

# SummitCity FLAVOR

Kitchen secrets. Where to dine.



## CRÈME DE LA CHOPS

“Cooking isn’t an exact science. Never feel if you don’t have one ingredient, you can’t make something. It’s not as rigid as some people believe. It’s playing around and finding what works for you.”



He seems so laid back, a bit soft-spoken, with an easy smile. Lose the uniform, keep the Colts hat, and he could pass for a college student finished with his last exam of the semester. Appearances can be very deceiving.

Brian Smith, executive chef at Chop’s Steak and Seafood, admits he likes to play around with ingredients. When it comes to quality and

presentation, however, he is as sharp and precise as the knives he wields in the kitchen.

Smith has been cooking since he was 15. A 1993 graduate of Carroll High School, he attended culinary school at Johnson and Wales University in South Carolina for four years. There, Smith met his wife Rebecca. They married in New Jersey, where she grew up, then moved to

Philadelphia. Smith worked in bistro settings for several years there before moving back to Fort Wayne in 2001.

“We were just ready to slow it down a bit,” he said.

Someone should tell him that most wouldn’t consider his pace slow.

Smith runs the kitchen during dinner at the bustling Chop’s six nights

a week, beginning at noon and working until around 11 p.m. His wife works earlier in the day, handling lunch.

“It’s not a 9-to-5 job. It’s more of a lifestyle. It’s great to have a spouse who understands the business, why there are late nights and early mornings,” Smith said. “The days that most people have off are our busiest days. It’s kind of tough to juggle. I’ve been really lucky to have a wife in the business.”

Needless to say, however, neither Brian nor Rebecca is very interested in cooking at home. They fix whatever’s easy or get something to go. Smith spends his free time taking care of their two dogs and the house, watching TV, “doing as little as possible,” he said.

Perhaps that’s because his work can be so demanding. He puts in 10 to 12 hours with no break, monitoring inventory, placing orders, creating specials and dodging burns and knives. “I don’t like to stand around” was his understatement. When he and his crew are busy, Smith said, “that’s when we’re at our best. Time goes fast, and all the elements come together.

“Cooking becomes addictive after a while. It becomes a passion that drives you. The intensity of working in restaurants — it grows on you.”

For all his intensity and drive, the smile that belies those characteristics is genuine. Smith loves to try something new, to experiment, to go with the flow.

He doesn’t take a list to the grocery when he shops for himself. “I’ll go in with no real idea, just walk around and see what looks nice.”

Smith employs the same philosophy at Chop’s. His purveyors know he’s game for whatever’s in season, whatever’s new, whatever’s fresh. “If there’s something I’ve never heard of, I’ll try to get it in here. We’re always looking to find new things,” he said.

Of course in a place called Chop’s, he serves a lot of filet mignon. But nearly 50 percent of his business is seafood, delivered overnight. Recently Smith tried out an Australian barramundi fish; he’s also cooked some Hawaiian seafood. “Fish is like produce. There are different seasons when it becomes available,” he said.

Because he uses what’s freshest and in season, Smith doesn’t have a favorite dish. “Every day is a different experience,” he said. Whatever’s coming in the door, “that’s my favorite thing for the day.”

— Julianne Will

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### Chefs TELL



### EXECUTIVE CHEF BRIAN SMITH

#### Crème Brûlée

Presentation of entrees at Chop’s is controlled and consistent, but Smith allows his crew free rein on desserts, all of which are made in-house. This French classic is over-the-top elegant drizzled with chocolate and served on an ultra-contemporary square dish.

1 ¼ cup sugar  
1 pint heavy whipping cream  
1 whole vanilla bean  
7 egg yolks

Combine sugar, cream and vanilla bean in a small saucepan and bring to a simmer over medium heat. While cream is heating, place egg yolks in a mixing bowl and set aside. When cream simmers, remove from heat and slowly add to the eggs while whisking rapidly.

When mixture is fully incorporated, strain through a fine sieve and ladle into five oven-safe dishes. Place dishes in a two-inch deep pan and fill with water halfway up dishes. Bake in the oven 1½ hours or until crème brûlée appears semi-firm when jiggled. Cool brûlées for at least two hours or until set. When ready to serve, sprinkle sugar on top of each dish. Place on the top rack of the oven and broil over high heat until sugar is lightly golden brown and bubbling. Serve garnished with berries and whipped cream. ■

### CHOP’S STEAKS AND SEAFOOD

6421 W. Jefferson Blvd.  
260-436-9115

Hours: Lunch, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday. Dinner, 5-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday

Specializing in steaks and seafood with fresh-baked bread and desserts prepared in-house. A full bar serves wine, spirits and mixed drinks.