

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH CHEF DAVID SHAKIN
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Willow Towers
Assisted Living



Up Close and Personal With Chef David Shakin

The chef at Willow Towers Assisted Living brings lessons learned from the Culinary Institute of America, his restaurant, and his Grandmother to excite residents' palates

Even as he cooks for large numbers of diners, chef David Shakin of Willow Towers Assisted Living tries to honor requests from individual residents. It's one of the touches he brings to the job he's held almost four years, and it reflects his love of cooking. He picked up skills from his grandmother and the Culinary Institute of America, honing them in various jobs. Now he oversees a staff of 25, and cooks daily for up to 200 people, but still tries to bring a bit of a small-restaurant approach to the plate - insisting on freshness and flavor. And when holidays and special occasions come, it's time to go all out.



Q. How did you get started in cooking?

I used to cook a lot for friends. So I applied for cooking schools including the Culinary Institute of America, but they required six months experience in restaurants. So, I got a job as a

dishwasher in a restaurant in Queens and was promoted to chef after about four months. Then I got a job at a kosher sleep-away camp; they made me head dairy chef. In the fall of that year, 1978, I was accepted to Culinary Institute of America. I graduated in 1980.

Q. Did you mention that your grandmother influenced your cooking?

Before I went to cooking school, I would go over to my grandmother's apartment in Brooklyn about once a week. We made our own gefilte fish, chopped liver, tzimmes and sponge cake. If I asked her "How much should I put in?" she would say in Yiddish, "As much as it takes!" You weren't a slave to a recipe, you were actually cooking based on taste and feel and what it looks and smells like.

Q. How did you find out about Willow Towers?

I owned a restaurant called The Heights in Yorktown. We had a pretty loyal following, but it wasn't enough to keep the business going. We closed in 2010. One day I called up the Atria senior residence in Ossining. A regional manager for Atria's facilities was there and she actually knew my restaurant. She got me the job at the Atria in Rye Brook. While I was there, the executive director from United Hebrew called me up one day and said, "I heard you are doing a good job."

Q. During regular meals, can you take requests?

When serving so many people, it can be tough to cook to order. But I talk to the residents a lot and if someone says, "I really want to have cabbage soup. I haven't had it for years," I'll add it. If they say something about what they would like to see and then they see it on the menu a couple of days later, it makes them very happy. We do parties a couple of times year and they get to be pretty extravagant. At the last one, we served sliced filet mignon. They really appreciated it.



Q. Your cooking demos are popular with the residents. What do they learn?

I taught them to make rugelach, and to braid challah and bake the bread. Next, I'm going to show them how to make baklava. Residents love the lessons. It gives many of them a sense of nostalgia and a chance to continue doing what they've always done. For others, it's an opportunity to learn a new skill.

Q. How do you make the holidays special?

The residents really seem to enjoy the special meals that we make for major holidays. For Hanukkah, I made some Star of David Cakes and decorated them with blue and white frosting. I made a different kind of latke every night of the week. Now we'll be doing a holiday dessert party on the Dec. 17. I'm going to do a Yule log or Buche de Noël. I'll make eggnog pannacotta. And I'll be doing a bombe in Christmas colors. When you slice it, you'll see three colors, red, green and white probably. I love doing this kind of stuff. I get to show off.



United Hebrew Shares 9 Great Holiday Gift Ideas for Seniors

If you're about to buy another candy dish or scarf for grandma, wait. Many seniors live in smaller spaces than they used to, with less use for new tchotchkes and collectibles. And they may not need much in the way of new clothes.



There's a better way to brighten grandma's holiday. With a little creativity, and an understanding of the challenges your elderly loved one faces, you'll find a gift that does more than bring a smile - it might change a life. Our eldercare experts are brimming with ideas for ideal gifts for all seniors, from those independent enough to live on their own to those affected by dementia.

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