

Coffee Talk with Don Newcomb, Founder of *ChicaGourmets!* and Foodie Extraordinaire!



Don Newcomb, founder of *ChicaGourmets!*, was among the first "Foodies" in Chicago, long before the term became popular. Don has been a big supporter to many local organizations such as Chicago Green City Market, The American Institute of Wine and Food in addition to being founder of *ChicaGourmets!*. He is a lover of fine food, wine, and good friends and has spent the past 40 years sharing his passion and appreciation for the cuisine of talented Chefs and unique restaurants with anyone and everyone interested in the culinary delights of Chicago. If you ever have the pleasure to sit with Don at any *ChicaGourmets!* event, rest assured, he will make you feel like a star. In honor of his organization's 10th anniversary, Don and I had a quick chat about his years on the Chicago culinary scene.

When did you first know you had a love for good food?

I think I was born with a love of food. As a child, the mayor of my home town was a family friend and avid hunter. He would hunt pheasants and invite my family to a restaurant in Evansville, Indiana that would prepare a feast for us. This restaurant was the best restaurant within 100 miles. We would eat roast pheasant with fancy potatoes and strawberry shortcake for dessert. At that moment, I knew I loved nice ambiance and delicious food.

What was your favorite snack as a child?

Peanut and butter and jelly sandwiches. In fact, I had one for breakfast today. The only difference is now I make them with homemade rye bread, homemade jam and fresh ground peanut butter. When I was young I would also go to the garden with a bowl of water and shaker of salt and eat radishes straight from the ground.

What inspires you?

I think you can trace your passion by recognizing what you find beautiful or inspiring. I see beauty in a perfect tomato on the vine. That excites me.

What is your favorite meal or dish to eat

When I am out to dinner I love to order fish. I also love frog legs, quail, and pheasant.

What is your favorite meal to cook?

I enjoy cooking steak au poivre and am probably a Francophile at heart, but I also love ethnic food.

Do you have a favorite wine?

Yes, all of them, but I love Chateau Palmer with steak au poivre.

What brought you to Chicago?

I went to the University of Illinois in Champaign and studied horticulture. When I graduated, my first job was an internship at the Garfield Park Conservatory. After my internship I was offered a position to teach at Kennedy King College and later became the chairman of the horticulture department at Triton College where I remained for 30 years until I retired. I taught landscaping and floral design as well. I have been in Chicago 41 years.

How did you become involved in the culinary community?

I have always been involved in some way or another including a position as a dishwasher at a small restaurant while working at the Garfield Park Conservatory. Over the years, I attended many of Gordon Sinclair's signature dinners at his restaurant and I would always bring flowers. Gordon began asking me and my students to do the centerpieces for events and later invited me to be on the board of the Chicago Chapter of American Institute of Wine and Food, which he founded in the early 1980s. That is when I first became involved with a dining organization.

Tell me about *ChicaGourmets!*

ChicaGourmets! holds 70 events per year and with 700 members, we are the largest dining group in Chicago. Our board has 22 members that all volunteer their time. Our membership fee is very low, \$40 per household, which helps pay the printing and mailing of our event invitations. Our events are open to the public but we usually sell out quickly. It helps to be member so you receive first notice of our events. All of our events are listed on our website www.chicagourmets.org.

My vision for *ChicaGourmets!* was to provide events for people who felt intimidated by fine dining or had an interest in fine dining and wanted a group with which to share the experience. *ChicaGourmets!* is open to everyone and our group events also make fine dining experiences more affordable. I also want to help our local chefs and restaurant owners by exposing groups of foodies to their restaurants, especially ethnic restaurants and small neighborhood restaurants. Our events are win-wins for everyone involved or we don't do the event.

Do you have a favorite restaurant or memorable dinner?

Dining at Le Français – no one does sauces like Roland Liccioni. In fact, *ChicaGourmets!* is doing an event at his new restaurant, Old Town Brasserie on North Wells. It's four-star dining at one-star prices.

Can you name a few highlights from *ChicaGourmets!* events over the last ten years?

- The wonderful event at Kendall College with the Iron Chef, Morimoto. We had a book signing, demonstration and tasting. It was free to the Kendall students.
- Dinner at Charlie Trotter's studio kitchen for only 22 people, there was a photographer present who was working with Charlie and some of our photos ended up in his latest cookbook. That was special.
- We did an event with Marco Pierre White, the youngest three-star Michelin chef from England. It was a book signing at Ambria just before it closed. Marco is supposed to be the next chef to host the television show "Hells Kitchen."
- I also loved a series of four seasonal dinners at Le Français. We had four dinners throughout the year that featured what was in season. Roland Liccioni did an amazing job.
- All of the dinners at ethnic restaurants around the city.
- Book signings with famous authors.

What is your wish for the future?

To spend more time in Paris.

ChicaGourmets! Celebrated 10 Years with a Special Benefit Dinner at Spiaggia to Help End Poverty In Africa with Executive Chef of Spiaggi Restaurant, Tony Mantuano. The event featured a wine reception with passed hors d'oeuvres followed by a five-course dinner with wines.

Proceeds went to benefit the One Acre Fund to help end poverty in Africa. Visit oneacrefund.org.