

FOOD & BEVERAGE

Marcus Restaurant Group chefs team up with Wisconsin vendors

By Matthew Marin
Associate Editor

MILWAUKEE—Marcus Restaurant Group—which manages restaurant concepts for Marcus Hotels & Resorts, a division of Marcus Corporation that owns and manages hotels in the U.S.—has conceived a program that pairs three of the group's hotels located here with local purveyor partners.

The Straight to Your Plate program, which began last spring, partners Marcus Restaurant Group's chefs with a variety of vendors throughout the state of Wisconsin. Every month, the chefs have featured local ingredients in a special dish for each of the group's three Milwaukee restaurants—Kil@wat, inside the InterContinental Milwaukee Hotel; Mason Street Grill, situated in the Pfister Hotel; and Milwaukee ChopHouse, located in the Hilton Milwaukee.

With ingredients from local vendors, Marcus Restaurant Group's culinary team has created specialty dishes such as Spanish chorizo from Underground Food Collective in Madison, WI; lemon cardamom purple ice cream from Door Ice Cream in Milwaukee; and Montmorency cherries from Seaquist Orchards in Door County, WI. The chefs have found new ways to incorporate ingredients into other courses.

"One of the highlights of this program is the diverse dishes our chefs come up with each month using the same ingredient," said Peggy Williams-Smith, VP of food and beverage for Marcus Hotels

& Resorts. "For example, we featured King David Apples from Weston's Antique Apple Orchards in November, and the chefs created two dessert dishes—a cobbler and an apple-buckle cake—and an entrée, Sonoma Duck breast with shaved apples."

Prior to launching the Straight to Your Plate program, Marcus Restaurant Group was looking for new ways to tie its Milwaukee restaurants together. The group had previously embraced the farm-to-table concept across all of its restaurants using local ingredients, but wanted to provide a memorable experience to guests as well.

"We wanted to go beyond simply picking a featured ingredient each month," said Williams-Smith. "We wanted to make it special, unique and something we could be proud of. And, since our chefs are familiar with so many great, local Wisconsin vendors, we decided to incorporate the vendors into our efforts."

Marcus Restaurant Group also wanted to provide the local vendors with an opportunity to promote their business through the Straight to Your Plate website and marketing outreach. The collaborations are documented with online videos filmed on location at the vendor's site that show how the ingredient is made. Additional videos show the chefs creating a dish using the featured ingredient.

"The video production style also really plays into the sincerity of the purveyor's story, and tends to tug on the viewer's heartstrings a bit," said



Williams-Smith. "The program is the perfect combination of great food with premium ingredients, mixed with talented chefs, wonderful restaurants and stellar Wisconsin-based purveyors."

To find flavorful ingredients and entrées, Marcus Restaurant Group turned to its chefs to help choose vendors throughout Wisconsin, such as Nueske's Applewood Smoked Meats. This family-owned purveyor, based in Wittenberg, WI, has offered smoked bacon, sausage, turkeys and ham for eight decades.

"We have previously established relationships with Nueske's and a few of our other purveyors whose products we may already use on property," said Williams-Smith. "Some of the new vendors, though, have been on our chefs' radars for some time, and they have been waiting for an opportunity to meet and work with them, which Straight to Your Plate has enabled."

The program, according to the company, appeals to a demographic of restaurant patrons who appreciate dishes with locally sourced ingredients, such as rainbow trout from Rushing Waters Fisheries, based in Palmyra, WI, or one of the most requested ingredients in the restaurants—cheddar cheese from local providers such as Carr Valley Cheese in La Valle, WI.

"Wisconsin has a rich variety of ingredients grown or processed locally to work with due to our seasonal climate changes," said Williams-Smith. "Wisconsin is home to purveyors of ingredients you might never think of, such as cherries, cranberries, rice and bison. So, it really is incredible."

Besides satisfying the culinary tastes



Marcus Restaurant Group's culinary team has created specialty dishes featuring ingredients such as rainbow trout from Rushing Waters Fisheries.

of hotel guests, the company is also using the Straight to Your Plate program to promote its food and beverage offerings to food enthusiasts in Wisconsin.

"Increasing F&B awareness of the Marcus Restaurant Group locally is our main goal. The Marcus brand has a long legacy in Milwaukee," said Williams-Smith. "We want to eliminate the negative stigma that hotel restaurants have had in the past, and show that they are real players in Milwaukee's culinary scene."

Since presenting the new dishes at its three restaurants, the group has received positive feedback from patrons and hotel guests alike. "The guests absolutely love it, as it allows them to learn about each of the purveyors, their history and their food," said Williams-Smith. "Seeing how our chefs take that food and incorporate it into a new dish each month is not only something our patrons are constantly learning from and enjoying, but is also a reason they come back each month." **HB**



Wisconsin-based purveyors, such as Carr Valley Cheese, provide locally sourced cheeses to the chefs of Marcus Restaurant Group.