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Chef's Corner

Presidential Desserts

An interview with former White House pastry chef Roland Mesnier

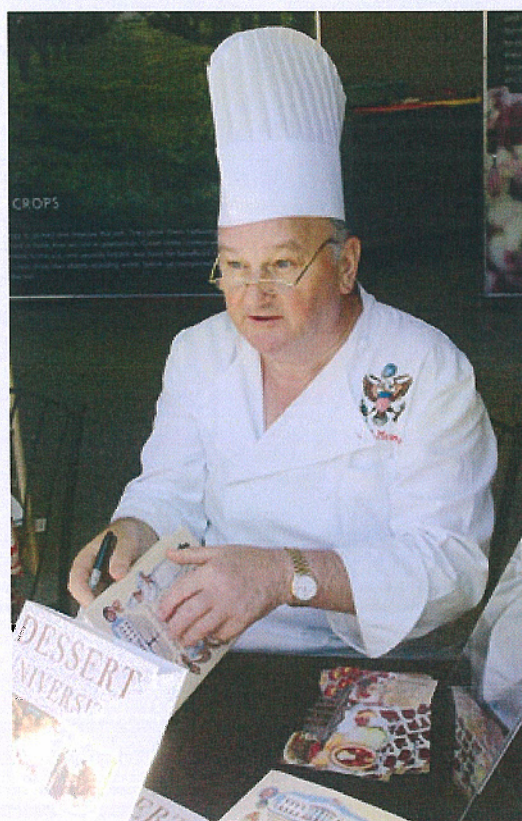
Cooking for your own family and friends can be intimidating—can you imagine having to do it for the presidential family? When you meet Roland Mesnier, pastry chef at the White House for more than 25 years, he makes it sound as easy as...well, pie.

Colorful and lively, Mesnier is the kind of chef you could picture having his own TV show. As the keynote speaker at *Gastronomy by the Bay*, a culinary event held in San Francisco last September, he demonstrated easy-to-make desserts for the public and convivially shared stories from his years with various first families.

"I made a Paris-Brest pastry [a praline-mousse confection] for the first time for the George W. Bush family," he told me over lunch. "He loved it so much, he asked for three more pieces."

Mesnier got a yen for pastymaking at the age of 12, while spending the summer with his brother, a pastry chef. "They were making sour cherry pies with boysenberry jam," he explains with nostalgia. "They smelled great and tasted delicious." He started pastry school at 14, got his first job in Besançon and then worked in Paris at a restaurant called *La Régence*, at the Palais Royal.

"I got a little discouraged because French pastries weren't really changing," he says, "so I decided to go to Germany, where they were making a lot of mousse-based desserts," a style unknown in France at the time.



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After spending years in France, at London's Savoy and in Bermuda, he met First Lady Rosalynn Carter in 1979. She hired him as the White House pastry chef, and except for a one-year break, he remained in the post until July 2004.

"When you cook for the president, you don't get breaks or vacations," Mesnier laughs, "so you better love your job."

He replies so passionately when asked about anything food-related, there's no doubt Mesnier loves his. "The products we buy are magnificent just as they are; they have incredible taste naturally," he explains. "A good piece of meat, even raw with no salt or pepper, is extraordinarily tasty."

The dessert recipes he chose to show at *Gastronomy by the Bay* were simple but delicious.

"If you cook fruit too much, you'll lose the taste," he warns me. "Cook it for a very short time to soften it inside, and it will keep its naturally fresh taste."

Call Mesnier old-fashioned, but he doesn't believe in organic products.

"I'm not sure that organic produce is healthier than regular produce. No one has proven it to me yet," he says. "Pay \$2 for an organic peach or \$1.20 for a regular one—the customer has to decide."

His only tip when purchasing ingredients: Buy top-quality products, whether organic or not.

—*Hélène Goupil*

- For more recipes from Roland Mesnier, check out his latest book *Roland Mesnier's Basic to Beautiful Cakes* (Simon & Schuster).

- Gastronomes will rendezvous again next year in early summer, this time in Paris, for *Gastronomy by the Seine*. For more information, visit www.gastronomyfestivals.com

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