

Pastry perfectionist

The sweet life of an executive pastry chef

by Evan Noetzel



David Ramirez, executive pastry chef, Rosen Shingle Creek, Orlando, Fla.

On a 230-acre plot of land in Orlando, Fla., at the headquarters of the Florida Everglades sits Rosen Shingle Creek (www.rosen-shinglecreek.com), a 1,500-room, AAA Four Diamond-rated hotel. Guests of the luxury property enjoy access to a full-service spa and fitness center, as well as an award-winning golf course, and are just minutes away from Orlando's many theme parks and nature and wildlife attractions. Yet, it is Shingle Creek's dining scene—the hotel

boasts 12 unique foodservice options, including catered banquet service and upscale eateries like the Italian restaurant Cala Bella and the steak house A Land Remembered—that has become one of its biggest draws.

Much of the credit for the hotel's well-deserved reputation as a foodie destination must go to its workaholic (and self-described “chocoholic”) executive pastry chef, David Ramirez. A graduate of Johnsons & Wales pastry arts program and a veteran of upscale hotel dining and commercial bakeries, Ramirez has been wowing Shingle Creek guests with both his delicious plated desserts and his awe-inspiring chocolate and sugar sculptures ever since the hotel opened in September of 2006.

“Coming on board when I did, just before the hotel opened, was great,” he says. “It was a blank sheet of paper, and everyone was totally open to my ideas.”

In the three years since, Ramirez has transformed the burgeoning hotel's pastry and desserts program from a blank sheet into a masterpiece by surrounding himself with, in his words, “the right equipment, the right people with the best training ... and the right products—the right purées, the right

cheese, the right flour, chocolate and other high-quality ingredients.”

Many hats under one toque

These days, Ramirez and crew, using the hotel's modern bake shop as their headquarters, create hundreds of fresh pastries, desserts and baked goods daily for the entire property—from room service and banquet service, to the on-site café and three fine-dining restaurants and everything in between. To give you a sense of the immense scale of this undertaking, consider the following: Just for 18 Monroe Street Market, the hotel's 24-hour diner/deli, Ramirez's bakery churns out a near-constant supply of breakfast pastries and croissants, and that's in addition to a menu of 12 rotating desserts like cannolis, cheesecake, German chocolate cake and Key lime pie.

As a full-service hotel with multiple ballrooms and conference facilities, Shingle Creek also calls upon its top pastry practitioner to spearhead the sweet side of the menu for every type of catered banquet, be it a wedding in need of the bride's dream cake or a conference of professional chemists seeking a chocolate tasting that brings to life a discussion on lipids and fats. For such functions, Ramirez also regularly custom-constructs elaborate, gravity-defying—and entirely edible—chocolate showpieces that capture with painstaking detail the theme of a private event or corporate logo.

“I always think about the guest first,” says Ramirez. “Whether it's a wedding cake or plated dessert, a large centerpiece or a demonstration, I always want as much information as possible about what and who I'm doing it for—the end product.”

“I typically don't go with my first idea. I'll sketch out two or three different ideas and bounce them around people. I go through the process, and usually, whatever comes easiest is normally the best.”

Given Ramirez's combination of customer service skills, creativity and amazingly amiable personality, it's no wonder Shingle Creek also uses his celebrity chef status to help market chocolate-inspired packages and events. For past promotions like the Ultimate Chocolate Fantasy and the



Ramirez's dessert samplers: (front, l to r) chocolate pot de crème, petit Key lime pie, petit old-fashioned chocolate and white chocolate mousse with fruit sauce

Chocolate Lovers Body Retreat, the hotel tempted prospective guests with a combination of a special room rate, spa treatments (think chocolate and raspberry facial, for example), and tastings and demonstrations compliments of Ramirez.

The competitive world of pastry

After collaborating with the hotel's sales and catering divisions, Ramirez estimates that he spends the remaining 60 to 70 percent of a typical work day in the hotel bakery. While much of that time is spent making sure his staff is happy, motivated and productive, Ramirez also is constantly working with his team to improve the hotel's desserts and baked goods by incorporating new concepts, applications, techniques and technology. Even off the clock, though, Ramirez seems to have a one-track mind.

“It's all about chocolate and sugar; that's my life,” he laughs. “Whenever I look at something, instinctively my mind is like, ‘Oh, how would that work if I cast chocolate in it or made a mold out of it?’”

That chocolate-informed outlook on the world has compelled Ramirez to create makeshift molds out of everyday items like his children's toys; it also has propelled him to the pastry world's premiere stage—the Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie (or World Pastry Cup).

Having earned numerous awards competing on the American Culinary Federation's pastry competition circuit over the years, Ramirez was selected to represent the United States as its World Pastry Cup team captain earlier this year in Lyon, France. While he cherished the experience and was able to share it with family and friends, he admits that the fact that his team finished out of the top three (after their 3-foot-tall chocolate sculpture broke and crashed unceremoniously just before the judging could take place) may serve as motivation to return to Lyon in the future.

For now, though, the father of three is content to spend time with his family, recommit himself to his duties at Rosen Shingle Creek and focus on life's little pleasures—like the fresh baked chocolate chips cookies he samples for “quality control” each afternoon. 🍪



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