

3 Doors Down chef taking his talent to Wyoming

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THE GAZETTE

This was to be a story about a great chef who was cooking up amazing dishes at 3 Doors Down Bistro in downtown Colorado Springs.

And Joel Wittenmyer is still a great chef.

But if you want to sample his cooking, you'll have to head to Buffalo, Wyo.

Wittenmyer and his wife, Meg, closed the restaurant just a few days ago, only six months after opening it. It had received glowing reviews and amassed loyal fans.

So what went wrong?

They went for broke to fulfill their dream of opening a restaurant, spending \$35,000 on it. In doing so, they went broke. Literally.

"We lost our house in Black Forest, our 401(k) and all our stocks," Joel said.

"We just weren't making enough money to cover our expenses or even pay ourselves."

So it's on to Buffalo, where they'll work at the restored, 125-year-old Occidental Hotel.

Joel will run the kitchen, and Meg will run the front of the house as of next Wednesday.

"I'll be preparing foods that Buffalo Bill might have eaten at the hotel restaurant," Joel said. "And, of course, I'll be doing some of the dishes I did here."

Lucky folks in Buffalo. Maybe they'll get to try his amazing cr me brul e or escar-got soup, a luscious, creamy concoction with finely chopped veggies and, of course, escar-got.

Or maybe they'll be able to savor his Chicken Vol au Vent, a puff pastry cup filled with creamy-sauced chicken, which is easy to prepare and would make an impressive dinner party entree.

They'd probably be surprised to discover that Wittenmyer had only modest culinary experience before taking over at 3 Doors Down.

He started out washing dishes at an Elks Club in Michigan, where he grew up. When he moved to Houston, he worked at Wendy's, where, at age 20, he became the youngest manager in the chain's history. He jumped to a job at Chili's, where he became kitchen manager.

But it wasn't until a three-year apprenticeship under a German executive chef and Swiss sous chef in Houston



CREAM O' THE KITCHEN: Joel Wittenmyer ran 3 Doors Down restaurant with his wife, Meg. Here, Joel shows off Chicken Vol au Vent, a dish of creamed chicken served in puff pastry.

that he became passionate about classical European cuisine.

Though he loved the world of cooking, he wasn't sure he could make the money he wanted. So he turned an interest in computers into a 15-year career with Oracle.

What made him switch careers?

In 2002, Meg spotted an advertisement for 3 Doors Down. It was for sale, and she suggested to Joel that they take the

3 DOORS DOWN: Cuisinart, sandals don't mix

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leap and buy it.

"I encouraged him to give up his computer career in favor of being a chef," she said.

"Throughout our entire marriage of 11 years, I could tell he really wanted to be back in the kitchen, and I was determined to make that happen."

And although he won't be in the kitchen at 3 Doors Down, at least he'll still get to do what he loves, hundreds of miles from Colorado Springs.

Q. With whom would you most like to do lunch?

A. Jacques Pepin.

Q. What is your favorite dish to make at home?

A. Chili dogs, about 8:30 a.m. on my day off. So much chili that you eat them from a bowl with a fork and knife (and lots of Tabasco). Wash them down with a couple of Cokes.

Q. What culinary gadget could you not cook without?

A. Tongs. They become an extension of your arm, but are heatproof.

Q. What three ingredients could you not cook without?

A. Butter, cream, wine, shallots. OK — that's four. But I really can't do without any of them!

Q. When it comes to eating,

what's your guilty pleasure?

A. Ice Cream. Cherry Garcia from Ben and Jerry's or Rum Raisin from Häagen-Dazs.

Q. What is your favorite restaurant?

A. Kanomwan, a Thai restaurant in Houston.

Q. What cooking tip would you offer our readers to make their time in the kitchen easier?

A. Clean and organize. A messy or disorganized kitchen preys on your conscience, distracting you so that you cannot concentrate on the tasks at hand. You should know where everything is and be able to locate it without looking.

Q. What is the biggest mistake you ever made while cooking?

A. Well . . . two of them tie. One: When I was in my mid-20s, I lived in Hawaii. I was grilling some chicken outside and the fire went out. I just squirted more charcoal lighter right on the coals and relit them. The chicken tasted just like the charcoal lighter! Mmmm!

Second: This involved a friend's going-away picnic that I catered. The ingredients: A Cuisinart and open-toed sandals. The result? Very nearly lost a toe. 'Nuff said.