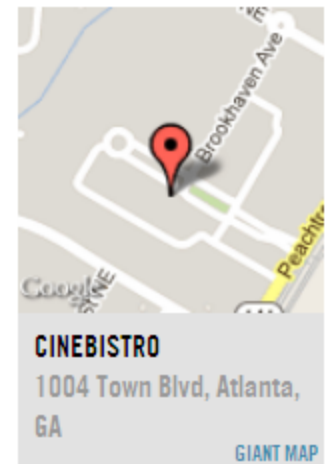


EATER INTERVIEWS

CineBistro Corporate Chef Isaac Stewart on Fine Dining in a Non-Traditional Restaurant Environment

Wednesday, November 14, 2012, by [Sonia Chopra](#)

Isaac Stewart is the corporate chef at [CineBistro](#), a movie theatre with a full bar and in-theatre menu. The company has seven locations and with corporate offices in Atlanta's Town Brookhaven, which Stewart comes to by way of Oregon via San Francisco and North Carolina. After getting a degree in English, Stewart started selling school buses, a very random industry for which he apparently had a knack, because he moved up the corporate ladder quickly—and then burned out just as fast. This led him to culinary school in California, which in turn landed him a job at [CentraArchy](#), where he redesigned the menu for **Tavern at Phipps**, and then as the corporate chef at **Fado**. From there it was Italy for a Masters in Fine Dining, and then back to Atlanta, where his current job was waiting for him. Now, he spills on what it's like to be running not just one kitchen, but many.



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What does corporate chef mean, exactly?

There are seven Cinebistro locations, and I'm the head back of the house guy.

So you're planning the menus?

I am—it depends on the location, though. Because in Miami, for example, and in Richmond, Virginia, for example, we've got very, very seasoned chefs. Guys that I trust that speak the same language at me. I trust them to do a lot of stuff, so they're working on their menus and kind of driving it that way. For me, that's how CineBistro works very well too. They have a little bit more of an eye for the local clientele, so the chef in Miami can figure out what the locals want to eat more than I can sometimes.

editorial



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When did you start?

I went to Italy in 2009 and started here a couple months after that, so early 2010.

What do you do on a day-to-day basis?

I'm not usually cooking. Sometimes there's a lot of R&D and things like that. I also do a lot of the purchasing. I may be negotiating contracts one day, I may be researching and developing food one day, having conversations with chefs and working on kind of the next stages. We're a very fluid concept in that we change the core menu twice a year in every location, which doesn't sound that big but is actually a pretty big production if you do it right. It's an effort to be more seasonal. It's difficult when you're serving 130 people, so the core menu needs to be quick, but we run specials every weekend and the chefs have a lot of creative say in that. That's how we keep the food fresh and upscale. It's got to be delicious. It's not always easy to make intricate plates and do fine dining things in this kind of template, but we try.

That's what I was going to ask. How is this different than a traditional fine dining experience?

That's the big thing. Every one of these theatres is a small restaurant. On a Friday or Saturday night, you might have 120 people at 7, 120 at 7:30, 100 at 8, so you can't do it like a normal restaurant does. You need to have a lot of labor back there, you need to have a lot of people going the same direction to get that food out. The food is very simple— put together well, well thought-out, but simple— so that it can come together quickly. And a normal restaurant is going to see checks stagger, whereas here, in five minutes, you've got the whole theatre.

CineBistro is really focused on quality, chef-driven, upscale food. Why is that important to the movie theatre experience?

That's what sets CineBistro apart. If you look at other similar concepts' websites, they've started to push their branding to be more like us. They want to pretend that they're a little more upscale. It's something that sets us apart, and **CineBistro becomes a destination**. People come from all over to eat here and watch a movie. There's something to it, having the fresh, cooked-to-order food. You don't get that in movie theatres— we're really the only ones who do it to this scale, and it's important to us.

There's a huge obstacle for other companies to do something like this, because you do need the right people. You need labor, you need talented chefs, you need people who understand food. We're not going to have a lot of competition any time soon, because it's not an easy thing to do.

