

TODAY

MONDAY, JULY 18, 2005



At a gathering last year of chefs who cater to the world's heads of state, Heinrich Lauber (left), in charge of official receptions in Switzerland, shows cooked lobsters to then-White House Chef Walter Scheib. Assisting Lauber is Junior Sous Chef Darnell Davis (right).

A CHEF'S NEXT COURSE

Former White House chef Walter Scheib dishes — respectfully — about serving his country.

By LINELL SMITH
SUN STAFF

Walter Scheib III can easily imagine an ideal menu for tonight's White House dinner for Manmohan Singh, the prime minister of India.

After all, he prepared the last one.

It was September 2000, in the waning days of the Clinton administration. The former White House chef remembers feeding roughly 800 guests smoked chicken cooked with Darjeeling tea, chilled pea soup made with cilantro chutney, chilles and mint, and wild Copper River salmon from Alaska.

Now, while the search continues for his successor — first lady Laura Bush dismissed Scheib in February — his former assistant chefs, Chris Comerford and John Moeller, are preparing the first official feast since his departure. Just what they will come up with is unknown; the menu, like the guest list, is a closely guarded secret until just before the dinner.

If the dinner follows the pattern Scheib used for such high-profile occasions, the four-course meal will begin with a diplomatic flourish: An ap-

petizer that incorporates an ingredient from India into American cuisine.

"Our menus would always include a 'culinary tip of the hat' to the guest country," Scheib says. "There'd be something to spark conversation among the guests."

Next would follow a memorable American entree — such as bison.

Then, a salad with the freshest tastes of the season and an element of cheese.

Finally, a simply stunning dessert.

During the 11 years he spent as White House chef, Scheib orchestrated as many as 60 official and state dinners for the Clintons and the Bushes. But when President Bush was re-elected, Laura Bush decided to put her own stamp on White House entertaining and food by selecting her own chef.

Meanwhile, the 51-year-old Scheib, who lives in Great Falls, Va., has been busy launching a second career as "The American Chef," a fledgling business that will allow him to lecture and cook in corporate and private settings. He's also finishing a culinary memoir of the White House that "dovetails interesting and positive experiences from both families that are reflected in menus and recipes."

Scheib has cooked for Nelson Mandela, Tony Blair, Emperor Akihito, Jacques Chirac and Vicente Fox. And before he arrived at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., he spent 15 years pampering palates at such exclusive spots as the Greenbrier and Boca Raton resorts.

As White House chef, he soon realized that serving the right comfort food to the first family was as important as preparing historic menus for the world's most powerful.

"In that job you check your ego at the door," he says. "For all the fancy titles, you're essentially domestic staff. Everything you do is based on interpreting and making real the style and taste of the first lady."

When Hilary Clinton hired him in 1994, it was with the understanding that the Clinton White House would emphasize "what was best and most unique in American food and wine and entertaining."

With her approval, of course.

He says creating an official dinner worked this way: The State Department would notify Scheib of a coming visit from a head of state, including information about any dietary requests or restrictions. The chef would whip up a few sample menus for the first lady's

[See Chef, 2c]

White House chefs really know how to dish it out

[Chef, from Page 1c]

approval and comments. He often prepared preview tastings to help her, and sometimes her friends, to decide.

His own guiding forces were always freshness and seasonality.

"If you have something that is tremendously ripe — like the tomato off the vine in your backyard — you have a greater chance to have a great course," he says. "The best cooking comes from the best ingredients."

The cost of those ingredients, he says, was generally not a consideration.

Before the food was prepared, the White House chef attended to any food allergies and dietary restrictions that guests noted when they were invited to the dinner.

