

CHEF'S PANTRY

A PEEK INTO THEIR SECRET CULINARY STASH

BY KRISTEN MANIERI • PHOTOS BY ALAN FRAEBEL



Kaitlin McGavock

KAITLIN MCGAVOCK

BARTENDER, THE COURTESY BAR

KAITLIN MCGAVOCK WAS NOT YOUR TYPICAL 21-year-old bar fly. For starters, while most girls her age were ordering light beer or chardonnay, her drink of choice was gin topped off with a splash of the bitters she would pull out of her handbag. “My drink was always gin, but no one ever had bitters behind the bar. So I would carry a little bottle with me,” McGavock says. “That inspired me to start thinking about what bitters were and how I could use my passion for culinary arts to make my own.”

Fast forward a few years—you’ll now find McGavock behind the bar at The Courtesy, a craft cocktail bar where her arsenal of at least a half-dozen homemade bitters fascinates the clientele. “Bitters are the salt and pepper of a cocktail,” she says. “A Manhattan is my first love; my grandfather drank them. You have whisky and vermouth and you put them together. But it’s not a married product until you put that one drop of bitters in. That makes it shine. Bitters create depth in a drink and can turn it into a completely different product.”

McGavock says she made her first batch of bitters five years ago, blindly experimenting with basic combinations and improving one batch at a time. “I have books and books and books on what herbs are for what ... but really, you have to get used to how things play with each other.”

“Bitters go with the foodie movement. People are now so interested in what’s going on their plate. This has trickled down into craft beer and craft cocktails. I think people’s fascination with where food comes from has affected our bar culture.”

This December, McGavock will sell her Daughters and Co. bitters at Stardust Video and Coffee’s Grandma Party Bazaar, an eclectic craft and vintage fair.

Kaitlin McGavock’s Orange Bitters for Beginners

Makes about 2 cups

2 cups grain alcohol over 100-proof
Colored peels from 5 oranges (avoid white pith)
6 to 7 green cardamom pods, cracked open
5 allspice berries, cracked open
6 cloves, lightly pressed
3 or 4 black peppercorns, cracked open
2 tablespoons demerara sugar*

1 Put all ingredients into a 24-ounce jar with a tight-fitting lid. Secure tightly with lid and set aside in a dark place for 3 weeks. Give the jar a shake every day.

2 Pour mixture through a coffee filter and discard solids.

*Demerara sugar is also called turbinado sugar. It’s available in most supermarkets.

3 Transfer mixture to an amber colored jar. Store at room temperature for up to 1 year.



Kathleen Blake

KATHLEEN BLAKE

OWNER/EXECUTIVE CHEF, THE RUSTY SPOON

“THEY CALL ME THE PICKLE QUEEN,” says Kathleen Blake of her staff at The Rusty Spoon. “I’m from Iowa. We pickled everything. Anything we have a little extra of, I say let’s pickle it and see what happens.”

Brining is a big part of the kitchen at The Rusty Spoon, where house pickles are whipped up in 30-gallon batches and sometimes are devoured at a rate of 10 gallons per week.

Blake has pickled peaches, celery and green tomatoes (her favorite), taking whimsical culinary liberties as she tosses in bay leaves, peppercorns, mustard seeds and dill. Her pickling propensities are fueled, in part, by her natural inclination to recycle and reduce kitchen waste, but this seasoned chef also knows a thing or two about the ways flavors harmonize and bring out each other’s strengths.

She says the pickles always start with a simple vinegar-sugar combination, but she and her staff often play around with complementary spices and herbs. For instance, when pickling tomatoes, Blake adds serrano chili and coriander seeds for a welcome bit of heat and floral spice.

Most people don’t give a lot of thought to the pickle on the plate, but at The Rusty Spoon, it’s there for good reason. “When you’re eating a burger, the acidity cuts through the richness,”

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Sean Woods

Blake says. "And have you ever had a grilled cheese with spicy pickles? It changes the whole dish."

Chef Kathleen's Green Tomato Jam

Makes approximately 1 pint

2 pounds green tomatoes, diced ½ inch
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
1½ teaspoons cumin
½ cup honey
Kosher salt to taste
¼ teaspoon cayenne
½ cup cider vinegar
Grated fresh ginger to taste
2 cinnamon sticks

- 1 Combine all ingredients in a large saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring to combine.
- 2 Bring to a boil, then lower heat to medium-low and simmer until thick, about 40 minutes.
- 3 Cool completely, then spoon into jars. Keep refrigerated for up to 1 week.

SEAN WOODS

EXECUTIVE CHEF, THE RITZ-CARLTON ORLANDO,
GRANDE LAKES

OVER THE YEARS, SEAN WOODS has honed his food philosophy: "Keep it simple, concentrate on real ingredients and try not to over-manipulate them. A carrot should taste like a carrot. It's better to let the food speak for itself."

The simplicity of barbecue lends itself well to Woods' "keep it simple" credo, and he's spent a decade perfecting the art of the rub. His home grill has seen its share of whole chickens, backbone removed, laid flat and dressed in one of his favorite combinations of spices. "I dust it with the rub generously on all sides and let it sit for about 45 minutes to allow it to come to room temperature before grilling," Woods says. "The rub puts a nice crispy skin on the chicken."

