

KITCHEN FIRE

Chef MikeC.

Co-founder/Executive Chef

KITCHEN ON FIRE

Host/Executive Producer

“Mastering Knife Skills” DVD

Host

Circulon’s “Hungry Bytes” Online Series

Featured Expert

Analon

Chef MikeC. is the co-founder of KITCHEN ON FIRE - the cutting-edge culinary school for home chefs, located only two doors up from Alice Waters’ landmark Chef Panisse Restaurant in the heart of Berkeley’s Gourmet Ghetto.

An honors graduate of the California Culinary Academy, he began cooking professionally in 1997 in upstate New York. In 2001, he moved to San Francisco to study at CCA and co-founded Xfusion Personal Chef Services - one of the originators of the concept of turning private parties into exciting cooking events for guests to participate in.

While still in school, MikeC. was hired to co-manage Sur La Table’s San Francisco culinary school, where he also taught. Within months, MikeC. was put in charge of the program, which included assisting such visiting celebrity chefs as Martin Yan, Jamie Oliver, Alton Brown and Michael Chiarello. In 2003, he founded Party Lifestyles and taught

international cuisines at cooking schools and retail outlets up and down the West Coast.

At the same time, he became the official spokesperson for Furi Knives, appearing at trade shows and culinary fairs around the country to demonstrate proper knife skills. Over the years, MikeC. has led countless corporate team building cooking events for such companies as GAP, Yahoo, Microsoft, Adobe, GE Capitol, and Charles Schwab.

Few know as much about the art of teaching cooking as Chef MikeC., who has led over a thousand classes to date.

The secret to his teaching technique? “I break things down into real world terms,” he says. “I always explain the science behind everything. If you understand the *why* and something goes wrong, you know what it is. You can adapt, you can make things work – *if you understand it*. Those are the times when I see the twinkles in people’s eyes. When they truly understand it, they’re like, wow, that was cool!”

Even though he hailed from a long line of scientists and engineers, it’s not surprising that MikeC. chose the culinary arts. After all, how many kids are preparing full meals by the first grade. Raised in Rochester, NY, he spent every Sunday afternoon with his family, who glued themselves to the TV set from mid-morning until evening, watching back-to-back cooking featuring such celebrated chefs as Julia Child,

Graham Kerr (“The Galloping Gourmet”), and Martin Yan (“Yan Can Cook”).

“Mom and Dad got us into the kitchen as soon as we could stand on a stool,” he recalls. “I was taught all the basics by the time I could see over the kitchen counter. We had to have cooked at least a meal by the time we were five or six.”

Growing up, while other boys worshipped sports stars, MikeC. most admired Chef Martin Yan.

“He was my big inspiration. I screamed I would work with that guy one day. He was the one who taught me one of the biggest rules that I live by – it has to be fun and it has to be funny, because that’s how you capture their attention.” Indeed, almost two decades later, MikeC. would finally work with Yan at Sur La Table.

MikeC.’s father, a biochemistry professor (“and quite the nutty professor in the garden and kitchen,” his son says with a laugh), was in charge of the family garden. “It was all organic, from the way he did his mulching and composting to what kind of nutrients were right for certain crops and how to rotate them. He also created his own cross-breeds and hybrids – such as chocolate jalapeno peppers – and made his own wine and beer.”

MikeC.’s mother and grandmother were the Martha Stewart’s of their generation. Whatever the occasion – from holidays and birthdays to neighborhood gatherings and Tupperware parties – they were “always doing all the food and setting up the buffets. We always had a proper buffet at home,” he says with a chuckle.

By the time he was a teenager, MikeC. had mastered “a nice repertoire of dishes. Towards the end of high school it occurred to me that my upbringing was pretty unique. Many of my friends hardly sat down to dinner with their families, let alone learned how to cook or entertain.”

Even so, he was headed into a career in dentistry when MikeC. decided to table college for a while and began working in a local natural foods store. Over the next three years, he became the bulk foods and sports nutrition manager – at the same time becoming an expert on organic and natural products.

In 2000, MikeC. started his first catering business, then moved across country to San Francisco a year later to study at the California Culinary Academy. For the next year, he put in 80-hour weeks, while working under some of the most respected names in the industry.

It was a major turning point in his career. “When you learn food in a restaurant, you learn only the cuisine that chef serves. You don’t learn the *how’s* and *why’s*. That was the cool thing about culinary school – it was intense as hell, but you learn how to cook everything. It was definitely an amazing experience. It also helped me to understand how to translate this to other people,” he says.

Chef Olivier Said

Co-founder/Executive Chef

KITCHEN ON FIRE

Host/Executive Producer

Mastering Knife Skills DVD

Co-Author

CÉSAR: Recipes from a Tapas Bar

Honored

***Food & Wine Magazine Top Ten
Cookbook of the Year 2003***

*Co-Author THE BAR: A Spirited Guide to
Cocktail Alchemy*

Chef Olivier Said is the co-founder of KITCHEN ON FIRE - the cutting-edge culinary school for home chefs, located only two doors down from Alice Waters' landmark Chef Panisse Restaurant in the heart of Berkeley's Gourmet Ghetto.

