

A Chef For All Seasons

Chef John Kinsella taught several generations of budding chefs the importance of being culinary “entertainers.” Meanwhile, his vision helped put the Midwest Culinary Institute squarely on the national stage.

On this summer afternoon, Chef John Kinsella has returned to his professional home turf — one of sparkling teaching kitchens in the Midwest Culinary Institute. Everyone who sees “Chef” stops by to say hello. Affection and banter intermingle, but always with respect for the Certified Master Chef who for 30 years served as MCI’s Senior Chef Instructor.



Though he retired in 2013 at age 74, Chef Kinsella seems far from slowing down. He just finished three certification reviews for younger chefs. His culinary consulting business remains active. And he is writing his second book. His first was a textbook on charcuterie. The new book, “A Chef’s Tales of the Kitchen,” is his autobiography, the story of a life with many highs and some lows that might have stopped someone less resilient.

The Apprentice Chef

Chef Kinsella was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1939. Both his father and mother worked

outside the home (she was a professional musician.)

He began to cook as a boy so his two brothers—one older, one younger, both with juvenile diabetes—would have the specialized diet they needed to keep them from falling into a diabetic coma.

“My father said to me at age 13, ‘you’re so good at this, it should be your profession,’” Chef Kinsella said.

He thought so too, and with his parents’ support soon moved to London to become an apprentice to Chef Rene Le Bec at the famous Grosvenor Hotel. There he would spend the next five years learning his trade, with an interlude in Lyon, France, in the kitchen of Chef Jacque Morrow, who he describes as “one of the best restaurant chefs ever.”

The Soldier Chef

Britain’s military drafted Chef Kinsella when he came of age. “I fell in love with it,” said Chef Kinsella, who would spend the next 15 years mainly in the Royal Air Force.

One of his first duty assignments was working as a visiting chef in British Embassies throughout the world. In 1963, however, he decided he wanted to be part of a

combat unit. He did so for two-and-one-half years until being seriously wounded in the

“Chef Kinsella has inspired and educated many thousands of aspiring apprentice chefs over the years. His ability to generously share his hard earned skills and knowledge epitomizes what a Master Chef should do: educate, Inspire and lead!”

—Stephen J. Miller C.M.C.,
VP & Chief Operating
Officer, Premier Restaurant
Group, Chicago, Illinois

shoulder and foot during a counter terrorism operation in Borneo.

The scars remain to this day, but he recovered and resumed service as an RAF Chef until taking early retirement and returning home to Ireland.

The Executive Chef

In 1975, while working as the chef in Dublin's Royal Marine Hotel, Chef Kinsella was recruited by American hotel magnate Barron Hilton to come to Cincinnati where he became the executive chef for the five-star Gourmet Room at the Terrace Hilton Hotel.

"I was only supposed to be in Cincinnati for two years, but we kept having kids and we stayed," Chef Kinsella said. He and his wife Jean would have five children—Simon, who tragically passed away at age 29, and Taigh, Brendan, Jonathan, and Dierdre, all now in their 30s. The couple also has five grandchildren and a great grandchild on the way.

In the early 1980s, Sheraton Hotels lured Chef Kinsella to Atlanta, but the move did not suit him and he returned 18 months later to Cincinnati and the Bankers Club.

The Chef Instructor

His devotion to serving others soon led him to make another life change. In 1983, he saw an ad for a culinary instructor at Cincinnati Technical College. He took the job even though it meant a major pay cut.

"I made a decision that I needed to give back," Chef Kinsella said. "I figured that people would remember me more as a teacher than as a crazy old Irish chef."

When Chef Kinsella was hired, Cincinnati Technical College's culinary program was a one-kitchen operation and he was the only full-time culinary instructor. But he made it known from the beginning that he wanted to build a major culinary program at the college. He calls Chef

A Few of Chef's Tales

After the executive chef of the Grosvenor Hotel went home one evening in 1957, a young Chef Kinsella filled a late dinner request from a hotel guest. It was Marilyn Monroe, in London making a movie. She liked the dinner so much (sautéed chicken breast and salad) that she called down the next morning for Chef Kinsella to make her breakfast, for which she gave him a signed \$100 bill that he keeps tucked away in a safety deposit box.

While serving in the RAF in the early 1960s, Chef Kinsella cooked two state dinners for President John F. Kennedy, one in London and one in Dublin. Both times Kennedy asked to meet the staff, and to Chef Kinsella's amazement, the President remembered him at the second dinner.

Chef Kinsella not only cooked dinner for England's Queen Elizabeth, he's also been awarded Her Majesty's Armed Forces Combined Services Medal in 2001 for services to the culinary profession.

Jim Myatt—a Manchester, England native hired a year later as the second full-time instructor—his "partner" in achieving that visionary goal.

The 20-year quest included many design decisions, knocking on the doors of equipment manufacturers for donations, endless other fundraisers, and navigating the shifting waters of college politics. But the result was the nationally recognized Midwest Culinary Institute program that in October 2004 took its place in the college's then-new Advanced Technical Learning Center.

Perhaps the only rival to Chef Kinsella's rigorous pursuit of excellence is his stamina, a combination he expects of students as well.

"As culinary instructors, we are hard asses," Chef Kinsella said. "It's not to be cruel to students but to be kind to them. This is the toughest industry in the world. I tell students that we are entertainers and you have three curtain calls a day. The customer doesn't care if

you have a headache. If I'm teaching someone in school and they go out in the industry and fail, I've failed them."

"You can ask Chef Kinsella any question about any classical dinner and he will know the answer. At the same time, he doesn't make you feel inferior. He encourages you to be better, stronger, and more knowledgeable about your craft."

Chef Betsy Lasorella,
MCI Pastry Arts
Technology Chair

To be a great chef, Chef Kinsella said, you must first be a great cook, that is, thoroughly master your craft. Then you must "have a reflex memory...cook from your heart and soul...constantly challenge yourself to be better...and have compassion for the people you work with," he said.

It is a recipe that launched the careers of hundreds of students who are now working as chefs and in other

positions in culinary arts locally and across the world.

"Chef Kinsella has high expectations of everyone, but never higher than for himself," said Sarah Huskey, who graduated from MCI with a Culinary Arts degree in 2009 and a Pastry Arts degree in 2010. "I consider him to be my friend, my mentor and my colleague, but in the kitchen, I will always be his student."

For all of the roles he has played in life—including four years as national president of the American Culinary Federation, during which he introduced professional certifications and raised membership from 18,000 to 26,000—Chef Kinsella places teaching at the top.

"You've got to give it away to keep it," Chef Kinsella said. "When you teach a person a skill they will use for the rest of their life, that's the most rewarding thing you can do as a human being."
