

A Dream Discovered

Young sous chef finds his way back to the kitchen.

by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

They called him “the kid,” and rightfully so. The only son of distinguished chef André Bienvenu walked through more kitchens by the age of 8 than most do in a lifetime. Yet Tyler Bienvenu is more than his father’s shadow. A pioneer in his own right, at 23 he brings talent and originality to a dream that’s as new to him as it is to those watching from afar.

The sous chef at world-famous Joe’s Stone Crab, Miami, Fla., is perfecting his craft in the same kitchen his father heads. Inspiring one another, side by side, they’ve overcome challenges often associated with multiple generations pursuing the same dream at the same time, leaving behind a playbook and a growing list of satisfied patrons.

“We’re very different, but we work very well together,” the younger Bienvenu says. “His strengths are my weaknesses, and my strengths are his weaknesses.”

Born a leader, André reinvents, he motivates. Tyler is more the introvert who will crack a joke to a small group before sharing it with the room. The son is quick, an avid learner who applies and moves on to the next goal, often before catching a breath.

To the kitchen, one brings freshness and new ideas; the other, wisdom and experience. There are neither puppet strings to guide nor coattails to ride, but rather a father who offers autonomy to implement ideas and a son who respectfully receives it.

“I was 19 when I came on full-time at Joe’s; I was the youngest kid in the building,” Bienvenu recalls. “We just complement each other. He’s able to teach, and I can make things better and stronger.”

It wasn’t always this finely oiled machine now at work behind the swinging doors at Joe’s. The Virginia-born son of a chef had other plans. Following in his father’s culinary footsteps was nowhere on the list.



Shifting passions

As much as superior taste for quality cuisine can be found in Bienvenu blood (his parents met while working as cook and waitress), the love of hockey stands just as prominently. With plans and a scholarship, it would be the junior leagues for a year followed by Penn State for four. There he would study mechanical engineering, play hockey and avoid the kitchen.

“It’s funny. Growing up, for take-your-

child-to-work-day we’d always go to Joe’s. The employees would say, ‘You’re going to be just like your dad,’ and I thought, ‘No way!’ I was not doing it. I went because I got free food.”

A summer at home put Tyler back in the kitchen, however. Coupled with a dawning realization that deskwork may not be suited for the out-of-the-box dreamer, ingredients and prep stations began to take on new meanings. So he transferred to a Florida league and looked into the hospitality and restaurant management degree program at Florida International University, which he later completed.

“It’s hard to explain, but it all kind of came together at once,” Bienvenu says. “I didn’t want to become an engineer. I don’t want to sit in front of a computer. Two years away from school made me take a step back and realize what it is I’m good at and what I want to do.”

It was a long goodbye, of sorts. First mechanical engineering, followed by hockey, but with it came the anticipation of new beginnings, of raw talent yet to be unveiled.

Life unfolding

Most Miami mornings, Tyler can be found on the move.

Up at 6 a.m. to beat traffic, he’s in the kitchen by 7 a.m.

First, it’s a walk through to greet his work family, then it’s organizing the cooler, tagging, rotating inventory and fabrication.

Throw in line and server meetings before lunch and he’s lucky if he makes it out the door by 7 p.m., ready to hit the gym.

The life of a young chef is rarely described as simple, but that’s exactly how “the kid” likes it.

Sure, he still hears the comments.

“I am the chef’s son,” he verifies. “It’s to be expected.” There are other nicknames, such as “Le Butcher” and “Mad Scientist,” he says more accurately reflect his culinary style.

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Tyler has a library in his room. Books line the walls, all with different eras and styles of cuisine. He carries his set of butcher knives around as a pioneer hunter would his bow. He delves into molecular gastronomy by taking beef and breaking it down to the scientific level. He recreates textures and studies the way they're perceived, and he leads a group of 110 with a kindness that is innate, not developed.

"You have to get close to the ingredient," he'll tell you. First understand where it comes

from and how it's grown. Then, if you dare, venture into the realm of cooking it.

"Ranchers and feeders pour their whole life, their hard work into growing and feeding these animals. Their whole life is dedicated to raising the best possible animal they can, and it's my responsibility, as a chef, to take that product and show it off in the best possible light. You have to respect it."

So what's his favorite food to prepare? You guessed right: beef. A fan of the chuck flap and the clod heart, he favors the spinalis. It's

timeless, and when it carries the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand label, it is hard to beat.

"To take a raw ingredient, and take your hands and ideas and create that into something that is edible and nourishing to a customer, it's one of the best feelings ever," he says.

So what's to become of the son who is following in his father's footsteps? Engineer? Chef? Did pursuing one passion mean forgoing another? On the contrary.



Applying his love for science and mechanics, perhaps he takes the term “culinary genius” to new heights. When it comes to recipes, he’s not one to follow common law, but instead opens his mind to adventure and what it can mean for a dinner table.

Three summers carried Tyler away from Joe’s to restaurants in Napa and Manhattan. There he observed, understood and honed his craft under the leadership of some of the world’s most talented chefs.

“I learn every single day,” he says. “You can learn from everybody, so you should never have a closed mind.”

Sure, opportunities have presented themselves, but, for now, there’s no place he’d rather be than beside his dad. Rest assured the kid will make his culinary mark on the world. Like father, like son.



Editor’s Note: *Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for CAB.*