

## Dining with the Duke - Mille Lacs Messenger

Written by Rob Passons  
Friday, 28 August 2009 10:12

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“Duke” started working in restaurants when he was 12 years old. “I lied about my age,” he said. “It was the 70s. You could get away with it.”

Duke has a fair number of culinary secrets after a career in the kitchen — like his full name.

Duke is all he’d share.

It’s been over 30 years since he washed dishes at that first job. Since then he’s learned to cook everything from pizza to classic French cuisine. “My experience is definitely wide spread,” he said.

Duke left the Cities a few years ago. He’s the head chef at Fishermen’s Wharf now.

Duke moved to the east side of Mille Lacs in 2008. He left the pressure of working at high-profile, upscale restaurants behind to work at the Wharf, and he has no regrets. “You can sell your soul to the kitchen,” he said. “Everything else can become secondary, and that’s no way to live your life.”

For over three decades Duke spent too many of his days going to work in the dark and coming home in the dark. He was ready for a lifestyle change. “I love it here,” he said. “It’s nice to go fishing and relax, and get some fresh air.”



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For Dale Eggen, manager of the bar and restaurant at the Wharf, Duke's a welcome addition to his staff. "We're lucky to have a chef of his caliber this far north," Eggen said. "We all make more money because his food's so good, and that means better tips and more customers. I hope he sticks around a while."

Duke likes to interact with the diners when he has the time, and he's met his fair share of celebrities during his years behind the grill. He cooked for George Bush Sr. when he was vice president in the 80s. He cooked for governors Rudy Perpich and Wendell Anderson. He cooked for Janet Jackson, Lynn Swann, Donny Osmond, Laura Branigan, Natalie Cole and Frank Zappa. He cooked for Alan Hale, Jr. "He was the Skipper on Gilligan's Island," Duke said. "I was working at Pippin in Bloomington and somebody said, 'Hey, Skipper's here,' and I just had to get an autograph. He gave me a glossy."

Duke was less impressed with Vice President George Bush. "He must have had eight guys around him with automatic weapons," Duke recalled. "I remember walking past him and thinking, 'It's just George — no big deal.'"

He once prepared a meal for Andre the Giant prior to a wrestling match. "He had two plates of nachos, two burgers and a bottle of wine," Duke said. "He was intimidating, but he was a really nice guy."

Duke wanted to approach Frank Zappa for an autograph, but thought better of it. "He had a couple of body guards who looked like they would eat me," he said.

Duke's keen memory for faces isn't confined to only the rich and famous. Fishermen's Wharf recently hired Lindsey Hippen as an assistant chef, and it took Duke nearly a week to figure out how he knew her. "She came into a restaurant I was working in Duluth in 2007," he said. "She got a turkey sandwich on whole wheat with pesto. I never forget a face."

Duke's not seeing many celebrities since taking the job at Fishermen's Wharf, but he doesn't mind. "I've met so many great people since I got here," he said. "And the people at the Wharf are great, too. They're like a big family."

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Compared to the impersonal setting of big-city kitchens, the Wharf is friendly and relaxed. “In the city no one knows the people they pass in the street,” he said. “Up here, people say hi to you even if they don’t know you. They take care of each other, watch out for each other.”

Duke seems content to stay at the Wharf, at least for the foreseeable future. “Money isn’t everything,” he said. “One day you’ll go home and realize you don’t have anything but a house and a job, and that just stopped making sense to me.”

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