



Hoofing It

Keeneland's Head Chef Covers a Lot of Ground

By Coleman Larkin | Photos by Lee Thomas

Ed Boutilier wants a pedometer. He's curious. He'd like to know, exactly, how many steps he walks each day across the spongy wall-to-wall of Keeneland's countless dining rooms, across the monolithic slabs of glassine cement out by the concession stands, through the ant-farmish network of linoleum-floored corridors, up stairs, down stairs, round and about in a deliberate frenzy on the tile of half a dozen kitchens.

"It's miles a day, I'm sure," he says. "Got to be."

And he lifts the heel on one of his stealthy, matte black sneakers to offer its eroded sole as evidence. It's smooth like a dragster's back tires.

Miles. Got to be. Just get the man a pedometer.

As chef de cuisine of Turf Catering Company, the exclusive caterer for Keeneland Race Course, Boutilier must remain in said motion because, well, it's his job. Poor guy's got the leviathan task of feeding multiple meals to upward of 30,000 people on a typical race day, many of them incognito millionaires with worldly appetites that simply can't be sated by the likes of hot dogs and soft pretzels. During the horse sales the Middle-Eastern sheiks like to show up with satchels of doves they shot themselves, for God's sake! (Here, Eddie. See what you can do with these!) Thus, he's all the



When feeding the racing and sales crowds, Ed Boutilier must please a variety of tastes.

time hustling somewhere to taste this or that, to lean into yet another 80-gallon kettle full of whatever and emerge sporting a loaded spoon ready for the licking. And after it's licked ... ZANG! There it goes! Skyhooked right over the netted heads of a diligently slicing kitchen staff and into the depths of a soapy sink.

"Is there sherry in this? Really? Well, it needs more. Needs a little umph! Know what I mean?"

A few yessirs and in goes the sherry, but before he has time to sample the amended dish, the wah-wah-ing opening riff of Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Child" radiates like an air-raid siren from the cell phone in his pocket. Boutilier answers. "But a case just came in yesterday," he says. "Uh-huh. Yeah. They went through a whole case in one day! Hold on! I'll be right there!"

Miles. Got to be.

When Boutilier, now 51, was a 12-year-old kid in his home state of Vermont, he used to have this job washing

dishes in back of some restaurant. The cook at this restaurant, a lady named Kristine Kidd, would pick him up from his house and take him to work; then, if she could, she'd give him a lift home when his shift was over. Well into adulthood and living in Kentucky, Boutilier picked up a copy of *Bon Appétit* magazine. He

CHEF ED BOUTILIER



Left, Boutlier confers with sous chef Joe Malinich during a recent Keeneland sale. Below, designer omelettes are just one of the many choices offered to diners.



glanced at the masthead. The food editor? Kristine Kidd. It was just one of those odd bits of synchronicity that let a man know when he's walking the righteous path.

"It's weird. I've done the bartending thing and the server thing, but for some reason I always end up back in the kitchen."

The Keeneland culinary scene in particular seemed to have an eerie Svengali hold on Boutlier. For 15 years he worked at the track, churning out all that bread pudding and burgoo, conducting an orchestra of 150 employees in the kitchens alone. Then he left. He took his expertise to Churchill Downs, to Lambeau Field in Green Bay, to

Arlington Park in Chicago. Four years he was gone, wandering in the wilderness, and then ...

"When Ed came back, everything was different," recalls Joe Malinich, Turf Catering's executive sous chef and Boutlier's right-hand man. "Before he left, we pretty much served your typical racetrack fare. I don't know what he did while he was away, but he got jazzed. He came back inspired. It was fun to watch. I remember I came in here three years ago just to help out during one of the race meets and I was floored. It was like being on a cruise ship with the meticulously dressed staff and all the different foods and props and displays. I was inspired."

Inspiration, however, will only get you so far at an operation like Turf Catering. The pace is supersonic and the numbers — plates, pounds, crates, sacks, barrels, bushels — are brain-scrambling. The largely self-taught Boutlier gets a kick out of taking new recruits, fresh from cozy culinary schools, on the grand tour. He takes them first to the 24/7 track kitchen where he generally starts his day around 4 a.m. He lets them get a good long look at the line that's already wound its way out the door and lets them catch wind of the customary triple-digit orders for sausage biscuits. He takes them to the main kitchen, the sales pavilion, the pantry kitchen, the corporate box kitchen. He points to the big barn in the distance, the entertainment center, and tells them of the 100-plus special events that must be catered there every year. He tells them about the Friday night dinners, the daily shipments, the amorphous à la carte offerings, and the finicky celebrity clientele. He tells them of the time squirrels gnawed right through the electrical wiring on opening day and how the crew had to tough it out in the darkness. He tells them of new challenges, of the 2008 2-year-olds in training sale with its multiple evening sessions brimming with hungry buyers.

