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## Marlborough native shares recipes for 'wicked good' fare

The Boston Globe



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In most parts of the country, what's better than good is great or awesome. In New England, as one local chef and cookbook author knows, there's another level - wicked good.

After 16 years of cooking professionally, 33-year-old Marlborough native Matt Williams has compiled more than 200 dishes that meet his qualifications to be dubbed, as his first-ever recipe book is titled, "Wicked Good Food."

"I think the book is fun, funny, and real relaxed. It's just a conversation about food from a guy that loves food," said the chef, who teaches culinary arts at Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School in Upton and offers other cooking classes on the side.

He will be signing copies of his book at the Vin Bin's 5th anniversary Grand Tasting Wine and Cheese Fest in Marlborough on Saturday from 2 to 4 p.m.

What Williams considers to be wicked good food is influenced by the other cooks he has worked with and the traveling he has done, he said. However, the book does have a local feel beyond the title.

Most of the recipes are ones he enjoys, a category that covers a broad spectrum, from comfort food - a personal favorite - to seafood and easy-to-prepare gourmet-type dishes.

Some New England-inspired recipes include steamers, corn chowder with smoked chicken, Rhode Island-style fried calamari, steamed mussels, scallop and bacon flatbread, Indian pudding, and "wicked good lobster roll."

Between the recipes in the book, which covers appetizers to desserts, Williams

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weaves in personal stories.

The title was inspired by his late grandfather, Dean Dorchester. Williams would help the lifelong Marlborough resident along his milk-truck delivery route.

Dorchester would describe things he liked as “wicked good,” Williams said. And so, when he was contemplating what to name his book, the locally famous phrase seemed appropriate.

“I said, ‘You know what, this stuff is wicked good. This fits,’” said Williams. The title “is eye-catching and goes with what people say around here.”

Williams said he had never planned to write a book. The spark that led to “Wicked Good Food” came as a time-saving effort.

“I kind of got sick of people asking me for recipes all the time,” he said, adding that most of them were for dishes he would typically make without using exact measurements.

The top requests include pizza dip, a grilled cheese and caramelized bananas dessert, and a blue cheese and grilled pear pastry.

So, about two years ago, Williams began writing down his most popular recipes. He wound up with around 500 before whittling the list down to about 200 that he calls “the best of the best for home cooking.”

And, home cooking was how Williams turned a hobby into a career.

Growing up about 3 miles from where he lives now, he started cooking at roughly age 5. He fought with his younger brother, Brian, to prepare favorites like Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and cream of tomato soup.

“My parents didn’t cook a ton, but they always had stuff in the pantry,” he said.

However, Williams never considered it to be more than a leisure activity until his father decided he was tired of seeing his 16-year-old son come home every day after school and plop on the couch to watch TV for several hours.

His father knew the owner of a restaurant at the Learning Center at Marlborough, and the owner gave Williams his first job.

For two years, he worked in the kitchen doing “simple stuff,” like microwaving frozen mozzarella sticks.

But it was enough to set him on a career path. He earned a bachelor’s degree in culinary arts and a master’s in food service education from Johnson & Wales University in Providence.

He interned at the Tavern restaurant on Nantucket and worked in kitchens in Florida, Texas, Georgia, California, Washington, D.C., and Colorado.

In his 20s, Williams returned to the kitchen where it all began for him at the Learning Center, but this time as a chef.

“Instead of just putting stuff on a plate, I was making the stuff to put on the plate,” he said.

But after spending countless hours in restaurant kitchens, working as a full-time chef had lost its appeal.

“I loved it, but I saw what was happening to some of the other chefs I was working with,” he said. Some of them were working too many hours, getting divorced, picking up drug habits, or becoming alcoholics, said Williams.

For Williams, who married 34-year-old Wellesley native Jane Condon in May, teaching at Blackstone Valley is ideal. The high school has “the best program around,” he said. He works better hours and is not only cooking, but also teaching, which has been a lifelong passion.

Now in his sixth year at Blackstone Valley, he instructs around 100 culinary students running the vocational school's full-service Three Seasons restaurant, which is open to the public for lunch on days when classes are in session.

Initially, he works side-by-side with the students, and later, as they gain experience and confidence, he lets them work more independently.

"Ideally it will run itself, and I'll step in when they need help," said Williams, minutes after helping one of his students prepare chicken marsala on the restaurant's opening day for the season.

He described the school's kitchen, with around 50 students working on their assigned tasks, as "organized chaos," but he tells his students that staying calm is key.

"It's just food. You screw something up or you burn something, then you just wipe it off. It doesn't matter," said Williams, admitting he still makes mistakes.

Williams also started and runs the Sweet Potatoes Cooking School, which offers cooking classes to people in their own homes. Additionally, he teaches classes at Tom's Gourmet Marketplace in Northborough.

He prefers teaching through interaction, as opposed to demonstration.

"I don't like to cook for you; I like to cook with you," he said. "There are some people that just generally don't like cooking, just like there are people who don't like football."

His basic recipe for cooking success? "Don't do it if it feels like a chore. Invest a little of yourself, make it your own.

"If you can make it fun you'll do it more. Play with your food. Don't be a slave to recipes."

*"Wicked Good Food" is available online through Amazon and Barnes & Noble. It is also available as an e-book and for the Kindle, and will soon be in local bookstores. More information is available online at [www.wickedgoodcookbook.com](http://www.wickedgoodcookbook.com). Matt Rocheleau can be reached at [mrocheleau@globe.com](mailto:mrocheleau@globe.com). ■*

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