

DESERT PATROL

The people who make Las Vegas

BY JACQUELYNN D. POWERS

JEFF HENDERSON

Epiphany in Pots and Pans

Chef Jeff is not in the kitchen at Café Bellagio, where for the past three years he has worked as executive chef. Instead, today finds him seated in a banquet of the lobby eatery, enjoying a meal. Jeff Henderson is on a three-month sabbatical to promote his first book, *Cooked: From the Streets to the Stove, from Cocaine to Foie Gras* (William Morrow). It's obvious that the staff at Café Bellagio is excited to see him: Waitresses, busboys and cashiers flock to Henderson as if he were a rock star rather than their head toque. Now the novice author is gaining some non-culinary fame as well, as the book-tour circuit has led to appearances on *Oprah*, *Good Day Atlanta* and XM Radio. Will Smith has even optioned *Cooked* for a major motion picture, which he will produce and possibly star in.

For Henderson, the attention is a bit surreal. A chef has not garnered this much attention from a book since Anthony Bourdain debuted *Kitchen Confidential* in 2000. Of course, Bourdain only mentioned the convicts who worked in his kitchens—Henderson spent nearly nine years in federal prison for drug trafficking charges. During his dealing heyday, in the mid-'80s, the California native was earning \$35,000 a week selling cocaine and crack. He was driving Cadillacs and Mercedeses and was a high roller in Las Vegas. Henderson and his crew enjoyed limos, presidential suites and private jets, and stayed at some of the Strip's hottest resorts, including Caesar's Palace. "We were catered to," he acknowledges. "It's no secret that Vegas used to be the backyard of everything illicit those days."

The *Scarface* lifestyle came crashing down in 1988, when Jeff was busted in San Diego. After his sentencing, he moved around to six different prisons, including a local stint at the Nellis Air Force Base detention center. It was behind bars that the career criminal learned how to cook. "I was on the Cadillac Crew in prison," Jeff recalls. "We used to sweep up cigarette butts. Each inmate had a section of the yard, and I took advantage of the job. So they reassigned me to the kitchen on pots-and-pan detail. I was able to eat better. I started a business; I sold extra chicken, cinnamon rolls and bananas. Chef was born. Many people saw punishment when they were put in the kitchen; I eventually saw it as an opportunity." Fried chicken was the first dish he

Café Bellagio executive chef and author Jeff Henderson hopes his story will change people's lives. "You have to be done with whatever your vice is, whether it's overeating, compulsive gambling or drinking," the former drug dealer says.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF GREEN

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cooked successfully.

This was not the only transformation Henderson made in jail. "When I first went to prison, I was hard-headed," Jeff recalls. "I blamed everyone for my shortcomings in life. I blamed everyone but myself. I came to a point where I accepted responsibility. I joined different prison organizations, like Toastmasters International and started reading books and newspapers. I was watching *60 Minutes* and *20/20*. People began to tell me that I was smart. That was a defining moment. The secret is that each individual has to say, 'I want to change my life.' You have to be done with whatever your vice is, whether it's overeating, compulsive gambling or drinking." Henderson was a responsible man by the time he got out in 1997.

Determined to succeed in his new, legitimate, profession, Jeff started working as a dishwasher at Gadsby's in Los Angeles. He was promoted to line cook and also toiled in upscale kitchens at the Hotel Bel Air and Raffles L'Ermitage Hotel. In 2000, Las Vegas beckoned. This time,

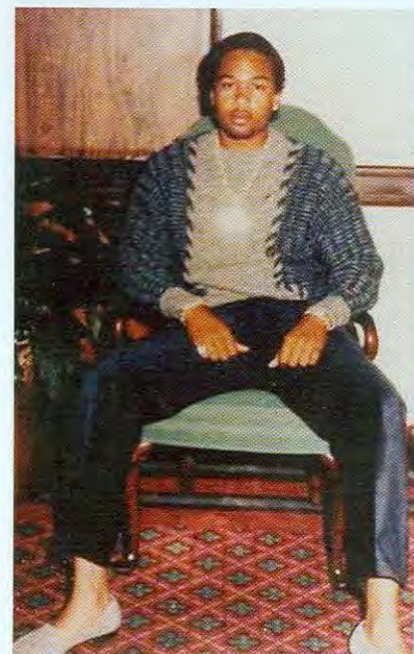


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there were no limousines or VIP treatment. In fact, Jeff couldn't get hired on the Strip. It was Caesars Palace, the scene of much debauchery in his youth, that finally gave him a shot. At Café Lago, he became the first African-American chef to run a restaurant at Caesars Palace. In 2004, Henderson moved on to the Bellagio, which he calls the Bentley of hotels. Within a month, he was appointed executive chef of the 24-hour Café Bellagio. The restaurant's high volume, from 3,000 to 4,000 covers a day, doesn't scare him: "I run my kitchen almost like when I was in prison. I had a big staff and kitchen there. There were 2,000 inmates for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I go into that mode where I'm very focused and disciplined."

Although he still fries up chicken (the secret is his "jailhouse spices"), Chef Jeff is serving more highbrow fare at Café Bellagio, including short ribs braised in red wine with mashed potatoes and asparagus. The Henderson resident and father of four is also an accomplished public speaker, with appearances all over the country. *Cooked* came out of the desire to motivate people. "I want the book to inspire people to overcome barriers," Jeff explains. "I want to show young people that there are consequences when we make the wrong choices." *Cooked* drew the attention of TV guru Oprah, on whose show Jeff recently appeared. "I had butterflies in my stomach," he admits. "I'm usually not nervous. I speak in front of thousands of people all the time. She made me feel very comfortable, though. When they first brought me out, before they were taping, she hugged me and said, 'I'll be right back. I've got to go pee.' I felt like she was a normal person."

If you missed *Oprah*, Henderson's tale is coming to a theater near you. After being bought by Smith and Columbia Pictures for seven figures, the movie should be in production by early 2008. Word is that Smith will play the lead. (If not, Terrence Howard's name has been introduced into the casting shuffle.) At his first meeting with Will, on the set of *I Am Legend* in Brooklyn, Henderson did not pull any punches. "We talked about the importance and integrity of my life story," he says. "I know Hollywood always has to put a dramatic spin on things, but I want to have that social message of redemption. I don't want any stereotypes." While this all sounds like a typical happy ending, Jeff has one more mission to accomplish—owning an upscale Southern restaurant on the Strip. "I'd like to be recognized as a serious chef," he says. "Everybody writes about my story now, but I'm hoping that with my own restaurant, I will be able to show the world that I can really cook!" ♠



Clockwise from top: Jeff Henderson during his dealing days; in a 1984 snapshot; Chef Jeff's short ribs braised in red wine with mashed potatoes and asparagus.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF HENDERSON, THIS PAGE TOP, RIGHT FROM COOKED; FROM THE STREETS TO THE STOVE, FROM COCAINE TO FIVE GRAMS, JEFF HENDERSON (WILLIAM MORROW).