

WEEKEND PREVIEW

Two cooks in the kitchen a recipe for romance

What happens when there are too many chefs in the kitchen? In the case of Diane Forley and Michael Otsuka, the two star chefs fell in love and learned to share the limelight as co-executive chefs.

Otsuka, executive chef at Lark Creek Inn in Larkspur, and Forley, former chef-owner of Verbena in New York City, met in 1999 and became co-executive chefs at Verbena for two years before moving west. In those two years, the two learned to work together — not always an easy task for a chef.

"Collaborating is always a little tricky," Forley said. "It's not like working with a sous chef who adapts your ideas; it's more of an enhancement. It's a complement of two equals."

Otsuka had served as executive chef of several kitchens, including Patina in Los Angeles. He was nominated by the James Beard Foundation as one of five rising chefs in the country.

Forley, who trained with Alfred Portale of Gotham Bar and Grill in New York City, was chef-owner of Verbena in New York City from 1993 to 2003. Her book with Catherine Young, "Anatomy of a Dish" (\$35, Artisan), won a James Beard Foundation award for photography.

Otsuka and Forley met at the annual epicurean extravaganza Masters of Food and Wine in Carmel. At the time, he was the executive chef at the Pan Pacific Hotel in San Francisco. They shared passion for food sparked a bi-coastal romance that prompted him to move to New York City a few months later to open Thalia.

Forley had dated chefs almost exclusively: "It's hard to meet people outside of the kitchen, and your circle of friends is restaurant people. My head was always thinking about food, and if they didn't have food knowledge, it was hard," she says.

"You understand the language, the problems and co-workers," she says of dating another chef. "You share a dynamic that is unique to a kitchen."

"And the hours!" exclaimed Otsuka, referring to a restaurant chef's typical workday of 12 to 16 hours that usually ends close to midnight.

Because of their schedules the two didn't see much of each other, so Otsuka joined Forley at Verbena in 2001 as her co-executive chef.

Chefs are used to being in charge — the word chef is French



Husband and wife chefs
Michael Otsuka and Diane Forley tested the bounds of cooperation when they were co-executive chefs at Verbena in New York for two years.

Courtesy Lou Manna

Dish Cynthia Liu

for chief. It takes patience and understanding to have two chefs in one kitchen.

Upon first working together, Otsuka said, choosing his words carefully, "I was a little more mercurial than I am now. It was hard for me to acknowledge, in the heat of things, that I wasn't in charge."

"Our challenge is not to step on each other's toes," Forley said.

"No, it's for me not to step on

"It's counterintuitive that if you've chosen to live with someone for the rest of your life, why wouldn't you want to work with them?"

Michael Otsuka

her toes," her husband teased.

As co-chefs, the couple needed to form a united front and establish consistency with the staff and the food. They had to make joint decisions on how they wanted staples prepared. Even something as basic as how to prepare potatoes

If you go

The Lark Creek Inn is open for lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. and dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner only 5-10 p.m. Saturday; brunch 10 a.m.-2 p.m. and dinner 5-9 p.m. Sunday. 234 Magnolia Ave., Larkspur; (415) 924-7766 or visit www.larkcreek.com and navigate to The Lark Creek Inn.

had to be agreed on — Otsuka cooked his with cloves, garlic and bay leaf while Forley used more brine and fewer herbs.

"It's those staple ingredients in your flavor repertoire that defines you and your style," Forley said. "You reach for the ingredients and you build from that. You're looking for a specific taste."

They found it was more difficult to collaborate on one dish — to finish the dish and balance the flavors — than it was to create a menu.

"We work on our own dishes and give feedback, as opposed to working on one dish together," Otsuka said.

Many people can't imagine working with their spouse. Yet, said Otsuka, "It's counterintuitive that if you've chosen to live with someone for the rest of your life, why wouldn't you want to work with them?"

"Before the industrial revolution, very few people left the house to work, and there was a close-knit community. It's a contemporary idea that spouses don't work together," he said. "Maybe that's why there is a high divorce rate because people don't have a

sense of close family."

Both professionally and at home, Otsuka tends to do more protein-centered dishes while Forley concentrates on vegetables and desserts. Forley's affinity for fruits and vegetables is apparent in "The Anatomy of a Dish," which contains botanical information and charts.

Forley was reared in Long Island, N.Y., while Otsuka grew up

in Pasadena. Their appreciation for global ingredients and flair for creating New American cuisine was inspired by their cultural backgrounds. Otsuka is the son of a Japanese American father and Viennese Jewish mother. Forley's father is Hungarian, and her mother was raised in Guatemala.

