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# Master Class

SPENCER'S FOR STEAKS & CHOPS

By Holly V. Kapherr

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> If you've ever dreamed of a private cooking lesson with a classically trained chef, look no further than the kitchen at Spencer's for Steaks and Chops at the Hilton Orlando on International Drive.

Every month, Spencer's hosts a private cooking class on a theme ingredient. The class is taught by Chef Eric Szymczak, under the supervision of Executive Chef Louis Martorano and assisted by his able line cooks. Chef Szymczak creates Iron Chef-style tasting versions of dishes that feature the ingredient in the most delicious way possible.

On Saturday, April 9, the kitchen hosted a "Fun with Fungi" cooking class featuring eight mushroom varieties from crimini and Portobello to more exotic varieties like meaty king trumpet mushrooms and truffles.

The art of cooking is based in physics, chemistry and biology, and Chef Szymczak does an excellent job of explaining the theme ingredient, offering a history of its use and some little-known facts about the ingredient.

Did you know that white button mushrooms, crimini (baby bella) mushrooms and Portobellos are all the same species, just at different stages in the mushroom's lifespan? We didn't either.

Chef Szymczak developed a decadent lobster mac and cheese recipe brimming with three cheeses and hearty chunks of lobster. A wild mushroom soup followed, velvety and rich with earthiness.

An excellent alternative to meat, mushrooms were played up in a "slider" served with beer-battered Portobello "fries." Spencer's smartly offers the recipes to take home to try on your own and develop a cooking repertoire fit for a high-caliber steakhouse like Spencer's.

The eating has just begun. After the tasting, a three-course lunch is served and paired with wines by the new, intensely knowledgeable sommelier and Senior Food & Beverage Manager Christopher Eisenlau, formerly of Victoria & Albert's.

A shiitake mushroom and goat cheese pissaladière, a puff pastry tart from the south of France, opened the meal, topped with arugula and a tangy shallot vinaigrette. The creaminess of the mushrooms and the crisp, buttery pastry was complemented perfectly by the bitter greens and bite of the vinaigrette. An elegant and refreshing starter set the tone for the meal.

The tart was followed by a rack of lamb, crusted in dried porcini mushrooms, known for their earthiness. The perfectly medium lamb sat atop a wild mushroom risotto blooming with black trumpet mushrooms, the chef's personal favorite. Paired with a mature 2003 Rioja/Tempranillo from Montecillo, this boldly flavored dish was balanced nicely with the fruit and earthiness of the wine.

To finish the meal, Chef Szymczak served a white chocolate truffle timbale with an inventive and memorable chocolate truffle ice cream. Flavored with the oil of truffles, this was the end of a cadence that left a lasting impression.

The cooking class at Spencer's is a well-spent investment in your cooking abilities and knowledge as well as in a few hundred calories comprising a delicious Saturday afternoon. Enjoy the veranda outside the restaurant while lunch is prepared and you'll feel as though you've stepped into an oasis on I-Drive. <

## The Energy of a Chef

By Holly V. Kapherr  
Photo By: Sven J. Bode

Read more at:  
[StyleToMe.com](http://StyleToMe.com)



> Chef Eric Szymczak practices what he preached at the Culinary Institute of America as a student and a teaching assistant. Now, as head chef at Spencer's for Steaks and Chops, he instills that spirit and energy in his team.

"A chef is from the French, meaning 'boss,'" says Chef Eric Szymczak, adjusting his toque. "It doesn't at all imply that you can cook. —Just that you are a leader." The cooks at Spencer's for Steaks and Chops in Orlando clearly look up to Chef Eric and his adroit leadership skills. His super-human energy and passion for his craft convey an authenticity his crew admires.

Throughout the event where I met Chef Eric, he was constantly talking about his line cooks: how smart and quick they are, how successful they've become since working at Spencer's and how he relies on them to carry the kitchen to success every night. His trust in his team is what makes him a real chef, not how well he can cook, even though he can—very, very well.

After serving as a rescue swimmer in the U.S. Navy, Chef Eric returned to his native

New Jersey and enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, America's premiere culinary school. He remained at the CIA as a teaching assistant, working as a sous chef under Chef William Phillips, one of the most accomplished chef-instructors in the country at American Bounty Restaurant. "They really taught me that teaching is one of the best things you can do as a chef," says Szymczak.

In fact, he says he'd eventually like to go back to teaching, so great is its pull. It's obvious to see why, too. Chef Eric teaches the once-monthly private cooking classes at Spencer's and his energy is exactly what's needed in the classroom.

His wealth of knowledge (probably from reading cookery books constantly in his spare time, Harold McGee's treatise *On Food and Cooking* is a favorite) and his love of the science upon which cooking is based shines through to keep his audience engaged and captivated.

"I opened this place," he says, gesturing to the contemporary steakhouse around us, Spencer's, which debuted in late 2009. "It's

kind of my baby. I love everything about this place and I'm glad to have made my mark on it," say Eric. As a chef, he believes strongly in local produce and dairy and humanely produced meats, which is obvious based on a glance at the Spencer's menu, full of grass-fed beef and pork, free-range chicken and lamb.

"The only thing I love more than food is my wife, and when we're together, we share a bottle of wine or two and something delicious. It's how we bond." Chef Szymczak's great loves combine in the Spencer's dining room, where he mentions the only other job he'd rather do in the restaurant is work as sommelier, the wine steward. "I love wine. It's so essential to the dining experience and so connected to the land," he says.

A student of the great chefs in America and abroad (he's a particular admirer of Fat Duck chef Heston Blumenthal), Chef Eric brings a fresh, young and energetic approach to classic steakhouse fare. His passion for ingredients and intense commitment to respecting them bolster Spencer's pledge to "sophisticated, yet approachable" atmosphere and cuisine. <

### LOBSTER & FOREST MUSHROOM MAC & CHEESE



#### INGREDIENTS (SERVES SIX):

4 oz. butter  
4 oz. flour  
1 small onion, minced  
2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced  
1 quart of milk  
4 oz. Gruyere cheese  
2 oz. goat cheese  
2 oz. Parmesan cheese  
8 oz. sautéed forest mushrooms (a nice mixture, anything but buttons)  
4 oz. cooked lobster tail, chopped  
1 tsp. parsley, chopped  
1 lb. cooked pasta (orecchiette, macaroni, rotelle, be creative)

#### DIRECTIONS:

Heat butter and sauté onions and garlic until translucent

Add flour and form a roux. Cook until roux develops a nutty aroma

Add milk gradually while stirring constantly with a whisk working out any lumps.

Bring to a boil and reduce heat to simmer.

Slowly add cheese on very low heat, while constantly whisking. Cheese sauce is now finished.

In a hot pot, add cooked mushrooms, lobster, parsley and cheese sauce.

Once hot stir in pasta. It can be served just as is, or it can be covered with shredded cheese, breadcrumbs or both to make a crust. Play around and enjoy!

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