

New Stars Shine At L'etoile

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By Samara Kalk Derby The Capital Times

Tory Miller remembers when he first came aboard at L'Etoile. Odessa Piper invited him to prepare a meal out of the ingredients the kitchen had on hand. He made fried potatoes, trout and beets. "We were so into eating the food. That's when I knew it was going to be a good relationship," he said. "It's all about the fried potatoes, right?" Piper quipped, adding, "I'm a pretty powerful chef with strong ideas. He was right there, he was really into it, we were really engaged."

What's more, the two of them are not competitive with each other, Piper said, sipping jasmine tea during an interview Thursday. "Tory has really influenced our cuisine here in his chef de cuisine role," she said.

Tory and Traci Miller grew up working in their family's Racine restaurant, the Park-In Drive-In. They will be equal partners in L'Etoile, with Tory handling the kitchen and Traci managing the business side. Traci, 32, graduated from the UW-Madison School of Pharmacy in 1995 and later helped put her younger brother through a nine-month program at the French Culinary Institute in New York City, where he studied under famous French chefs like Jacques Pepin, Andre Soltner and Jacques Torres. He graduated second in his class.

The Millers say there was no sibling rivalry between them when they were growing up. If anything, they would team up against their older brother, Traci said. "It's the second time she's come through for me in my culinary life," Tory said. "When I went out to New York I needed help mentally and financially."

At the time, Traci said she was seven years into her profession and had the ability to finance her brother's culinary education. She characterized her own job as "more of a means to an end for me, whereas he has a real passion for cooking. I'm so in awe of that." Traci is in the process of moving to Madison from Racine, where she owns a home and works as a pharmacist. She will continue to work there -- Sunday and Monday -- when the restaurant is closed.

Tory doesn't have the name recognition that Piper does, but his work in the kitchen has already won rave reviews. Veteran New York Times gourmand R.W. Apple Jr. came to Madison last fall to test Tory's chops. The reporter -- whose nickname is "Three Lunches" Apple -- described the Farmers' Market and his subsequent L'Etoile meal rapturously. His menu included ribeye steak, an heirloom tomato sampler, a wild and exotic mushroom salad, a cheese plate with about 10 Wisconsin cheeses, and chef Tory's hot beignets.

Closer to home, John Priske said, "I'm one of the most ecstatic farmers you'll meet right now" upon hearing that Tory is taking over the restaurant. Priske, who runs Fountain Prairie farm with his wife Dorothy, has supplied meats to L'Etoile for three years. He credits the restaurant for putting his Fall River business -- 35 miles north east of Madison -- on the map. "Tory is one of the best chefs I've ever worked with in my life. He knows quality when he sees it and when he tastes it. He has an artisan way of working with our meat."

And the admiration is mutual, with Tory telling Priske, "Sometimes your steaks bring me to tears."

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