The couple's multicultural culinary sensibilities have been passed on to their children. Three-year-old Olivia can already give instructions on how to make flan, and when asked what she would like for breakfast, politely asks for a croissant. They also have a 10-month-old, Adam.

When both chefs were cooking in restaurants, they ate out more. At home, the restaurant training still shows — "we probably cook more food than we should," Forley said.

"You don't make vinaigrette for two or three, you make a quart," Otsuka quipped.

After Verbena closed in 2003, Forley focused on raising their children and consulting. She also cooks more at home.

"Whether setting the table or cleaning up, they are all contributions to the dining process," Otsuka said.

E-mail comments to nbayfriday@schronicle.com.

FRIDAY MOVIE GUIDE

SONOMA CINEMAS

AIRPORT CINEMA 8
405 Aviation Way, Santa Rosa (707)522-0300
Call theater for show information

PACIFIC ROHNERT PARK STADIUM 18
533 Robert Park Expressway (707)585-0555

Free Movie Pass
When You Purchase 3 Gift Books
Or 875 Worth of Gift Certificates
Fee Valid 1/1-3/31/05 and Not Good for No Post-Expenditure
KING KONG Opens December 14
Advance Tickets Now On Sale

Special 1201 AM Midnight Show Tuesday Night
KING KONG (PG-13)
CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE (PG) Ch 3 Screens
Digital (12:15, 1:10, 2:15, 3:30, 4:15, 5:25, 6:30, 7:15, 8:30, 9:40, 10:15)

SYRIANA (R) - On 2 Screens Digital (12:45, 1:45, 3:45, 4:45, 7:05, 7:45, 9:45, 10:25)
HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (PG-13) - On 2 Screens Digital (12:30, 1:30, 3:00, 5:00, 7:05, 9:15, 10:10)

WALK THE LINE (PG-13) Digital (1:25, 4:25, 7:25, 10:10)
AEON FLUX (PG-13) Digital (1:30, 3:30, 5:40, 8:10, 10:30) (2:00, 4:30, 7:15, 9:30)

YOUNG, MINE AND OURS (PG) Digital (1:35, 4:10, 7:10, 9:25)
PRIDE & PREJUDICE (PG) Digital (1:00, 4:00, 7:00, 9:50)
JUST FRIENDS (PG-13) Digital (1:05, 4:05, 7:05, 9:55)
RENT (PG-13) Digital (1:05, 4:05, 7:05, 10:05)
CHICKEN LITTLE (G) Digital (1:15, 3:15, 5:25, 7:25, 9:25)
DEPARTED (R) Digital (2:25, 5:10, 7:40, 10:05)

BOULEVARD CINEMAS 12
285 G Street, Petaluma 762-7488

CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE (PG) THX
12:00, 1:10, 3:15, 4:10, 6:35, 7:10, 9:35 P.M.
SYRIANA (R) 12:50, 3:40, 6:50, 9:35 P.M.
HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (PG-13)
12:30, 3:45, 7:00 P.M.

RIALTO CINEMAS LAKESIDE

881 767-575-0556
Call theater for show information

ROXY STADIUM 14
85 Santa Rosa Ave., Santa Rosa (707)522-0330

CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE (PG)
12:00, 1:10, 3:15, 4:10, 6:35, 7:10, 9:35 P.M.
SYRIANA (R) 12:50, 3:40, 6:50, 9:35 P.M.
HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (PG-13)
12:30, 3:45, 7:00 P.M.

JOYBO ON THE SQUARE
820 Third St., Santa Rosa 767-529-8779

SEATTLE CINEMAS 11
NORTH COUNTRY (R) 8:00, 9:00
DEPARTED (R) 12:00, 7:15, 9:00
THE ICE HARVEY (PG) Digital (12:40, 1:40, 3:40, 5:40, 7:40, 9:40)
HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (PG-13)
WALLACE & GROMIT: THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJI MUGGER (G)
THE IRON MAN (PG-13) Digital (12:15, 1:15, 3:15, 5:15, 7:15, 9:15)

SEBASTOPOL CINEMAS
888 McClellan St., Sebastopol (707)839-2400

CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE (PG)
SYRIANA (R) 12:50, 3:40, 6:50, 9:35 P.M.
HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (PG-13)
12:30, 3:45, 7:00 P.M.

SONOMA CINEMAS
285 Santa Way, Santa Rosa Springs (707)535-1234

CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE (PG) THX
12:00, 1:10, 3:15, 4:10, 6:35, 7:10, 9:35 P.M.
SYRIANA (R) 12:50, 3:40, 6:50, 9:35 P.M.
HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE (PG-13)
12:30, 3:45, 7:00 P.M.