



Jimmy Schmidt whips up 4,000 meals for Le Mans guests, crews and drivers.

ONE FAST CHEF

Cooking (very well) with Corvette Racing

BY J. P. VETTRAINO

CHEF JIMMY SCHMIDT heads to the track caring more about winning than about great food, but the Detroit restaurateur is no ordinary caterer.

Schmidt once showed us how to do haute cuisine under the hood of a car ("Eat Free or Die," *AW*, Aug. 30, 1993). He owns the Rattlesnake Club, one of Detroit's finest restaurants, and its counterpart in Palm Desert, Calif. He has friends in high places, and for 10 years, he's been chef for the Corvette Racing GT1 team at Le Mans and other endurance races.

If you think pleasing palates at a five-star restaurant might be challenging, try preparing 4,000 meals in six days in the Le Mans paddock.

"It's a lot more intense and crazier than running a restaurant for a week," Schmidt says. "And the challenge is a bit different. We try to get the team, almost unwillingly, to eat well."

Former GM racing boss Herb Fishel, a regular at the Rattlesnake, pulled Schmidt aside in late 1998. How would he like to cook for the soon-to-be-launched Corvette GT1 and Cadillac LMP teams?

Schmidt already knew his way around both a kitchen and a manifold.

While studying electrical engineering at the University of Illinois, he had joined a program in France to earn language credits. There he'd enrolled in food and wine courses and decided he'd rather apprentice at a cooking school in Avignon. Diplomas and certificates in classic and nouvelle French cuisine followed, as did postgrad study in management at Harvard.

Schmidt would be great for GM's visitors at Le Mans. Fishel also knew that Schmidt had grown interested in sports nutrition while crewing on long-distance yacht races, and when Fishel's own crews and drivers reached the last third of a grueling 24-hour race, nutrition could be crucial. "There are similarities between endurance racing and racing sailboats. When you are on the water or in a garage, it can be difficult to mark the passage of time," Schmidt says. "We're linked to the rhythm of our meals, psychologically and biologically. That rhythm is important to peak performance."

Schmidt's first undertaking at Le Mans was massive. With both Cadillac and Corvette teams running, he'd be preparing 10,000 meals. It helped that he spoke French, but it was no small task lining up local suppliers for huge quantities of specialty meats, fresh produce and baked goods. His goal was to make nutritious meals that the crews would eat, "essentially comfort food for the Americans, without pissing off the French."

The chef typically has a week to get the crews' nutritional needs balanced. Schmidt's rule of thumb for mechanics is minimal carbohydrates and lots of protein, to stabilize blood sugar through the course of the race. Drivers, on the other hand, load carbs, the way marathoners do.

The process is streamlined now, because of experience and because Schmidt has to prepare only about half as many meals as he once did—though he's still feeding the team, guests, track officials, local dignitaries, journalists and hangers-on. There is no cooking infrastructure in the Le Mans paddock, so he assembles a full-blown kitchen capable of everything except baking the bread. Schmidt is on the job at 5:00 on race morning and doesn't sleep again until the after-party is over two evenings later, spending close to two days on his feet.

"I love doing it, and I think the team loves the food," he says. "It's a psychological lift, something they feel gives them an edge. My goal is to keep them focused and in tune. In the last third of the race, when mental fatigue sets in, it pays off."

Do GM and its guests eat better than anyone at Le Mans? "Audi has some elaborate resources," Schmidt says. "But as a team, for taste and nutrition, no one eats better than the Corvette people."

Time—and economics—will tell if Schmidt will return to La Sarthe. 🍷

Racing Fuel

Here's just one of the dishes Jimmy Schmidt prepares for the American barbecue dinner at Le Mans.

Cocoa- and Coffee-Crusted Filet of Prime Beef

Prep: About 30 minutes
Cook: About 15 minutes
Makes 4 servings

For the spice blend:
½ cup natural cocoa powder
¼ cup ground espresso coffee
1 tablespoon ground New Mexican chiles, mild
1 tablespoon smoked salt or sea salt
1 tablespoon freshly ground black Tellichery pepper

For the steaks:
4 filets prime tenderloin of beef (such as Certified Angus), 6 to 8 ounces each
Olive oil

For the sauce:
1 bottle full-bodied red wine, preferably cabernet sauvignon or syrah
2 tablespoons honey

For garnish:
4 potato crisps, artisan chips or crispy shoestring potatoes

To prep: Preheat your grill or broiler.

In a small bowl, combine the seasoning spices. Rub the steaks with olive oil, and thoroughly coat with the spices. Allow to marinate

at least an hour (or overnight) under refrigeration.

In a medium saucepan, combine the red wine and the honey, bringing to a boil over high heat. Cook until reduced and thickened to coat the back of a spoon, about 15 minutes. Reserve at room temperature.

To cook: Rub the surfaces of the steaks with a little additional oil.

Place the steaks on the grill, cooking until well seared, about 6 minutes. Turn over, and continue cooking to desired done-

ness, usually about 6 minutes for medium rare, depending on the heat of the grill and the thickness of the steak. Remove the steaks from the grill.

Brush the steaks with the red-wine sauce, and roll all surfaces with the remaining cocoa-coffee-spice blend. Return the steaks to the grill to toast the spices for 1 or 2 minutes.

To serve: Spoon the remaining sauce onto the center of the plate. Position the steak atop the sauce. Top with potato crisps. 🍷