



Trust the Chef

AT MARRIOTT CHEF'S CUT EXPERIENCES, EXECUTIVE CHEF PAOLO BUFFA TAKES BLIND TASTING MENUS TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

By Karen Catchpole



ALL PHOTOS BY MELISSA VALLADARES

For Paolo Buffa, executive chef of the Torrance Marriott Redondo Beach, improvising a meal on the fly is a welcome challenge that brings him back to his passion for cooking. So when he was asked to host a Chef's Cut event—a new concept driven by Marriott Bonvoy member interest—he relished the opportunity.

Marriott first rolled out a Chef's Cut program at six properties around the world, including the Heirloom Farmhouse Kitchen at the Marriott Hotel Irvine Spectrum, where at the time Chef Buffa was executive chef. The Milan-born chef loved the concept so much that he brought a Chef's Cut program with him when he moved to the Torrance Marriott Redondo Beach.

At Chef's Cut dinners, there is no menu. Creation begins at Southern California's bountiful markets, where Chef Buffa selects the best ingredients he can get his hands on. Then the chef calls on skills earned during his nearly 30-year career, including cooking with his grandmother in Italy, studying at the Culinary Arts Institute in Milan and holding many kitchen positions within the Marriott network, and the expertise of his kitchen staff to turn those market ingredients into dishes prepared in the moment, exclusively for Chef's Cut diners in the hotel's Asian-inspired 21 Square Bar + Kitchen. The result is a totally unique culinary experience that leaves all parties feeling satisfied.

Marriott Bonvoy Traveler recently talked to Chef Buffa about why he loves Chef's Cut dinners as much as his guests do.



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—Chef Paolo Buffa, Torrance Marriott Redondo Beach

How is a Chef's Cut meal different from a tasting menu or a chef's table experience?

During a chef's table dinner, you sit down and there is a menu with dishes the chef wants to make that night. During a tasting-menu meal, everyone gets the same dishes. For a Chef's Cut meal, we go to the local market and create dishes specifically for each diner. Chef's Cut is also served family style at long wood tables so that people get to know the dishes and each other. All ingredients are from California, so everything is fresh, sustainable and seasonal. And everything is served by me or one of my head chefs who can tell the story of each dish and explain why the ingredients were used. There is a lot of interaction between the chef and the guests.

What do you think is the key to a successful Chef's Cut experience?

Trust. The first thing I say to diners is, “Do you trust the chef?” Then I ask about allergies. Then I tell them to sit down, buckle up and get ready to take pictures for Instagram.

What elements of a Chef's Cut event make you nervous?

You're always nervous because you don't know how people are going to react. Do they really trust the chef? Do they really mean it?

How do guests respond to your dinners?

They are blown away because they don't expect to find a meal like this in a hotel. This belongs in a fancy restaurant. But I put everything I have into those dinners. Chef's Cut dinners are very exciting for me. They give me and my staff the opportunity to cook for fun. Cooking is a job for us, but it's also our passion. To get something at the market and transform it into something unique is very rewarding.



What is the most powerful part of the meal?

Every single dish has a story. If I put a carpaccio on the table, I want to be sure that dish tells a story about my heritage. In order to create a memory, you have to engage all the senses.

How does a Chef's Cut event keep your kitchen lively and creative?

In my kitchen I have people from Mexico, India, Australia—all over the world. They can use those influences, and I rely on that. I say, “Guys, give it your best shot. Do it!” And then we create. It starts with an idea, then the market, then the kitchen, then we start the show. Chef's Cut is when I go crazy and do whatever I want. I'm off the menu. You have a sense of your guests, and you can make changes based on that. We can switch at the last minute if we see they are not meat lovers, for example.

What are the biggest rewards for you and your team?

When you get a round of applause from the table. I always bring my team out with me. The dishwasher comes out, too! That's when all the other people in the dining room realize that Chef's Cut is something special. **T**