

Kurt Hankins:

Master of Menus
for the Masses

Chances are good
you've eaten a meal
created by this 1983
UK graduate.

By Beverly Bell



Attention, all you Rachael Ray wannabees; you Tyler Florence groupies and Paula Deen devotees; get a pad and pen and take down this recipe for real success in the kitchen:

- Pick parents who are good cooks. (Hint: if they have canned pasta in their pantry that's one notch better than dog food; keep looking.)
- Start cooking young, very young. (Think pre two-wheel bikes.)
- When you're old enough, get a job at a restaurant.
- Stay in the business through and after college, learning all facets, from purchasing to portion size.
- Make food your obsession. Think about it in the shower, on vacation, surfing the Internet, at competitor restaurants, while reading magazines and playing golf.
- Stick with it — for like 30 years — and then maybe one day you'll have the opportunity to be in charge of menus for the largest casual restaurant chain in the world.

Kurt Hankins didn't write the preceding recipe; he lives it. As senior vice president of menu development and innovation at Applebee's International Inc., the 1983 University of Kentucky graduate develops

food for the company's 1,938 restaurant locations in 16 countries.

In the case of a restaurant, the menu is the engine that drives the train. And Hankins has been at the controls for six years, creating and improving more than 90 percent of Applebee's selections during that time.

"I like being called the MenuMaster."

Movies have the Oscar. Musicals have the Tony. Restaurateurs have the MenuMaster, a peer-nominated award given out by one of the industry's leading publications, *Nation's Restaurant News*.

First bestowed in 1997, the prize recognizes the best in the business. Hankins has won the honor an unprecedented three times; in 1998 when he was with Red Lobster; and again in 2002 and 2005 with Applebee's.

So what makes a "MenuMaster"? In Hankins' case, good instincts might play a role. Sometimes, he just knows an item will be well received by the public. He felt that way a few years ago when he intro-

Hankins Claim To Fame: Creator Of Cheddar Bay Biscuits

During his 11 years with Red Lobster, Hankins was tasked with creating a bread that was "cravable." A sister company at the time, Olive Garden, was known for its breadsticks, but Red Lobster had no equivalent.

Hankins' response was the irresistible Cheddar Bay Biscuits. At one point it was the most requested recipe among restaurant dishes. An Internet search will result in literally thousands of suggested methods for making the biscuits.

Of course, Hankins knows the secret formula, but can't reveal it. "I told my daughter, 'Those biscuits are putting you through college.'"

duced Weight Watchers dishes to the Applebee's menu.

"It just filled a niche that wasn't out there — really good portions and high quality, good tasting food that was very good for you," he says.

"It's not just a couple of people in the kitchen whipping up recipes. It's a science."

Those recipes for a Bruschetta Burger or the Pecan-Crusted Chicken Salad didn't just float into Applebee's headquarters on a feather. Menu development is serious business, with billions of dollars riding on final decisions.

According to Hankins, most large restaurant companies will change their menus one to two times a year, in addition to short-term promotions during which "limited-time" offerings are featured. And while Hankins acknowledges that "a flash of brilliance" or inspiration sparks a menu idea, the process of bringing the brainstorm to the consumer is very methodical.

He and a group of 16 culinary professionals start with approximately 200 ideas a year. Extensive product development and consumer testing takes place in small focus groups (complete with two-way mirrors) and in restaurants. Special internal teams evaluate and continually refine the product until the pricing and promotion phases are reached. At the end, only a small number of dishes actually find their way onto the restaurant menu.

Since the chain serves about one million people a day, Hankins and his team are never really finished. "You're always working on making yourself better or adding new things. And when you get to the point that you're going to put new food out there, you better make sure it's right."



Kurt Hankins, center, poses with his team of Applebee's chefs.

Chefs Who Inspire Hankins

Paula Deen – “She’ll be cooking with Grand Marnier and then she’ll take a little drink of it. I like that. I like chefs that cook and drink while they cook.”

Tyler Florence – “I think Tyler’s a great chef. And when you watch how he does it and the way he thinks about food, it’s a lot of fun. He doesn’t measure a lot. He’s kind of like a pinch and a throw, and that’s how I like to cook. I hate even using measuring spoons.”

Emeril Lagasse – “Emeril has done a lot for people’s interest in cooking. He’s approachable, but he’s a great chef.”

Paul Prudhomme – “I just like his philosophy. He grew up with no electricity, so when he opened his New Orleans restaurant, K-Paul’s, he didn’t have a freezer. Basically, the idea was that you have to bring in stuff and cook it that day. I like that, cooking that fresh.”

“Americans want it all.”

As restaurant-goers, American consumers are a schizophrenic lot. One day, we’re ordering a 1,400 calorie, 90 plus fat gram mega-burger. The next, we want broiled tilapia with brown rice, while interrogating the waitress about the trans-fat content. Then we order a diet drink with a slice of pie on the side.

Hankins says that this “bipolar” approach to food isn’t unusual, it just means that consumers aren’t a homogeneous mass. We choose different foods for different occasions. If we go out with our friends, we’ll order one thing. When we eat with our significant other, we’ll order something else. A graduation celebration means one type of food; a quick lunch with co-workers calls for another. Visiting a restaurant while we are on vacation results in different choices than eating at the neighborhood diner. Stated another way, it’s less about palate than purpose.

