

Revving the Engine

New Executive Chef Scott Poff is drawing on his Southern roots and extensive experience—including two stints at The Greenbrier—to bring new culinary excitement to the Country Club of Lansing (Mich.)

by Jerry Schreck (editor@clubandresortbusiness.com) August 2008



The Country Club of Lansing, in Michigan's capital city and near Michigan State University, was founded in 1908. Over its 100-year history, its course and clubhouse have seen steady improvements, to remain mid-Michigan's premier club and offer a wide variety of amenities to what is now a membership of 650.

This past spring, the club took another step to advance its leadership position, hiring Scott Poff as its new Executive Chef. Scott's resume includes two tours at The Greenbrier—first as an apprentice and most recently as Chef d' cuisine at Sam Snead's Golf Club, the resort's 200-seat restaurant that includes Slammin' Sammy's bar and brings in \$5 million in annual revenues. A West Virginia native, Scott has also worked in a variety of other resort and club settings (see below).



Chef Scott Poff - Profile:

Current Position: Executive Chef, Country Club of Lansing (MI)

Time There: Since April 2008

Previous Club/Resort Experience:

Chef d' Cuisine, The Greenbrier (Sam Snead's Golf Club)

Executive Sous Chef, Williamsburg (Va.) Inn

Executive Chef, Little Harbor Club, Harbor Springs, Mich.

Banquet Chef, Gulf Stream

Golf Club, Delray Beach, Fla.

Restaurant General Manager, Snowshoe (W. Va.) Resort

Education:

Johnson and Wales University, Charleston, S.C.

Culinary Apprenticeship:

The Greenbrier

Q & A

Chef Poff was brought to the Country Club of Lansing with the charge of bringing high-end restaurant cuisine to its menus. The timing added to his challenge, as Michigan's auto-based economy has been especially hard-hit by the effect of soaring fuel prices. But he has forged ahead, drawing on his resort background and Southern roots to bring some exciting new touches to a traditional club setting. We appreciate that he took time from his new duties to fill us in on what he's trying to achieve:

Q: Scott, how has your membership reacted to some of the new dinner menus you've introduced?

A: In a country club with 650 members, it's challenging to meet everyone's needs. We have four separate dining areas with different "DNA" serviced by the same kitchen. It makes it challenging to fulfill the anniversary dinner, along with golfing buddies who just want a drink and a quesadilla.

Typically, country clubs with one kitchen tend to offer too much menu diversity to service the needs of their membership. It's up to the chefs to determine when you are close to overloading the kitchen and staff, which could result in sacrificing quality and, in turn, create a mediocre experience for all diners. You have to have the same amount of passion when you make a cheeseburger as you do when making filet of sole Veronique.

Q: How do your roots as a chef who grew up in the South benefit you in a Midwestern setting?

A: I have already had a lot of success bringing Southern cuisine to the membership here at the club. Many of our members vacation or have second homes in the South, so they are now glad that this type of cooking is being made available to them when they're here. Some of our new menu items with Southern roots are Southern fried chicken and collard greens with hog jowls.

Q: During your two stints at The Greenbrier, beyond fundamental culinary skills, what key knowledge did you gain there?

A: The Greenbrier and its staff has played a major role in the development of my career. There are so many "walking encyclopedias" at your fingertips when you work there, and it was up to me to build relationships and learn all I could as an apprentice and sous chef. When you are put in an arena with Certified Master Chefs like Peter Timmins and John Johnstone, in addition to great food and beverage minds like Rod Stoner, it becomes a part of your soul, and you "bleed green."

Q: What are some of the main challenges you've faced, coming from resorts to a private club?

A: First, there's the need to locate available products and have them arrive in stellar condition. Fortunately, I still have great relationships with people I've worked with in the past, and I've used them as a resource to locate products that meet my specifications.

Also, larger resorts attract higher skill levels and more goal-oriented staffs; it's a challenging transition at the club level to communicate what everyone needs to understand about culinary vocabulary and cooking techniques. Fortunately, I inherited a staff that is motivated to learn and become better at their culinary craft.

Q: Speaking of staff, when you were interviewed by the local Lansing paper after arriving (for the full interview, see the online version of this article at www.clubandresortbusiness.com), you mentioned a lapse in overall workforce performance. What specifically were you referring to?