He began his career at the age of 15 in his mother's Paris restaurant, then moved to Los Angeles in the early 1980s, where he worked at Ken Frank's LaToque, one the first restaurants in the country to feature California nouvelle cuisine.

In 1987, Said returned to Paris and opened his own restaurant, the popular Texas Coyote, which included three sprawling bars and a night club.

After returning to the States in the late 1990s, he joined the management team at Berkeley's César Tapas Bar, founded by three

Chez Panisse alumni. Said is the co-author of two notable cookbooks: *CÉSAR: Recipes from a Tapas Bar* (named one of the year's Ten Best by *Food and Wine* magazine in 2003) and *THE BAR: A Spirited Guide to Cocktail Alchemy*. He also writes a regular column for *Trump* magazine.

Born and raised in France, Olivier Said literally grew up in the business – the descendant of at least five generations of restaurateurs in France, dating back to the early 1800s.

As a child, he often heard stories about his great-grandfather's country inn, the Hotel Restaurant Des Chasseurs in central France, founded by his great-great-grandfather around the turn of the 19th century. His great-grandmother ran the cafe/boucherie (butcher shop) next door.

Besides its regular menu, the hotel specialized in preparing the wild game that weekend hunters brought in to dine on.

Though never formally schooled in the culinary arts, Said was introduced into the profession at an early age. After a two-month journey throughout Europe with a classmate, he began working as a dishwasher in the kitchen of his mother's successful Paris restaurant, Les Halles, at the age of 15. Before long, he was also preparing desserts and appetizers.

At the age of 18, he enrolled in a flight school in the south of France and spent the next two years working a grueling schedule of double shifts, seven days a week, in a pizzeria to pay for lessons. Upon obtaining his pilot's license, Said headed to the U.S., landing in Los Angeles,

where he worked for two of the city's top restaurants, among other stints.

The first was Ken Frank's LaToque Restaurant, a popular celebrity hang-out that was one of the first in the country to feature California nouvelle cuisine. Even though Said had never mixed drinks professionally and barely spoke English, Frank made him the bartender. Said had just one week to learn the essentials on how to make everything from gimlets, whiskey sours and margaritas to Mai Tais and Hurricanes. "That's basically what people were drinking then, the classics. They were also discovering wine," he says.

Several years later he became a bartender at the L.A. jazz club, the Nucleus Nuance, then spent a year as a waiter at West Hollywood's legendary Le Dome, where he regularly waited on Hollywood icons like Elizabeth Taylor, Elton John and California's now governor when he was just the "Terminator."

In 1987, Said returned to Paris and opened his first restaurant, Texas Coyote. It was such a success that he had to move the operation to bigger quarters to house its three bars and late night club. In 1994, after several years of trying to fight the city's then-corrupt legal system, he was forced to close it. Left with nothing, he went to work for a friend in a taqueria stand for \$40 a day until he could earn the \$800 necessary to return to the U.S.

"It was interesting to go from owning two well-known restaurants in Paris to a taco stand cook," he says with a laugh. "The hardest part was when a old client would recognize me and ask

what are you going to do next. I had to tell them they shouldn't worry, I have a plan. *I just didn't know what it was!*"

Once back in Los Angeles, he got a call from his old friend, Richard Mazzera, the former manager at LaToque who had gone on to become the business manager at Chez Panisse for 13 years.

Mazzera invited Said to join the management team behind an innovative new tapas bar – to be called César – that he was starting up with two other Chez Panisse alumni. Said leaped at the chance and headed up to Berkeley. To his surprise, the place had yet to be built. Indeed, he would spend the next four months helping convert a former dry cleaning shop into the Mediterranean-style tapas bar that would become one of the Bay Area's celebrated restaurants.

The tiny 60-seat restaurant was an instant hit with both Berkeley foodies and food critics who loved its truly unique Spanish-style menu and world-class wine-and-spirits list. The *San Francisco Food Lover's Guide* hailed it as "one of the greatest bars in the world in terms of quality of spirits, selection, and mixology." Among other accolades, it was voted one of the best restaurants in the Bay Area by the *San Francisco Chronicle* for five years in a row, and featured in such national publications, as *Gourmet* magazine.

In September 2003, CÉSAR: RECIPES FROM A TAPAS BAR was published, written by Said and James Mellgren with César chef Maggie Pond. Among other accolades, it was named one of the Top 10 Cookbooks of the year by *Food & Wine*

magazine. The popular cookbook features more than 50 tapas recipes and 50 mixed drinks (including the restaurant's signature cocktails, the Lucky 13, the Marius, and the Three-Citrus Margarita).

Always on a quest to perfect the César experience for its legion of devout fans, Said

began working on a definitive handbook for its bartenders and waiters to help answer customers' questions about the over 500 liquors from around the world served by the bar. The result was his 2005 book, *THE BAR*, co-written by Said and James Mellgren.