

# Hail to the chef

Presidential cook dishes on former employers, launches tasty new business

By Robin Tierney  
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On Presidents Day, what will the chief executive have for his holiday dinner?

It's more likely to be huevos ranchero than a multicourse gourmet feast, says Walter Scheib, former executive chef to the nation's chief executive.

"Everybody thinks that [for the first family], it's all state dinners and formal affairs," says Scheib, who presided over the White House kitchen from 1994 to 2005. "But 85 percent are simply family meals."

What does the president eat in private? Pretty much what everyday Americans enjoy.

For the Bushes, Scheib served up a lot of Southwestern fare. The chief exec also likes roast beef tenderloin.

In contrast, Bill Clinton preferred lamb.

"It's a sort of red-state, blue-state thing," quips Scheib.

Like the diner-next-door, President Bush has vetoed some dishes. "He does not like 'wet' fish," Scheib says. So Scheib avoided sautéed and poached in favor of crispy-coated and broiled.

Will the executive chef dish on his former employers? Scheib confides that when he first began serving Clinton and President Bush, every meal resembled "Sunday dinner" — until White House residents started gaining weight. "Then they'd ask me to scale back," Scheib says.

George and Bill also shared an amusing marital-linked dining habit: They'd eat one way with the first lady, and more bachelor-like when dining solo. "They'd say, 'The salads are nice, but can I get some real-guy food?'" Such as burgers, nachos and quesadillas. Both presidents enjoyed simpler food, while both first ladies "preferred more production and were very nutritionally aware." For example, Laura Bush prefers organics.



Former White House executive chef Walter Scheib cooks in the kitchen of his Great Falls home on Thursday. Scheib has started a new consulting business called The American Chef and is working on a cookbook. — Jeff Mankie/Examiner

After whirlwind trips, the president and Mrs. Bush crave comfort food upon their return. Such tales are about as spicy as Scheib gets outside the kitchen.

Cooking for first families is no piece of cake. Says Scheib: "It's a challenge to cook an interesting variety three meals a day, seven days a week, all year long." But his team, working in the kitchen on White House's lower level, quickly learned the repertoire for both administrations they served.

First lady Bush had clued Scheib into favorite family recipes. Her predecessor, Hillary Clinton, appreciated Scheib's corn bread, but still desired Pepperidge Farm stuffing as a staple on the table. "They want those familiar foods," Scheib says.

Young Chelsea Clinton had favorites as well: "She loved sweet potato casserole." Chelsea became a vegetarian during her White House years, "so we had to learn how to prepare appealing and nutritionally healthy vegetarian dishes." In addition, Scheib taught the former first daughter and one of her friends the rudiments of vegetarian cooking to prepare for college life.

How does one land a presidential gig? Scheib perfected his skills running five star/five diamond kitchens at the Greenbrier and the Boca Raton Resort and Club. Upon reading that Hillary Clinton was seeking a new White House executive chef,

## TASTE IT

Enjoy some of the presidential palate-pleasers on Walter Scheib's Web site, [TheAmericanChef.com](http://TheAmericanChef.com).

Here's a sample:

### RANCHERO RED BEANS

8 cups water  
1 cup red or pinto beans dried  
1 cup medium diced onion  
1 tbsp. fine diced jalapenos  
1 tbsp. minced garlic  
4 cups stock  
1 tsp. chipotle puree  
1 cup diced tomatoes  
1 tsp. cumin  
1 tsp. coriander  
1 tsp. black pepper ground  
1 bay leaf

1 tsp. thyme dried  
1 tsp. oregano dried  
2 tbsp. lime juice  
salt to taste

Soak the cleaned and picked-through beans in water for 8 hours, or overnight.

In a 2-quart sauce pot over medium heat, cook onions, jalapenos and garlic in oil until tender, about 4 minutes.

Add the drained beans, stock, tomatoes, chipotle and all the seasoning except the lime and hot sauce. Bring the mix to a boil, reduce heat to a simmer, and cook until the beans are tender, about 1 hour.

Before serving, adjust seasoning with lime juice, hot sauce and salt. Serve hot — serves four.

Scheib's wife pushed him to compete for the prized position. The audition clinched it.

Among his fondest memories is the night French President Chirac came to dinner — not long after Scheib, under Mrs. Clinton's direction, staged an American culinary revolution at the White House, replacing a long reign of French continental cuisine. Chirac gave a toast: "If this is what American food is like, then I really like it." *Magnifique!*

Scheib hung up his White House apron a year ago. "I got to do for 11 years what most chefs never get to do in a lifetime." Since then, he has cooked up his own business. Dubbed *The American Chef* and based in his Great Falls home, Scheib's venture combines his culinary-related loves: presidential-style cooking, food-centered team-building events, restaurant consulting, public speaking and working with another chef he truly admires — his wife, Jean.