



Walter Scheib in the kitchen.

# Hail to the Chef

Eleven years in the White House have given chef Walter Scheib plenty of tales to tell—but he's not dishing any dirt.  
By Erin Hollaway

**W**hen Walter Scheib took over as the country's top toque back in 1994, the cooking at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue had done little to distinguish itself for several decades. The days of splashy dining—ushered in by Jackie Kennedy, who hired French chef René Verdon to stir the presidential pot—were long past, and White House cuisine had since settled into a comfortable, if rather dull, routine. “It was very standard, Continental fare,” Scheib says. “It had probably been very contemporary in the mid to late seventies, but it was boring—it was safe, it knew its place, it wasn't supposed to be the highlight. The chef had never been asked to expand the palate, and consequently did what he was asked to do, which was just continue to serve food.”

But Hillary Clinton, then first lady, had no interest in maintaining the culinary status quo. She discovered Scheib at the five-star Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia, where he served as executive chef, and convinced him to take the helm of the White House kitchen, charging him with the daunting task of

highlighting “the best and most unique in American food, wine, and entertaining.” A lesser chef may have trembled, but Scheib had already done the same basic job in some of the country's finest establishments, and he set about redefining White House cuisine with gusto. “We basically just threw open the cupboard doors and said, ‘Let's try everything.’”

This was at a time when the country's entire culinary landscape was changing, triggered in part by the free-range, organic craze sweeping the nation. “The period between '90 and '95 was probably the most volatile American cuisine has been,” Scheib says. “There was kind of this anxiety in culinary groups—what exactly is this new, forming cuisine? Is it teeny-tiny portions, is it only organic ingredients?” Eventually, Scheib recalls, they determined that “the driving force behind contemporary American cuisine was this great influx of ethnic influences coming in. So we really tried to highlight that [in the White House],” while also showcasing the best of America's bounty.

Doing so required a multipronged approach: Not only did the kitchen itself need a complete overhaul, but a staff of 20-plus top-tier chefs had to be assembled. Most important, though, was the development of what Scheib calls an “American market basket” of available products, from artisanal cheeses to miniature sprouts to Kobe beef. These kinds of high-end items may seem common enough now—indeed, they've become *de rigueur* in the country's best restaurants—but 11 years ago, Scheib and his team were on the cutting edge of American cooking.

During his White House tenure, Scheib established an extensive network of free-range ranchers, organic farmers, wild-catch fishermen, foragers, bakers, and many other purveyors.

Huevos rancheros with fresh tortillas and red beans spice things up.



"This is fairly easy to do if you're in the regular public marketplace," he says, "but when you throw in [White House security], you have to be a little bit creative." To satisfy the demands of the Secret Service, Scheib also set up a network of food-savvy, security-cleared third parties, who would do the purchasing for him when necessary. Many of the suppliers, he laughs, still have no idea that their products found their way onto presidential plates.

Not everything was top secret, though, and dropping the White House name opened all the right doors in times of need. Scheib remembers one formal dinner that very nearly went awry when just days before the big event he got the phone call every chef dreads: The menu's centerpiece, hook-and-line-caught striped bass from Massachusetts, was no longer available—the quota had been caught up, the season was closed, and there was none left. "We had the printed menu and the whole deal—everyone was excited about it and the first lady was ready for it, she loved it," Scheib recalls. "I told [my fish person], 'You gotta do something for me.'" And do something he did: "He went to the governor of Massachusetts and actually got them to reopen the season." Another hundred pounds of striped bass were caught and flown to Washington just in time for dinner.

Such major meals required weeks of planning and rehearsing—the extra time to work out every last kink and stave off potential disaster. Scheib explains, "When you're representing the country—which you are in many respects as White House chef, especially doing a state dinner—if there's a mistake you can't just give them a free dessert or a bottle of champagne and call it day." One of the more memorable—and more nerve-racking—occasions was the first French state dinner. Scheib's predecessor, French chef Pierre Chambrin, had departed amid some controversy (he was dismissed by Hillary Clinton, who preferred less buttery fare), so the pressure was on, both for the first lady and for the executive chef. But President Chirac won Scheib's undying gratitude when he arose at the end of the meal and declared, "If this is American food, it's OK with me."

Of course, high-profile state dinners were just one aspect of the job. Simple family meals demanded an intimate knowledge of individual tastes and preferences. Here, Scheib serves up a Bush family favorite: huevos rancheros (see recipe), a home-style Tex-Mex classic and a Sunday brunch staple for the Bushes.

