for how hard work and dedication can help you accomplish your goals—however ambitious they may be. Already, he has worked as executive pastry chef at award-winning Susanna Foo Chinese Cuisine and The Water Works Restaurant and Lounge, two shining stars on Philadelphia's culinary map. Now, he is executive pastry chef at Exton, Pa.-based Desserts International, LLC., where he has continued certified master chef Gunther Heiland's legacy of providing quality products to some of the country's finest hotels, restaurants and casinos—and he has helped double the company's profits in less than a year.

Sizzle spoke with Durkin from his 6,000-sq. ft. operation to hear his story, find out how his involvement in American Culinary Federation (ACF) culinary competitions has improved his skills and get his advice to students entering the industry.

From artist to chef

Durkin is no stranger to culinary competition. In 2004, he was pastry chef for ACF Culinary Youth Team USA and helped bring home two gold medals, one bronze medal and sixth place overall in the world at the IKA "culinary Olympics" in Germany. In 2007, he placed sixth overall in the cake and showpiece category at Paris Gourmet's U.S. Pastry Competition in New York. Last year, he was one of three semifinalists in ACF's Regional Pastry Chef of the Year competition in Cincinnati. But Durkin's competition career can be traced much further back—to a vocational high school in Bricktown, N.J., where his interest in the culinary industry as a career began.

"I always wanted to be an artist. I loved sculpture and drawing, and my family owned restaurants, so that was always on the back burner of my mind," Durkin says.

This four-tier passion fruit opera torte wedding cake is enhanced with hand-painted stenciled overlays and custom-made gum-paste flowers.

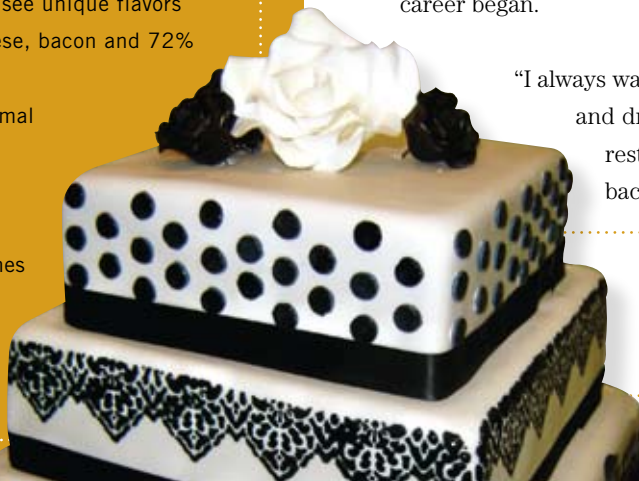
Chad Durkin works on a sugar showpiece for a client for a Celebrate Life event in 2008. Jessica Moyer assists. Durkin builds approximately 12 to 15 showpieces a year for clients, and two or three for competitions.

Courtesy of Dave DiRentis

Dessert Trends

We asked Chad Durkin, executive pastry chef at Desserts International, LLC, what he thought the rising pastry trends would be in the next three years. While he says staple dessert items, such as crème brûlée and warm chocolate cake, aren't going anywhere just yet, chefs are pushing the envelope of the traditional desserts. Here are some trends to look out for:

- Flavor combination: incorporating vegetables into pastries and not making them as sweet. You'll see unique flavors being added to desserts, such as cheese, bacon and 72% dark chocolate.
- Changing what people perceive as normal or standard
- The use of chemicals, stabilizers, emulsifiers and gelifiers
- Modern-style desserts without clean lines or with all counteracting flavors
- More focus on the dining experience



on Culinary Competitions

“At school, chefs came in, did a demo and hosted a competition. I competed and I liked it, so I got enrolled in the program. We learned the front of the house, culinary and pastry. I used my artistic ability as well as pastry skills. That’s where it all started.”

The program exposed Durkin to the multifaceted foodservice industry, and after that, there was no turning back. He attended The Restaurant School at Walnut College in Philadelphia, competed in international competitions and interned under Heiland for more than two years as a pastry cook. Durkin’s ongoing accomplishments can be attributed to his love of food, constantly trying new ideas and his dedication and passion.

“I live, breathe and dream this industry,” he says. “It doesn’t matter what I get paid or who I am working with, it is where my heart is. I could be at a diner or at a five-star hotel. To me, it is still cooking.”

Competitions and connections

A member of ACF Philadelphia Chapter, Durkin has been involved in ACF since 2001. In February, he hosted an experimental seminar at ACF’s Northeast Regional Conference in Boston, *Breaking it Down: A Step-by-Step Guide to Dessert Construction*, and he will host the seminar again at the 2009 ACF National Convention in Orlando.

In last year’s regional Pastry Chef of the Year competition, Durkin tried something new and innovative. Then, with feedback from the judges, he returned to his shop to evaluate their comments and consider ways to incorporate what he learned in future products.

“That critique is priceless,” he says. “These are the people who are eating your food and the ones who appreciate it. As a chef, you don’t always get that feedback.”