What are the best kinds of food to serve?

I think it needs to be protein-driven, center of the plate-driven. It needs to have a couple sides and the protein, whether it's a New York strip or Tasmanian salmon—it's more focused on the ingredients, and I think it has to be if you're going to do upscale food. Our competition is interesting; we compete with theatres that show movies and have food, but it's more like chicken tenders and pizza, but we also compete with restaurants. So there's got to be that kind of restaurant-feeling food. We try to source locally in each of our locations. We want the menus to feel like the city that they're in.

Are there foods that you want to stay away from? Anything that's hard to eat in the dark?

We do ribs here, and some people complain that those can get messy in a dark theatre, but that's the only complaint that we really get. Soups, you can't really do those. We make things like kimchi, but something we have to think about is that we have such a broad clientele that we can't go too pointed with our flavors. A lot of my background is very casual too. The big thing I learned from CentraArchy is making the food fit together back there so it's easy to get out in large volumes quickly, but also finding food that has a mass appeal and is still delicious.

So what's the perfect movie meal?

One thing that sells across the board is the salmon. It's a sauteed salmon with a really nice crust on lemon whipped potatoes with bacon collard greens and rock shrimp in an avocado key lime beurre blanc. There's also a "popcorn," that's fried calamari, popcorn chicken, or rock shrimp battered and fried and served in popcorn boxes with dipping sauces.

Do you ever miss being in a traditional restaurant?

Sometimes. You know, the older you get, the more you don't miss being in the day-to-day grind, but it's a lot of fun to be in the kitchen and get to be creative. With CineBistro, the creative outlet is still there—I'm very heavily involved in seven different fine dining restaurants. Sometimes I collaborate with the chefs and sometimes I'm heavily dictating what they're doing, and if I need to work something out, I can come and make it in the kitchen. So that part is still there, but the fast-paced stuff, like cooking on a line, I definitely miss, because it is fun.

What are the biggest glitches that occur?

You know, occasionally, you do miss things when you have fifty tickets lined up. Typically the food rolls out in 10 to 14 minutes, but occasionally, you will miss a check and you have to recover it. That's not any different than any other restaurant. Our service style is a little different in that we don't course, and all of the food arrives at once, which makes it difficult sometimes to sell a full course meal, but the movie aspect is just as important to the company as the food, so we don't want the food service to interfere with the presentation. Some people complain, but if you come to see a movie, you don't want to have to listen to somebody taking an order or collecting payment from the person next to you during the film.

Another thing that is a little challenging is refills, because we're in and out of the theater so quickly. We have full refills on popcorn and sodas, but three-quarters of the way through a movie, you'll have to come out and get the refill yourself, which people sometimes aren't happy about.

You just started brunch.

We're only doing brunch in Atlanta right now. The food is ridiculous; it's really good. There's such a huge difference in quality compared to some of the restaurants nearby. Brunch is also one of the only times that people come and eat out here in the lobby before a show, which is great— we'd like for it to become more a meeting and socializing place.

We're also rolling out a new regular menu. It has flash-fried sweet rock shrimp in a fiery soy and red chili sauce; short rib and gorgonzola "nachos," which will be house-fried potato chips with short rib, gorgonzola, applewood bacon, caramelized onions, and malt vinegar steak sauce; rock shrimp mac and cheese; sesame caramel pork confit; sous vide buttermilk fried chicken; spice-grilled lamb chops; and birthday cake. I think it's fun because we have such talented pastry people and we make all of your desserts from scratch and they get to kind of run with it. It's a birthday cake! It's a fun celebration cake that I hope people order all the time, not just on their birthdays, because it's such a cool dessert.

Do you have plans for the future?

CineBistro right now is kind of on the cutting edge of this dinner and a movie market. There are people who do it, but not as well as we do, so people are kind of knocking on our door. As a company, we're primed very well for development, so there's not really anything that's off-limits for us. The other thing is that we charge the same price for movie tickets than any theater down the road does, but the seats are way better and it's typically 21 years or older. You don't have to eat, either, so personally, I don't know why anybody goes anywhere else.