

# **Ricky Joe: Your Personal Chef of Cooks Comfort Cuisine**

By Empish J. Thomas

Meatloaf served with homemade buttermilk mashed potatoes and blanched green beans with crumbled bacon. Or what about Shepard's Pie made with ground lamb, various vegetables & thick beef sauce simmering under a layer of creamy mashed potatoes. Couscous and Quinoa Stuffed Peppers prepared with red bell peppers, couscous and quinoa in a delicious tomato sauce; or Grandma's Pennsylvania Dutch Chicken & Egg Noodle Soup prepared with rich broth, vegetables and egg noodles; serve with sides of corn and mashed potatoes. No, this is not a dinner menu at a local restaurant or the highlights from a cooking show on the Food Network Channel. But these mouth-watering meals are some of Ricky Joe's, personal chef, favorites to prepare for his clients. Located in Portland, Oregon, he specializes in Pennsylvania Dutch, Amish and Southern cuisine. "I really love to cook home-style comfort meals and many ethnic dishes," said Joe, who has been a personal chef and owner of Cooks Comfort Cuisine for the past year. "The main thing is that I cook the comfort foods my clients enjoy and I serve them family style. I put all the love and passion that I have in my meals and if my clients can feel just a little of my love for what I am doing that will make me happy."

Joe started learning to cook growing up around his grandmother in Phoenix, Arizona. While both his parents worked, his grandmother cared for him and his sister, Lori, passing on several family recipes and cooking techniques. "She taught me many Pennsylvania Dutch dishes such as chicken & dumplings which is actually a chicken and homemade egg noodle soup," said Joe. "On Saturday mornings we made baked goods like cinnamon rolls and homemade bread." His grandmother was also instrumental in encouraging Joe to pursue his dreams despite his vision loss. Joe was diagnosed, shortly after birth in 1959, with Congenital Glaucoma, which at that time was an irreversible eye disease. "My grandma always told me that my blindness was just a small part of who I am as a person and that I should follow my dreams," he said.

At 7 years-old, Joe worked in the kitchen with his mother preparing homemade dinners for his parents' business clients. A few years later, while attending classes at the Washington State School for the Blind in Vancouver Washington, Joe learned more about cooking from his house mothers. They taught him Scandinavian dishes and valuable kitchen skills. During his college days he lived in Chicago, Illinois learning how to be a dietitian. After graduation Joe worked for many years as a private chef and caregiver for seniors, diabetics and clients with AIDS. In 1995, Joe moved to Portland and opened a home-based travel agency escorting travelers on culinary cruises to many destinations. During his final cruise in December 2005, Joe spent time talking to chefs and learned about the personal chef industry. Shortly after he returned home, Joe began intensive research into this field and shut down his travel agency. "I realized after investigating the personal cheffing service for a while that it wasn't that different from when I worked as a private chef in Chicago," said Joe. "The difference being that I cooked for more than one client at a time."

Joe's new knowledge of the industry, former assistance from family members and teachers, college education and travel business all played an influential role in preparing Joe for his ultimate dream which was to become a personal chef. "Food has always been a passion of mine. My skills are self-taught, but I am constantly looking for new trends in cooking and obtaining new training as needed." He applies this drive not only to being a personal chef but also to overcoming specific challenges due to his vision loss. "What is unique about me being a blind personal chef is that I use my sense of TOUCH and TASTE to prepare my meals," says Joe. He confidently chops up meat and vegetables using standard chef knives; and does measuring by feel. He does use some adaptive devices such as a talking thermometer and bumps or small dots that are temporarily placed on the client's stove to indicate heating temperature. Another talking device that he uses is a Post-Your-Voice Post-it Memo that provides recording capabilities to jot down quick notes. He records heating instructions and clips this memo device onto the prepared food for later use by the client. "My blindness has never inhibited my cooking," said Joe. "When I look at an onion I can't see the lines on it but I can feel them and so I cut by feel. I am so used to it, it's second nature to me." Joe believes that his blindness has been more an asset than a hindrance as a personal chef. "It has taught me to keep it simple and not to overcomplicate dishes. I love creating dishes and using the freshest ingredients that can be found," he said.

Once Joe makes contact with a prospective client he will plan a customized menu and e-mail it for approval. Next, he will shop for the groceries, choosing organics whenever possible. Then he and his partner, Doug, will arrive at the client's home with the groceries and the proper cooking tools, which includes everything from pots and pans to pantry items. "Because I am blind and am often cooking in different kitchens its important for me to have as many of my own utensils and pots and pans with me so I don't spend a lot of time searching for things," said Joe. The last four steps are to prepare the entrees and appropriate side dishes; package each meal according to the clients needs i.e. single servings or large family style portions; and lastly to leave cooking instructions and clean the kitchen thoroughly. His personal chef service starts at \$75, depending on serving sizes and frequency; with additional charges for food purchases, extra side items or extensive clean up before cooking.

When Joe goes to the client's home for the first time Doug comes to help do a visual and mental walk through of the kitchen. "I usually have a mini disk recorder with me that I record the walk through so that when I get home and think where the stove or something was I can play back the walk through," said Joe. "Also because I'm working in a different kitchen my partner assists me with the cook date. Since Doug is a chef at the Porta Terra in the Portland Hilton Executive Tower we work our appointments for our clients around his schedule." Joe and his partner will provide service to clients in the Portland Metro area only. He notes he will occasionally travel to other parts of Oregon for a special event or a monthly cook date. "We can service other clients in Oregon but usually have to charge a per hour travel fee and the cost of any lodging we may need if the trip is not close enough for us to drive round trip and chef in the same day," said Joe.

Since the inception of his new career as a personal chef, Joe has endured one specific challenge. He continuously comes up against the perception of being a personal chef with a visual impairment. "I enjoy it every chance I get but I don't want anyone to think it's easy for me. I not only have to find clients but ones that can open up their minds to letting a blind man into their kitchen and get past the fear of me cutting off a finger, burning their kitchen down or whatever kind of horror they can dream up," said Joe. He is not disheartened by this fact, but overcomes by being professional, upbeat and positive. "I find if you can get them to smile usually that can break the ice. Also I've offered to give a free sample service of one or two entrees if a person seems really interested but just needs a little encouragement," said Joe. "Once they try my food and watch me in their kitchen their hooked."

Joe has been a successful personal chef donating his services to worthy causes and participating in professional organizations. In October 2005 he donated a romantic dinner for two gift certificate to the Oregon Make-A-Wish Foundation for their "Food, Wine & Wishes" dinner. Over \$4,500 was raised for the certificate. Additionally, Joe was recently voted as the head chef for the Oregon chapter of Personal Chefs Network™. This organization was founded in 2000 to provide education materials, support and networking for beginning and seasoned personal chefs. "When I found out about the personal cheffing industry I knew I had found what was right for me," said Joe. "I love what I do and I believe it shows through in my meals."

For more information on Cooks Comfort Cuisine call (503) 740-7438 or log on to <http://www.cookscomfortcuisine.com>.