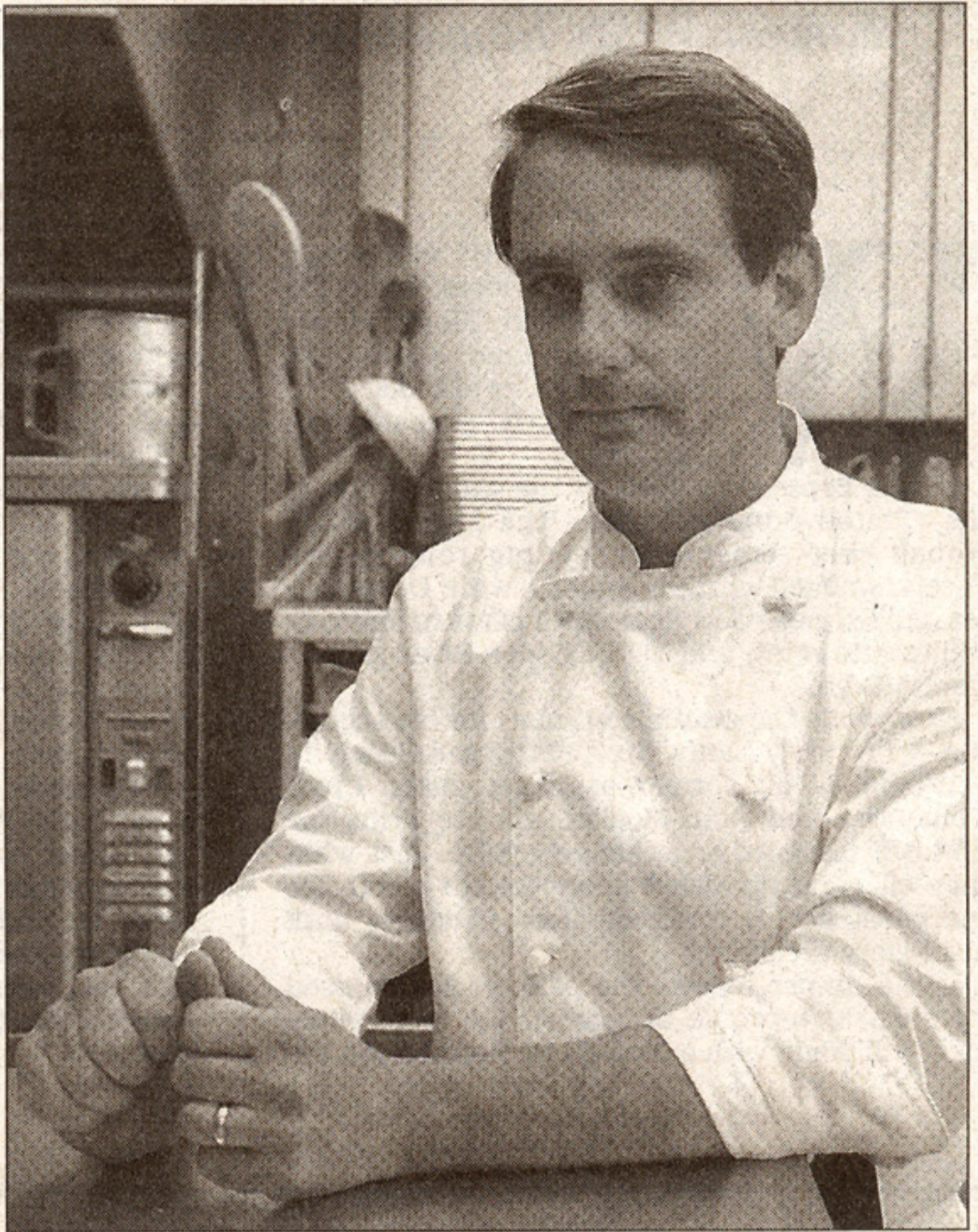
And, during the meal, he monitored other evidence of dining satisfaction. At Scheib's first state dinner, for instance, waiters followed the traditional practice of presenting a platter to guests at the table so that they could help themselves. When the platters returned to the kitchen, however, the chef saw they still contained more food than they should.

Were the guests, seated at tables of 10, baffled by the serving method? Were they unsure of how much to take?

"We found that some guests were intimidated by the idea of skooching the food off the platter onto their plates," Scheib says. "The last thing you want to do is drop a lamb chop on the bodice of your new gown. So Mrs. Clinton decided to go to a contemporary plated style where everyone would have the same experience."

Mrs. Bush, on the other hand, has returned to the traditional platter serving style.

Although a state dinner can stretch five hours from the reception to the after-dinner entertainment, the actual meal lasts only about an hour, Scheib says. And he learned that many guests don't actually remember much about their meal — except for the way it helped or interfered with their networking.



WILFREDO LEE : ASSOCIATED PRESS 1994

"There's one person you really want to make sure is happy, and that's the first lady."

*Walter Scheib III,
former White House chef*

"We're talking about a group of 120 to 900 people who are very, very interesting and unique types — some of America's best and brightest," the chef says. "Six months down the road, someone may ask 'What did you have for dinner? And you'll say, 'I don't really remember, but I met Sophia Loren!'"

"There's one person you really want to make sure is happy, and that's the first lady," he says. "What's most important at the White House is to be flexible and responsive. The challenges change from day to day. It's not a hotel or a restaurant serving 150 meals every day, it's a private home.

"You've got a family that lives

there year round, and their home dining style can be completely different from their habits eating out. As the chef, you build up a private repertoire and a public repertoire."

Do the two ever overlap? Were there ever any first family requests for "seconds" from official and state dinners? For, say, a bison sandwich?

"If some dish was particularly well received, someone might say 'If there's any of that left, can we have it for lunch?'" Scheib recalls.

But rest assured that the nation's first cook never warmed over yesterday's success. He would prepare the very same dish, from scratch, the next day.