Scheib, who left the White House in early 2005 after more than a decade of service, is keen to dispel rumors that he and Laura Bush clashed over style. "Regardless of what the newspapers said, it was a very amicable change.... I understand that there's more to the deal than just how well you're doing and what your personality is—there's a political need to

## A BUSH FAMILY FAVORITE • BY WALTER SCHEIB

### HUEVOS RANCHEROS WITH FRESH TORTILLAS AND RED BEANS

Serves 4

#### RED BEANS

*1 tablespoon corn oil*  
*½ cup onion, diced*  
*1 ounce garlic, chopped*  
*½ pound red beans, soaked overnight and drained*  
*1 quart chicken or beef stock*  
*1 tablespoon cumin*  
*2 tablespoons chipotle purée*  
*(less if less heat is desired)*  
*½ tablespoon ground coriander*  
*1 teaspoon dry oregano*  
*1 bay leaf*

Heat corn oil in a 2-quart sauce pot over medium heat. Sauté onions and garlic until tender, about 3 minutes. Add beans, stock, and all other ingredients. Cover and simmer over low heat until beans are very tender, about 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Add more stock if beans dry out while simmering—they should be a little soupy.

Keep warm until ready to serve.

#### RANCHERO SAUCE

Makes 3 cups

*1 tablespoon corn oil*  
*½ cup onion, diced*  
*1 tablespoon garlic, chopped*  
*2 ounces poblano chili, roasted, peeled, seeded, and diced*  
*1 ounce jalapeño chili, roasted, peeled, seeded, and diced*  
*1 pound ripe tomatoes, diced*  
*6 ounces tomato sauce*  
*1 cup chicken stock*  
*1 tablespoon cumin*  
*½ tablespoon coriander*  
*Hot sauce to taste*  
*Salt and pepper to taste*  
*1 ounce fresh lime juice*

Heat corn oil in 2-quart sauce pot over medium heat. Add onions and garlic and

sauté 3 minutes until tender. Add diced chilies and sauté 1 minute. Add diced tomatoes and sauté 3 minutes. Add tomato sauce, stock, cumin, and coriander; bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer covered for about 30 minutes. Adjust seasoning with hot sauce and salt and pepper.

Keep warm. Add lime juice just before serving.

#### FRESH TORTILLAS

Makes 8–10

*1 cup Maseca-brand corn masa mix*  
*(available at most grocery stores)*  
*¾ cup water at room temperature*

In a 2-quart mixing bowl combine masa mix and water; mix well, 2–3 minutes. Divide dough into 8–10 equal-size balls, and cover with a damp towel to prevent drying. Place one ball of dough in a tortilla press (available at any Latin market) between 2 sheets of plastic wrap; press flat to about 6 inches in diameter and ¼ inch thick. Repeat until all dough balls are pressed.

Heat ungreased cast-iron pan over medium-high heat until hot, remove tortillas from plastic wrap, and place one at a time in the pan. Cook each tortilla 20–30 seconds on one side and then flip and cook another 20–30 seconds. Remove from pan and stack covered to keep warm until ready to serve.

#### For the eggs and assembly:

*8 eggs, scrambled, poached, or fried in sets of two*  
*4 ounces grated Manchego or jack cheese*  
*1 ounce cilantro, chopped rough*

On a warm plate place one warm tortilla and top with 1½ ounces of ranchero sauce. Place portion of eggs on top of sauce, then top with 1 additional tablespoon of ranchero sauce. Top with about 1 ounce of cheese and put under broiler to melt cheese. Sprinkle cilantro on top of cheese and serve.

Serve additional sauce, tortillas, and beans on the side.

make a splash," he says. "For better or for worse, and I think for the better, I'll always be identified as Hillary Clinton's chef, and I don't think Mrs. Bush can make her signature with Hillary Clinton's chef!"

Scheib has wasted no time in embarking on new adventures. In autumn, he officially launched his own business, The American Chef

([theamericanchef.com](http://theamericanchef.com)), which provides a variety of White House-inspired event services, consulting, and cooking classes, as well as a glimpse of life with the two first families. And he's busy penning a culinary memoir of the White House, which will include about 60 recipes and an abundance of anecdotes. Look for it on bookshelves in early 2007. ★