Woods suggests playing with the spices to produce different flavor profiles, such as incorporating five-spice powder or turmeric for an Asian twist. "Find a good balance that works with the type of meat you've selected," Woods suggests.

Chef Sean Woods' Dry Rub

Makes about 1 cup

3 tablespoons paprika
3 tablespoons chili powder



Phillip Ponticelli

2 tablespoons light brown sugar
1 tablespoon garlic powder
1 tablespoon onion powder
1 tablespoon mustard powder
1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon dried thyme
1 tablespoon dried oregano
1 tablespoon smoked sea salt
½ tablespoon celery seed
½ tablespoon coriander seeds, ground
2 teaspoons cayenne

Combine all ingredients; store in an airtight container for up to 3 weeks.

PHILLIP PONTICELLI

CHEF DE CUISINE, CÍTRICOS AT DISNEY'S GRAND FLORIDIAN RESORT

GROWING UP IN AN ITALIAN FAMILY, food was always the centerpiece of Phil Ponticelli's life. "We finished one meal and started talking about what we would eat for the next," says Ponticelli, who was raised in New Jersey (and has the accent to prove it) but spent time with his family in Spain, Portugal and Germany thanks to the travel required by his dad's government

job. Peppers—serranos, jalapeños, little Italian finger peppers—were all a big part of his family fare, and Ponticelli can trace his love for them all the way back to the family garden.

"I think a little heat opens up other flavors in the food and awakens your taste buds. It's almost like salt; it's a flavor enhancer," he says. "You can start with a simple pasta dish with clams and garlic and then add red pepper flakes. The heat from the pepper seeds really brings out all of the flavors."

Ponticelli keeps a bottle of his homemade hot sauce in the pantry in his office at Cítricos. "It's super easy to make—an hour, tops. You just throw it in a blender, strain it, cool it down and stick it in a jar in your refrigerator. And you can control your heat by adding a little more onions or a little more honey," Ponticelli says. "We break it out in the kitchen whenever we cook a meal just for the staff. It's great on pizza, hot dogs and, oh my Lord, eggs in the morning."

Chef Phillip Ponticelli's Backyard Pepper Hot Sauce

Makes about 1 cup

½ cup sliced Vidalia onion
8 large garlic cloves, thinly sliced
20 fresh jalapeños, both green and red, stemmed and thinly sliced
1 cup distilled white vinegar

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2 tablespoons olive oil
1 teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 cups water
2 tablespoons orange blossom honey

1 Heat oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onions, cooking until caramelized, about 8 minutes. Add jalapeños, cooking until just beginning to soften. Add garlic and cook until golden, 1 to 2 minutes.

2 Add water; bring to a simmer. Season with salt and pepper. Let simmer for 1 minute, then remove from heat and set aside off the heat for 1 hour.

3 Pour mixture into a blender and puree, slowly adding white vinegar and honey.

4 Strain mixture into a glass jar and refrigerate 2 weeks before using.

STEVE SAELG

CHEF/OWNER, THE CROOKED SPOON

WHEN STEVE SAELG TOOK TO THE STREETS with his Crooked Spoon food truck a few years ago, Orlando's meals-on-wheels culinary scene was still just a dream in the minds of a handful of foodpreneurs.

"Right from the beginning, there were just six of us who started the whole thing. Honestly, I started at the right time and left at the right time," Saelg says. The Crooked Spoon moved into its permanent digs in Clermont earlier this year, becoming the first Orlando food truck to turn brick and mortar.

Saelg stuck with his modern American theme when he moved from truck to kitchen, and a few of his fan favorites have come along for the ride. "We still serve the Six Cheese Mac & Cheese and the Crooked Spoon Burger. I can never take those off the menu," he says.

Jars of colorful pickled vegetables called giardiniera greet guests arriving at The Crooked Spoon. "I started making it two and half years ago. I had an Italian beef sandwich on the truck, so I started making [giardiniera] and chopping it up, putting it on the sandwich with a sun-dried tomato aioli and smoked provolone cheese."

Steve Saelg's Giardiniera

Makes 1 (1-quart) jar

3 cups white distilled vinegar or rice vinegar
3 tablespoons salt
3 tablespoons sugar
1 tablespoon chili flakes



4 garlic cloves
2 bay leaves
3 thyme sprigs
2 carrots, cut into ¼-inch-wide matchsticks
¼ head cauliflower, cut into very small florets
¼ head broccoli cut into very small florets
6 Brussels sprouts, stem-ends removed, halved or quartered depending on their size
1 to 2 serrano or jalapeño peppers, deseeded and cut into long, thin strips
Small handful asparagus, tough ends discarded, cut into 3-inch-long pieces
Small handful thin green beans, cut into 3-inch-long pieces

1 Combine vinegar, salt, sugar, chili flakes, garlic, bay leaves and thyme sprigs in a saucepan over medium heat. Cook until mixture is very hot and sugar dissolves, 8 to 10 minutes.

2 Meanwhile, fill a quart-sized jar with vegetables.

3 While liquid is still hot, pour over vegetables, making sure they are all submerged. Set aside at room temperature until cool.

4 Refrigerate at least 4 hours and up to 3 weeks.