



AN AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE

By Emeril Lagasse

Think about the most memorable meal you've ever eaten. The food was probably excellent and the wine exquisite. But there was more than food and wine. Remember the location; maybe it was seaside and you could feel the salty breeze, or maybe it was around the well-used table of a dear friend. Who else was at that table? Chances are the company, the conversation and the laughter were part of what made the meal special. All of those things—food, beverage, location, atmosphere, company and conversation—work together to create a memorable dining experience.

For me, life itself is the ultimate food and beverage experience. But food is my life, my passion, so I know that for most people, it's not that extreme. However, I believe that food is important to everyone, and a good meal with all the right touches can be one of the most enjoyable pleasures on earth.

If you're a person who has enjoyed really good dining experiences, you know that nourishment is not just to fill your belly, but to nourish your soul: to enjoy yourself, to communicate with others and to experience the art of sharing — food, wine and life. For those of us in the hospitality industry, true joy comes from transferring these qualities of the family table to other environments, whether they are intimate restaurants or large group events in a hotel ballroom. The key is to remain focused on the spirit of what makes dining so important—not just delicious food, but an opportunity for real sharing and conversation, an authentic experience.

The good news is that unique dining is more accessible today than ever before. We have more choices, more delicious foods at our fingertips and guests who are much more excited about and interested in food than they were in the past. For instance, while Italian and Japanese foods remain popular, people are becoming more interested in other international cuisines as well. Spanish food and wines are hot; Portuguese food and wines are

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experiencing increased interest; and Vietnamese food, both spicy and healthy, may become the most desired Asian cuisine.

When I began to get serious about cooking in the 1970s, the United States wasn't really respected for its cuisine. The rest of the world thought of us as the place to get hamburgers, hot dogs and macaroni and cheese and didn't take our food, wine, restaurants or hospitality seriously—probably because we didn't take these things seriously either. Thirty years later, that perception has completely changed. Led by chefs like Julia Child and Larry Forgione, American chefs and the American public rediscovered the exceptional ingredients we had right here in front of our eyes. We began to take pride in our own fish, shellfish, organic fruits and vegetables. We began to perfect the beef, lamb, quail, cheeses and wines produced right here. We realized that cuisine doesn't have to be expensive; it just has to be delicious.

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Once we began taking notice of the abundance available in our own country, regional American cuisines began to evolve. Chefs from each area began to show off their best products and spread the word about the unique foods and wines produced right in their own backyards. And then suddenly in the 1980s, the rest of the world began looking at Americans and saying, "Wow, they truly have a cuisine all their own." People began to appreciate American wines, beer, cheeses and chefs. And our cuisine continues to develop, getting better and better with more choices than ever before.

One example is the American wine movement, which continues to grow. Often overlooked regions, such as Oregon and Washington state, are producing some killer wines. And American artisanal cheeses are becoming more popular. In the past, the average American diner wouldn't take a cheese course seriously, but now there are small farms all over

America that are producing high-quality cow, sheep and goat cheeses on a limited production scale.

As American cuisine has evolved, so have American palates. In 1995, the Food Network began educating consumers about soufflés, collard greens, shrimp and grits, oysters and numerous other types of regional and local specialties. Other cooking shows, magazines and cooking classes followed suit, and as people's knowledge has grown, their expectations have risen. Now you might hear 12-year-olds talking about shitake mushrooms or truffled potato chips—and that enhanced knowledge is good for our industry. We can no longer just meet expectations; we've got to find ways to exceed expectations.

Rising above the expectations of your guests involves creativity and flexibility. Surprise them with a meal that's more delicious than the last, with service that goes beyond their imagination, with a dining atmosphere that blows them away or with all of the above. All the elements in this *Guide* must work together to perfect the entire food and beverage experience.