

DENVER ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

IN THE KITCHEN WITH RADEK CERNY
ADVENTURES OF A RESTAURANTEUR
CZECH REFUGEE FIRED UP BY CULINARY FREEDOM

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Spotlight on Food

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When you've stood in lines around the block and waited for a week, ticket in hand, for the chance to see an American movie in Czechoslovakia, there's only one thing left to do: Go west, young man, go west.

"Remember The Magnificent Seven?" Radek Cerny says in his thick broth of an accent, shaking his head in awe. "That set you up for seeking adventure."

And at age 45, Cerny has had plenty of that. Born and raised in Czechoslovakia, the owner of Papillon Cafe, Radex and the new Le Chantecler in Niwot has lived all over the map. Not bad for a man who had to wait five years to get a travel visa. "If you live in a communist regime, there's no traveling, because there'd be nobody left," he says with a laugh.

But his childhood was idyllic and a precursor of things to come in the cooking arena. His parents lived in a tiny apartment in Prague when he was young, so he went to live on a nearby farm with his grandparents. "I had a great youth. We had a bunch of guys and we'd chase chickens and play hockey on the frozen lake."

And generally raise Cain, which he recalls with great nostalgia. "When we were hungry, we'd climb apple trees and pick apples, or we'd lie down in a field of pea pods and open them up (and eat them on the spot). We always got in trouble because the farmers didn't like six guys in the field (lying down) and flattening the ground they wanted to cut. The whole village was watching us."

Three or four times a year, his grandmother would prepare nothing short of a feast, complete with roast goose, for his whole family. "She was an incredible cook," he says.

At 13 or 14, he moved back to Prague with his family to finish his schooling and to "start to decide what to do with my life," he says. "The government would tell you, 'You could be carpenter.' I said, 'I'll be a cook.'" After he finished his regular schooling, he did a four-year apprenticeship at the Czech Cook's School.

Then, in 1980, he was surprised to receive a visa. "I was pretty bad-risk," he says. His passion, then and now, was writing and performing bluegrass music, and he had long been in contact with music publishers in the West as he pursued his interest. Then there was that movie influence.

Telling his parents he was off on a camping trip, he traveled by bus through Yugoslavia, a legitimate trip; to Italy, not a legitimate trip.

On the bus, he befriended a man who had the same intention. They pooled their money, sold most of their luggage and hired a taxi to take them the 400 miles to

the border. Although the taxi driver understood what they were about to do, he clued them in on where to cross to avoid the patrols.

"We ran all the way to Italy," Cerny says. "I was scared like hell. If they caught us, we'd be sent back and maybe even spend a couple years in jail." Still, he says, "I'd do it again, because I was a kid and it was fun to do."

On the other side of the border, the Italian night patrol picked them up and took them to a place for Czech refugees. In the morning, they were sent to a school to learn English, and then they'd plan where they wanted to go. The budding bluegrass musician, who plays guitar and mandolin, thought that all roads led to Nashville, Tenn. But when he finally arrived there, his dream of professional greatness died on the streets.

"The minute I saw the 10- and 15-year-old kids playing music outside the bus station, my dreams were shattered," he says. "You have to have it in your blood, and I do, but not like that. I said, 'I should go back to spatula.'"

He hung around for a while, meeting people like Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. "They're still my heroes," he says.

Eventually he moved to Chicago, sponsored by a church ministry, to live with an uncle. He began cooking in restaurants, "but I had no style," he says. "I knew the basics, but I didn't know what way I wanted to go."

By chance, the church ministry got a call from a Czech chef, George Janku, in Vail. Janku needed help in the kitchen of the Tennis Club, where he was working, and brought Cerny to Vail.

It was here, he says, that he started cooking in the French style: "I first met fresh fish, lobster and super fresh vegetables. Czech food is like German food. There is no sex in the food - too boring. French food is simple, very fresh and totally different."

After a couple of years, wanderlust kicked in and he began to travel a little, this time stopping in Boulder, taken by the beauty of the town. He was hired at Marie's, owned by Marie Halek, a fellow Czech who now owns Marie's in Berthoud.

"She's a great lady," he says. "I started flipping eggs. The first day, I flipped eggs for 500 people. I was dreaming about eggs all night."

In the years that followed, he worked at the Normandy restaurant and Cherry Hills Country Club, working two jobs to save money for his own restaurant and working side-by-side with then-little-known Kevin Taylor along the way. Eventually he ended up on the "dream team" at Strings restaurant, with Noel Cunningham and Taylor.

"It really opened my mind to a new style of cooking," he says. "Nobody knew me, but it was incredible. It was so hot."

Inspired, he took two trips to France, where he worked briefly at Roger Verge's Moulin de Mougins and Paul Bocuse's signature restaurant in Lyon. In 1988, he returned to Boulder and opened the European Cafe, which quickly became a raging success. Spurred by that, he opened the European Cafe and Al Fresco in lower downtown. Somewhere along the way, he found time to get married - he has since divorced - and has two daughters, 14-year-old Alexandra and 8-year-old Brea.

The problem came when he tried to expand the LoDo restaurants. "We spread ourselves too thin," he says. At some point, he realized he was tired and wanted to get out, so he did.

By the time he re-entered the restaurant scene, he had learned his lesson, part of which was letting other people in on the action financially. "Otherwise they don't care enough," he says.

Most days he can be found at the fine-dining restaurant Papillon, whose cuisine he describes as French-influenced modern American. Radex is more of a happening bistro / brasserie, with dishes like roast chicken. Le Chantecler is French-influenced California cuisine.

Cerny plans still to be part of the restaurant scene 10 years from now, adding perhaps one more small restaurant along the lines of Le Chantecler. But then there is that bluegrass thing. "I still play, but I want to put a really good band together and play in Prague on the Charles Bridge," he says. "There are big fans there."