



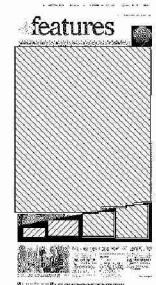
eclectic taste

PROOF CHEF
LEVON
WALLACE
LIKES TO
'COLOR OUTSIDE
THE LINES'

▶ **PROVING
HIMSELF**

Watch a video of chef Levon Wallace in the kitchen at Proof on Main at www.courier-journal.com/features.

Proof on Main chef Levon Wallace. AARON BORTON/SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-JOURNAL



By Matt Frassica

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 The Courier-Journal

“Did she come in yet?” asked an excited Levon Wallace from the kitchen of Proof on Main, where he has been executive chef since Michael Paley moved to the 21c Museum Hotel in Cincinnati last year.

“Who?” asked Matt Johnson, a sous-chef. “Myra,” Wallace said, as he pulled out his iPhone to show Johnson a photo — a pig’s-eye-view of a large Red Wattle hog happily chewing. “Michael Paley and I went halves on her. She’s supposed to come in today.”

At 33, Wallace has an impish

sense of humor that’s more skate punk than haute cuisine. Tall and broad, he has tattoos creeping up his forearms, and during a recent interview, he hid his slicked-back hair under an L.A. Dodgers cap.

Wallace grew up in East Los Angeles, where the L.A. riots shuttered his family’s deli. “I didn’t grow up with a lot of re-

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sources — single mom, inner city,” he said. “But one thing was always there, there was always this appreciation for food.”

He moved to San Francisco — where chefs like Alice Waters, Judy Rodgers and Jeremiah Tower influenced the way he thought about local ingredients — and attended the California Culinary Academy.

Before Proof, Wallace was chef de cuisine at the Ojai Valley Inn in Ojai, Calif., and corporate executive chef for a company that owns a handful of boutique hotels in coastal New England and Florida, among other gigs.

But Wallace and his wife had traveled throughout the South. “My wife and I honeymooned in Memphis because of a very strong passion for Gus’ fried chicken and Elvis Presley,” he said. After that, Wallace made annual trips to Tennessee and neighboring states.

“Man, I really dig this culture,” he recalled thinking. “It feels like home.”

When Wallace saw the job opening at Proof, he said, “I couldn’t resist.”

Since taking over at Proof in June 2012, Wallace has made what he described as incremental but noticeable changes in the menu. “I didn’t come in here guns a-blazing — ‘It’s my menu now!’ Quite the contrary,” he said.

“I think the transition has been slow and steady. If you were to go back, say, one year and looked at the menus side by side, I think you’d definitely see a difference.”

So what has Wallace changed at Proof from Paley’s Tuscan-influenced Southern cooking? “I grew up in a Mexican-American household, studied in San Francisco, where the cuisine can vary from regional French to pan-Asian,” he said. “I tend to color outside the lines a little bit.”

As an example, Wallace cited a scallop dish with muscadine grapes he was testing in the kitchen about a year ago. “I said, ‘Guys, this needs toasted seaweed,’” he recalled. “People were like, ‘Are you crazy? That’s not very local.’ That’s OK.”

One of the things Wallace has come to appreciate about Louisville is its mix of small-town familiarity and urban bustle. He lives with his wife and two kids on two acres and change in South-



Proof on Main's executive chef, [Levon Wallace](#), right, works with sous-chef Duncan Paynter. AARON BORTON/SPECIAL TO THE C.

“All these regional and indigenous Southern ingredients, they’re like Candyland to me. They’re brand-new. Pimento cheese is a revelation.”

LEVON WALLACE, executive chef of Proof on Main

ern Indiana, but the city kid in him enjoys walking down Main Street for a coffee.

Wallace sees the recent national attention on Louisville as a tourism and dining destination as an opportunity to improve. “The challenge now is to up the ante,” Wallace said. “It’s not just Derby anymore.”

The fine dining scene in Louisville is small — not to say incestuous — but the city’s chefs seem to like what he’s done with the place.

Kathy Cary, the founder of Lilly’s, first hung out with Wallace at a James Beard Foundation “boot camp” program held at Woodland Farm, which is owned by 21c owners Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson and supplies produce to Proof.

“I think he’s done great things with the cuisine down there,” Cary said. “He’s got stories behind all his dishes because he supports local farmers.”

At the same time, Cary added, “He seems very laid-back. I don’t see any

bursting ego.”

Chef Edward Lee of 610 Magnolia and Milkwood also approved. “He had big shoes to fill,” Lee said. “I think he’s done a nice job of balancing the menu favorites, like the bison burger, but also adding his own touch.

“I think he’s only improved the restaurant,” Lee added. “I think he’s willing to experiment. I think that attitude fits more with the progressive feel of 21c as a whole.”

While Wallace has introduced new flavors at Proof — the current menu has a potato gnocchi with green tomato and buttermilk queso — traditional Southern delicacies continue to enthrall him.

“All these regional and indigenous Southern ingredients, they’re like Candyland to me. They’re brand-new,” Wallace said. “Pimento cheese is a revelation.”

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