Yeah, Boutlier gets a kick out of the old grand tour. He watches with

CHEF ED BOUTILIER



glee as the virgin eyes of those greenhorn foodies bulge and their faces melt from fear. He can laugh because he knows they'll be all right. Soon enough the place and the processes will seep into their circulatory systems just as they've seeped into his own.

"At this point it's become almost like an instinct for me," explains Boutilier. "I'll be at an airport and I'll see something and the first thing I'll think is, I could put a tray of food on that. I can't help it. Even my home decor looks like a buffet."

It's all that round-the-clock brainstorming that keeps Keeneland safe from what Boutilier calls the "country club look" of plain, skirted tables and Sterno cans as far as the eye can see. His own buffet setups are, therefore, notoriously decadent. He's always tweaking, always reinventing and keeping on top of the latest trends while staying true to the conventions of the track and the commonwealth. It's not uncommon to see dumbfounded diners roving around, plates in hand, trying to decide where to begin and anticipating where they will end.

"I like that," says Boutilier. "I want it to be an uncertain journey."

And that reverence for the experience of Keeneland Race Course is what makes Boutilier so much more than a man who writes menus and taste tests vats of Mornay sauce and skyhooks spoons across kitchens. He understands the place and what makes it special, and he knows his role in coaxing that distinction from the ether. (Close your eyes and imagine a day at the races. What do you smell?)

"We understand that what we're really making are people's memories. They might not have a cup of burgoo or bread pudding or a corned beef sandwich any other time of the year, but when they come to Keeneland, they go right to the same stand that they've always gone to. It's a tradition. It's a feeling that takes your breath."

So somebody get Ed Boutilier a pedometer. He's more curious than ever. He'd like to know, exactly, how many steps he's taken in reverence for your fond recollections. At least, he'd have some idea of how tired he ought to be when he heads out to Napa Valley in the summertime. It's important, he believes, for a chef to know what's up with wine. Or maybe he'll visit the family cottage in Rhode Island to unwind. After all those meals and all those memories and all those miles, he'll certainly need it ... that and a new pair of shoes. 🐾



Boutilier oversees a bounteous feast, ranging from hand-carved roast beef to French cheeses and decadent desserts.



KENTUCKY BURGOO

Serves 10-12

- 1 cup each: diced celery, carrot, and onion
- 3 pounds stew meat (cubed)
- 1 teaspoon each: ground thyme, sage, garlic, and oregano
- 1 (12-ounce) can diced tomatoes in juice
- 1-pound bag frozen mixed vegetables
- 1 (7-ounce) can tomato puree
- 2 pounds fresh okra sliced
- 1 tablespoon beef base
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 cup sherry wine
- 3 pounds diced potatoes

- Brown stew meat with herbs and garlic.
- Add remaining ingredients and cover with water. Bring to a boil and reduce to simmer for a minimum of three hours.
- Adjust seasoning to taste and, if needed, thicken with cornstarch.

BREAD PUDDING

Serves 10-12

- ½ gallon milk
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- 8 eggs, beaten
- 2-3 quarts cubed white bread
- 1 cup golden raisins
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon

- Whisk sugar into milk until dissolved. Add eggs and vanilla and stir.
- Soak bread in mix for several hours or overnight.
- Pour into ovenproof dish.
- Sprinkle with raisins and cinnamon and “push” into mix.
- Bake at 250° for approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes or until firm to touch and golden-brown.

MAKER'S MARK BOURBON SAUCE

- 1 pound unsalted butter
- 2 pounds powdered (confectioner's) sugar
- 1 cup Maker's Mark bourbon

- Soften butter to room temperature and add powdered sugar. Beat with electronic mixer until combined.
- Whip bourbon into mix until it achieves frosting consistency. Ladle sauce over hot bread pudding. Sauce will “melt” on its own.



Boutilier and his team attend to the finer details of an artful buffet.