A: Over the past 10 years, I've noticed that students coming from culinary colleges think they're ready to accept a management job in the kitchen. I don't know about other chefs, but I graduated from Johnson & Wales with a 3.99 GPA—but when I left culinary college, while I could write a complete paper on braising, I could not achieve it on the stove. In my opinion, young culinarians are not taking the time to train under talented chefs and gain complete understanding of the craft of cooking. It seems they want to pass by standard cooking techniques and move on to molecular gastronomy and cooking sous vide.

Q: Your arrival coincided with some big economic challenges in that area. How has that affected your approach?

A: Yes, Michigan has been hit fairly hard by the repositioning of the automobile industry, and this economic downturn has had a negative impact on morale in the entire state. The direct effect on the country club business is that we have to continually seek ways to increase membership value and the diversity of the amenities that we offer.

There are also new challenges regarding the price of raw food, which is up approximately four percent. The increased cost of delivery is being passed on to our bottom-line food cost. It remains up to us as chefs to find ways to work through this, by planning menus creatively and limiting deliveries to the club.

Featured Recipe

WILD MUSHROOM STEW

Yield: 2 Gallons

Amount	Ingredient
5 lbs.	Assorted Mushrooms, in season
12 ozs.	Onions
6 ozs.	Leeks
½ cup	Garlic
½ cup	Shallots
375 ml	Noilly Prat Vermouth
	375 ml Madeira Wine
1.5 gals.	Chicken Stock
12 ozs.	Whole Butter
1 qt.	Heavy Cream
1 ea.	Bouquet Qarni
to taste	Salt and Pepper

For the Truffle Cream:

Amount	Ingredient
1 cup	Heavy Cream
2 tsp.	White Truffle Oil
to taste	Salt and Pepper

- Whip cream to stiff peak
- Fold in truffle oil gently
- Season with salt and pepper

Procedure:

- Sweat all vegetables in butter
- Add wines and reduce to au sec
- Sinter (lightly dust) with flour to make roux
- Gradually add hot stock
- Stir to a boil and add bouquet garni
- Simmer for 30 minutes, and remove bouquet garni
- Puree in blender until smooth
- Cream out at service
- Garnish with small cuts of mushroom, Asiago chip and shaved chives



Featured Recipe

CORIANDER-DUSTED WHITEFISH

Amount	Ingredient
(2) 3-oz	Whitefish Filets
<i>Suggested Garnishes:</i>	
to taste	Tomato Concasse
to taste	Bacon Brunoise
to taste	Shaved Chives

For the Coriander Flour:

Amount	Ingredient
1 cup	Coriander Seed
1/4 cup	Fennel Seed
2 ½ lbs.	AP flour
to taste	Cayenne Pepper
to taste	Salt

Procedure:

- Toast seeds, let cool and mill to powder
- Add to flour and season with pepper and salt

For the Frisee Salad:

Amount	Ingredient
to taste	Frisee
to taste	Spicy Olives
to taste	Chive Batons

For the Bacon Vinaigrette:

Amount	Ingredient
8 slices	Smoked Bacon
4 tbsp.	Shallots
4 tsp.	Garlic
8 ozs.	Rice Vinegar
16 ozs.	Canola Oil
1 ea.	Egg Yolk
1 tsp.	Truffle Oil
1 tsp.	Dijon Mustard
to taste	Chives
to taste	Salt and Pepper

Procedure:

- Render bacon and remove from grease
- Add remaining ingredients, except for oil and chives
- Puree in blender and add oil slowly
- Fold in chives



For the Bacon Onion Butter:

Amount	Ingredient
2 lbs.	Apple-Smoked Bacon
4 tbsp.	Olive Oil
4 ea.	Shallots
½ cup	Sherry Vinegar
1 cup	Chicken Stock
1 cup	Butter
2 tsp.	Tabasco
2 tbsp.	Corn Starch
to taste	Salt and Pepper

Final Assembly:

- Dredge whitefish in coriander flour and sauté
- Plate fish and top with bacon onion butter (above)
- Garnish with bacon, onion and chives
- Toss frisee salad in bacon vinaigrette; top fish and serve