

Deaf cook lets food speak for him



Charlie Somers enjoys learning the inner workings of a professional kitchen. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Only one ingredient is missing from the kitchen at Mirabelle – the chatter among the staff.

Well, there's chatter, it's just not audible.

With the hiring of Charlie Somers, owner-chef Kenn Druley has had to rethink how he communicates with staff. Somers is deaf. Druley isn't proficient in sign language, nor is anyone else who works at the Stateline restaurant.

It can be a challenge at times because the work of a chef

involves having one's head down nearly all the time cutting, chopping and stirring. It can be fast moving as well.

"It's kind of like with any new language or any new guy in the kitchen, there are always things to adjust to. It's just a different way to communicate," Druley told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I see it as more of a positive challenge for the kitchen; for myself and Charlie as well. It's a verbal occupation and you are constantly working with your hands and talking. So when Charlie needs some instruction or directions I have to stop and put things down."



Charlie Somers doesn't let his disability of being deaf slow him down in the kitchen. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Despite what could be perceived as a language barrier, Somers, through interpreter Karla Johnston, told *Lake Tahoe News* that the "joking, teasing and camaraderie" are the best parts of the job.

Right behind that is learning to cook French cuisine – not something he does at home. Burgers and fries are his specialty when not at work.

He said there are few chefs in the United States who are deaf. The challenges, he assumes, would be the same whether it's a small kitchen like Mirabelle or a larger one.

Mozzeria, a pizza place in San Francisco, is one place Somers believes would be interesting to work because it is owned and operated by deaf people.

Somers is cognizant that his disability can be more of a challenge to others than it is to him.

"I'm used to working with it, others aren't," he said. "I adapt pretty well."

Everyone at Mirabelle has learned a little sign language.



Salads are one of Charlie Somers' responsibilities. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

"He has to learn to work within this environment and how to teach other people how to work with him. It's not a one-way street at all. It is a two-way street. Teaching is going on both ways all the time, every day," Druley said.

Somers took a break from whipping the chocolate mousse into the perfect consistency to chat about how at age 43 he got into this profession. He credits his three children.

About five years ago they were all watching the movie "Ratatouille" and from there Somers got the idea that working as a chef would be interesting and rewarding. He was fairly proficient at barbecuing, but the intricacies of the kitchen – especially a commercial one – were foreign to him. That led him to Lake Tahoe Community College.

Somers now has a certificate in culinary arts. Last fall he answered an ad from Druley on Craigslist that led to him to Mirabelle. He started just before Thanksgiving.

"The ad didn't say anything about hiring deaf guys only. It said it was open to anyone with a passion for cooking who wants to learn, would be here every day and had a great attitude. Charlie showed up and fit the bill. He was exactly what I was looking for," Druley said.

Normally Somers works four days a week. A regular shift includes preparing the salads, then dessert, onion tart, bacon, chopping onions, doing dishes, taking out the trash and helping Druley and the line cook with whatever they need.

For Somers, the onion tart is one of his favorite items on the menu. He describes it as being like a French pizza. For now, it's all about following the chef's recipes and becoming proficient in various techniques.

Prior to putting on a chef's jacket, Somers had been working in data entry before going to LTCC. His time in a kitchen had been at Bread & Broth and Little Philly Cheesesteak.

As for his future, he's not sure. Owning a restaurant seems daunting to him. For now, though, he's perfectly content to learn all that Druley has to teach.

Druley gives Somers high praise for how far he has come in these four months.

"He is anticipating what the line needs during service. He is learning how to be a good cook, what good cooks do and how they work," Druley said.