

GEORGE MORRONE *Executive Chef*

For over two decades, diners and critics have heralded George Morrone as one of the most creative and accomplished chefs in the country. The only Bay Area chef ever to



be awarded four-stars twice, Morrone has fomented many of the region's major culinary trends, and his sensibilities regarding flavor, technique, and aesthetics have influenced California's culinary lexicon.

Words like *witty*, *artistic*, and *inspired* have all been used to describe Morrone, voted Chef of the Year in 1992 and 2002 and frequently featured in the PBS series *Great Chefs*. His food, full of playful sensibility and fueled by a solid grounding in classical technique, lends itself to the label, "Modern French with a twist." It's that emphasis on the twist that departs his distinct signature to each dish.

The Jersey native got an early start to the culinary life, working at a bakery throughout high school before enrolling at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA). Upon graduation in 1981, Morrone went to work at New York's acclaimed River Café and spent three years there before chef Bradley Ogden—recognizing something special in the young chef—recruited him to be the Executive Sous

Chef at Campton Place in San Francisco. He got his chance at the top toque as Executive Chef of the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles, where for 5 years he cooked for A-list celebrities, dignitaries and high society while defining and refining his own personal style of cooking.

Morrone returned to San Francisco to open Aqua (with friend and partner Michael Mina), where he held dual roles as co-owner and chef. It was there he earned a four-star review for his innovative seafood creations, establishing him as one of the country's great culinary talents.

From Aqua, Morrone moved on to other projects—including reuniting with Ogden at One Market Restaurant—before helping to create the Fifth Floor restaurant, also with Shapoorian. The instant accolades culminated in his second four-star review. In 2001, Morrone left to open Redwood Park and reunite with his old partner, Michael Mina.

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Travel has also been an integral component to Morrone's development as a chef. He spent a year in France eating and acquainting himself with the best of the country's contemporary cooking. In 2003, his travels took him to Australia, where he turned his talents to helping an old friend—celebrated chef Mark Miller—open his new venture, Wild Fire. With Morrone's help the 300-seat, 450-cover, "restaurant-as-theater" concept has quickly become Sydney's hottest destination dining room.

His time in Australia exposed him to unique ingredients, like *finger limes*—a tart citrus composed of crunchy pearls, and he found himself enthralled with the tremendous influence from Bali prevalent in Australia. Morrone brought some of those exotic ingredients, techniques, and influences back with him to further fuel his creativity, as seen on one of his dishes like his *Ostrich Tartare*.

For five years, Morrone had the opportunity to travel around the world with other renowned chefs on five-day tours sponsored by Hudson Valley Fois Gras, cooking in such far-flung places as Moscow, Jerusalem, Buenos Aires, and many others. During these tours he worked side-by-side with his most important mentor, Jean-Louis Palladin. "From Jean-Louis, I simply got a sense of perfection. He never settled: if it wasn't perfect, he wouldn't serve it. He wouldn't hesitate to make diners wait rather than serve anything not completely up to his standards," he says. "The end result was always amazing. I never heard any complaints." The two shared a close bond in the kitchen, and Palladin paid him the greatest compliment of his career, says Morrone, when he told him that if he was cooking in Europe he would surely have earned two Michelin stars. "I'll never forget that," he says.

Morrone, in turn, mentors within his own kitchen; many members of staff have moved along with him to different restaurants. His chef de cuisine at Tartare was initially the sous chef at Fifth Floor, before following him to Redwood Park and Wild Fire. "It's like a family in the kitchen. If cooks *get* me, they tend to stay around," says Morrone, who places a high value on investing time and energy in developing staff. "I'm tough, but fair and honest," he says. "The best way to manage people is to gain their respect. I demand a lot from my staff, but I am always ready to share my knowledge and explain why."

As generous as Morrone is with his cooks, he's even more so with his diners, believing hospitality to be an essential compliment to cuisine. His partner, Shapoorian, says that Morrone never misses an opportunity to mingle with his guests, many times personally delivering plates as they come out of the kitchen. "You can't keep him out of the dining room," says Shapoorian, smiling. "It can be a challenge for the servers, but the diners love it."

With his many-starred pedigree, Morrone understands that expectations for him are always high, but he says that his vision is more about creative fine dining in a casual, relaxed environment without any pretense or stuffiness.

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