

New film sees ex-chef turn the camera on Detroit’s dining scene

Keith Famie comes full circle with his new documentary ‘Detroit: The City of Chefs,’ detailing our long and eclectic culinary history and the melting pot of immigrants who helped make it so

By Jim McFarlin / Nov 20, 2024



Far left: Chef Keith Famie traded in his cutlery for cameras nearly two decades ago.

What’s Keith Famie been cooking up these days?

Well, nothing in the kitchen. At least, nothing for our consumption. The Farmington Hills native once hailed as one of America’s “Best New Chefs,” who went on to operate such upscale metro eateries as Chez Raphael and Les Auteurs, traded in his cutlery for cameras nearly two decades ago.

Famie founded his own video production company, Visionalist Entertainment Productions, and has gone on to create nearly 30 longform documentary-style films, winning multiple Michigan Emmy Awards for works centering on Detroit and its history. Beyond the things we know we’re famous for — cars, music, and coneys, for example — Famie has reminded us in his previous docs that we are also the city of churches, faith, and hot rods, among other attributes.

But with his latest release, Famie appears to have come full circle.

Detroit: The City of Chefs, detailing our city’s long and eclectic culinary history and the melting pot of immigrants who helped make it so, airs at 9 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 12, on Detroit PBS, Famie’s broadcast partner for years. Prior to that, however, the film will be showcased in a gala Metro Detroit premiere that should excite both filmgoers and foodies alike.

Detroit: The City of Chefs will debut on the big screen at Novi’s Emagine Theater at 7 p.m. Monday, Dec. 9, accompanied by a variety of food and chef-related events. (Tickets are priced at \$20 for general admission,

\$200 for the VIP “Chef Extravaganza Experience.” More about that later.) But why, after all these years, has Famie now decided to make a film focusing on chefs? Was he attempting to distance himself from his previous life?

Pondering the question, Famie says he really doesn’t have a good answer. “I’ve always wanted to tell this story,” he said in a recent conversation. “I understood the importance of the story of our culinary heritage, but it just wasn’t something that was on the radar screen to do.

“Maybe in a subconscious way at 64 I was reflecting upon where I came from personally and the richness of that story, and I started seeing people like Milos [Cihelka, the master chef best known for his years at Southfield’s gone-but-not-forgotten Golden Mushroom restaurant] turning 92, other individuals falling away, I thought it was time.”

Nearly 14 months in the making, *Detroit: The City of Chefs* includes interviews with dozens of chefs, restaurateurs, and other Detroit icons of eating out. It’s surely the last visual image of our seafood fine-dining legend Joe Muer, Jr., who died Aug. 11 while the film was still in production. And because the subject was especially dear to Famie’s heart, he and his team at Visionalist Entertainment added some special garnishes.

They reached out to Detroit’s College of Creative Studies, who selected student Alexandra Martinescul to painstakingly craft 20 miniature clay likenesses of people interviewed in *City of Chefs*, which were then used in a stop-motion animation CCS created for the film. And Detroit’s timeless chanteuse, Jill Jack, was commissioned to write the doc’s original theme song, “The Legends of the Stove,” which she also performs. (The trailer for *Detroit: The City of Chefs* is available at vimeo.com.)



The documentary traces our city’s rich kitchen history back to the early 1900s, and shows how it was enhanced as different ethnic groups — the Italians, Poles, Irish, German, and Lebanese among them — landed in Detroit, bringing their unique cooking styles and ingredients with them. “I talk about the work ethics of the early European chefs and immigrants, and what that led to,” Famie says. “You can still see that work ethic in the great young chefs we have in Detroit today. To be a great chef, I think you have to have a little ADD.”

City of Chefs also explores a unique connection between our restaurant industry and auto industry. As Big Three executives traveled around the world on business, they grew accustomed to diverse menu offerings, meticulous preparation and impeccable service. They brought those expectations, and suggestions, back home with them: Detroit restaurant owners had no choice but to compete.