For Durkin, the benefits of competing are abundant: Being in the same boat as fellow competitors, you become good friends and build lasting relationships. In addition to the valuable and honest critiques, you learn strategic planning. While competing in front of peers and mentors may not be easy, it is worth it, he says.

Words of wisdom

Finding a mentor, being able to accept constructive criticism and trial and error are all key elements to success. Students need to

take the initiative and take advantage of any learning opportunity offered, Durkin says. Recently, he spoke at a nearby culinary school and offered students the chance to come to his shop, work with him and get a behind-the-scenes look at Desserts International. To his surprise, out of 15 students, only one student called him and took him up on the offer. He says it is that kind of initiative that has a lasting impression on chefs and future employers.

“Most chefs don’t have a natural gift,” he says. “But if you have the devotion and dedication, you can do it.”

So what is the most important thing for students entering the industry to understand? Dedication. You don’t just become a chef overnight, it takes hard work and long hours, he says.

“When you are feeling down, just remember why you are here and what you are doing,” Durkin says. “Set a goal and jump on every opportunity. Don’t second-guess yourself.”

Quick Bite

Born: Haledon, N.J.

Education: bachelor’s degree in pastry arts from The Restaurant School at Walnut Hill College, Philadelphia; continuing-education courses at The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y., and the Notter School of Pastry Arts, Orlando, Fla.

Title: executive pastry chef

Company: Desserts International, LLC, Exton, Pa.

Motto: I make pastry chefs, not pastry cooks. In my shop, you are going to learn all skills and become well-rounded — that’s what makes a chef, not a cook.

Favorite dessert to make: decorating 10-in. gâteaux and making contemporary mousse cakes with layers, assembly, texture and flavor profiles

Favorite dessert to eat: fresh ripened berries and seasonal fruit with vanilla sponge cake. It is natural and pure.

Future goals: become a master pastry chef



National Convention

The 2009 ACF National Convention is just around the corner. More than 2,500 chefs will gather in Orlando, Fla., for the ultimate culinary weekend at the Orlando World Center Marriott, July 11-14. Come hear from industry leaders, network with students from across the country and learn the latest trends and techniques.

Chef Edward Leonard Student Forum

sponsored by Johnson & Wales University

At this much-anticipated convention highlight for student members, **Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC**, hosts a brunch that includes an instructional demonstration and Q & A session.



America's Career University

Breaking it Down: A step-by-step guide to dessert construction

In this seminar, **Chad Durkin** shows how desserts are developed, broken down and recreated.

Don't miss the biggest culinary event of the year. For travel discounts, to register and for up-to-date program information, visit www.acfchefs.org.

A word from our sponsors

Baron H. Galand Culinary Knowledge Bowl

"It is an absolute privilege to sponsor the Knowledge Bowl competition. Success in the industry depends not only on a deep understanding of culinary content, but also on the ability to work effectively with a team and handle oneself with grace under pressure. I am so impressed by the poise of the Knowledge Bowl competitors, and their mastery of such a wide range of content is extraordinary."

— William Lawrensen,
senior acquisitions editor,
Pearson Prentice Hall



Test your knowledge

Here is a sampling of questions from last year's national Knowledge Bowl competition. See if you have what it takes to be a champion. If you get some or all of these questions correct, consider trying out for a spot on a 2010 Knowledge Bowl team.

1. Why does circulating hot air in a convection oven speed up cooking?
2. What spice is used today to color cheddar-like cheeses like Double Gloucester in place of more traditional food colors?
3. What temperature is required for the hot water sanitizer rinse in a warewashing machine?
4. A tourné vegetable has how many evenly spaced cut sides?
5. What type of starch is used to make Asian cellophane noodles?

(Answers are listed at the bottom of this page.)

ACF Student Team National Championship

"I've had many opportunities to not renew sponsorship for this competition, but I've seen the look on the young people's faces, the pride in the parents attending and the excitement of the coaches at the successes that these fine young people have enjoyed. It excites me to see this kind of enthusiasm, and it is a rare thing to experience. I wish them all the best in their chosen field, and I hope to be a part of this competition for a very long time."

— Tom Schreiber, HAAC, HHOF,
president, R. L. Schreiber, Inc.



Why I attend

"I have attended ACF's conference and convention mainly to compete in the Knowledge Bowl. I have experienced so many things that I would never have been exposed to otherwise. Networking at the convention is out of this world and everyone is there for one reason—comradery. It is a great feeling to have the support of so many great chefs around you. Every time I leave a convention, I am inspired to accomplish more and set my standards higher."

Mary Boehne

Team Captain, Chefs de Cuisine
Association of St. Louis Inc.
(2008 Baron H. Galand Culinary
Knowledge Bowl champions)
Pastry Cook
The University Club at the
University of Missouri,
Columbia
Member of Chefs de Cuisine
Association of St. Louis Inc.



Answers: 1) It equalizes the heat's distribution for more rapid and even cooking 2) Annatto 3) 180°F 4) 7 5) Mung bean starch