That’s not to say that taste isn’t important; on the contrary, it’s everything. “What they want is great tasting food first,” Hankins says. “It’s got to taste great. And if it doesn’t... they won’t eat it.”

Also, maybe Americans are a bit food obsessed. People are surrounded by every imaginable type of restaurant and super-size grocery stores, along with access to 24-hour food channels and hundreds of food magazines.

“The American public is getting more

and more educated on food,” says Hankins. “Our challenge is to keep meeting the rising expectations of the American dining public. The definition of great food is constantly evolving.”

“I made a decision that I was going to stay in the restaurant business, take my degree and cook my way to the top.”

Like a recipe that didn’t turn out the way he had expected, Hankins’ first major at the University of Kentucky wasn’t what he thought it would be.

Aptitude tests had shown Hankins possessed a proclivity for science and math, so the New Jersey native who grew up in Lexington, Ky., chose civil engineering. One year into the program — and an early morning physics class — convinced Hankins that engineering wasn’t for him.

A marketing class set him on a new direction. “I remember thinking it was a lot more interesting,” says Hankins. “I ended up transferring into the business school and getting my degree in marketing.” It’s a choice he’s never regretted. “Throughout my career, marketing has been an outstanding major to have had along with the culinary piece of what I do because in my world of product development and menu innovation for major chains, most of that function is under the marketing arm of a big corporation. Having the culinary background and the marketing degree was a very unique combination of skills that I think has really helped me.”

Hankins can still recall taking Introduction to Marketing with James Donnelly. “The class opened my eyes to what marketing was all about and Professor Donnelly was an outstanding presenter, very funny and informative. I really knew I was in the right place after that.”

Upon graduation, Hankins could have pursued more traditional routes, such as advertising or sales. But he was already on a different path, working full-time as a restaurant manager for the now defunct Chi Chi’s Mexican Food Restau-



Kurt Hankins and his wife Denise met with Emeril Lagasse, center, during a MenuMaster meeting.

Firsts, Favorites & Tips

First Time He Cooked

"I was seven years old and I got up on a Sunday morning, pulled out the Bisquick box, made the Bisquick coffee cake, and surprised my parents with it when they got up. I think they were surprised that I didn't burn the house down."

rants. When they offered him further advancement, he accepted the promotion and never looked back.

"A hamburger cooked over charcoal is just a religious experience."

At work, Hankins is either in his office, a kitchen or at a restaurant developing and tweaking dishes.

But the process doesn't stop once he gets home. "Many a weekend, I'm in the kitchen — all weekend — just going nuts on all kinds of creations," he says. "My family, they're willing participants in trying different things."

And what is his preferred method when cooking for his wife and two teenage daughters? Grilling. Hankins grills everything.

"I can grill desserts. I can grill pizzas. I can smoke on a grill. We grill out about every night. I go through four or five propane tanks a summer and a mountain of charcoal. I use both."

For Hankins, it's all about the flavor that grilling creates. "You just can't beat grilled food in my mind. It's like free seasoning. To cook over red hot charcoals or hardwood gives you some wonderful flavors that don't add any calories."

It's also about freshness. Fresh ingredients are the key to making food taste better, says Hankins. "My mother went to the grocery once a week. That was the program. But we go probably twice a day. We're grocery-aholics."

"People just don't eat at home anymore."

According to the National Restaurant Association, sales in the United States are expected to reach a record \$537 billion this year, with Americans spending nearly 48 percent of their food budget in restaurants.

Hankins describes a heavy user of restaurants as someone who eats out three or four times a week. He says that the trend has been building for years. With the rising number of two-income households, less time for cooking and more schedule demands for both parents and children, dining out is an opportunity for families to come together.

"People still need to connect and frankly, when everybody gets home at 6:30 at night, you're just not going to cook dinner," he says. "Even though they have their favorite restaurants, they definitely like going to new places. And if you have something that's new and interesting, they'll definitely give you a try."

Lots of issues face the restaurant industry: rising gas prices and shrinking discretionary income, more farmers growing corn for ethanol instead of for food, and stiff competition.

"You have to be thinking two or three years out in this job."



Kurt Hankins and his daughter Jenna participated in the third annual Run for the Riblets, a 5k charity event he created in Overland Park, Kan.

Favorite Junk Food

Salt and vinegar chips, dark chocolate. "Mars recently introduced dark chocolate M&Ms. Oh man, those are deadly," Hankins says.

Favorite Comfort Food

"I love homemade grilled pizzas. I could eat that every night."

Favorite Food As A Child

"My father used to make lots of pies and puddings. He was a big dessert guy and made some killer apple pies. That was probably one of my favorite foods growing up."

Tricks to Make Food Taste Better

"I finish a lot of food with fresh lemon, fresh lime. Just takes flavors up to new levels." The same is true for herbs such as cilantro and basil, Hankins says. "It's surprising to me how many people are still using dried basil out of the little shaker. Fresh herbs just make all the difference in the world and add no calories."

Ingredient No Kitchen Should Be Without

Extra Virgin Olive Oil. "I put it in everything, drizzle it on stuff, and make dressings with it. It's great."

Hankins doesn't dwell on these. Instead, he follows the advice of hockey great Wayne Gretzky. Someone once asked the superstar why he was such a superior player. "Most hockey players skate to where the puck is," Gretzky explained. "I skate to where the puck is going to be."

It's a philosophy that Hankins shares, working on food now that will be featured in 2008 and beyond — skating along and satisfying millions of appetites along the way.

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