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Around the World with the
English Man



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Celebrity chef Todd English entertains longtime friends with exotic fare and theatrical flair.

BY ANNA CHESHIRE LEVITAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HEATH ROBBINS

What began as an unassuming 50-seat Charlestown storefront restaurant—known for its brawls rather than “interpretive rustic Mediterranean cuisine”—has grown into a culinary empire that reaches up to the Delta skies and down to Walt Disney World—literally. Mention Olives to movie stars, athletes, food critics, and locals, be they Bostonian or Charlestonian, and passion soars.

With his hunky good looks, Todd English, Olives chef and owner, is every bit the celebrity, thanks to his numerous awards, TV and book deals, and multiple restaurants in hip venues such as New York City’s Union Square, Las Vegas, and Aspen. This spring he adds Hollywood and Vine to his restaurant résumé when he opens Beso (Spanish for “kiss”) with sexy actress Eva Longoria. The Mexican restaurant already has the paparazzi salivating.

Back from exotic tours abroad, English recently invited some special friends—Boston Pops maestro Keith Lockhart and his charming bride, Emiley, and fancy-car czar Herb Chambers, among others—to the famous back room at Olives for a dinner appropriately themed “Think Globally, Eat Locally.” The evening’s creative menu proved one thing: Despite his star status, English’s culinary talents are still sharp as a knife.

“This guy can cook,” said funny guy Tony V to fellow guest Billy Costa, the host of the popular roving food show Kiss 108/TV Diner. “He oughta open a restaurant.” Costa, meanwhile, was busy devouring the first course of sushi Todd, an assortment of tuna, hamachi, and seared diver scallops, paired perfectly with an ice-clear Hakutsuru sake.

Surprise, bordering on shock and awe, greeted each course, starting with ravioli-o’s—yummy pasta served in plastic takeout containers reminiscent of Dean & DeLuca’s. “We picked these up at the 7-Eleven,” said English, referring to the ultracute packaging. (Female admirers such as bubbly Lisa Roach and lovelies Marianne Siegel and Lisa Costa tried to pop the containers into their purses without spilling the deliciously rich red sauce.)

Guests were blindfolded to experience the next course: Thai lobster fantasy. “Get your hand off my wallet,” whispered Celtics legend M.L. Carr to table neighbor Matt Siegel, also of Kiss 108. “Is that your wallet?” returned Siegel, sounding very Matty-ish.

One guest who was obviously peeking quipped, “Ed Kane is checking his cell phone even though he’s blindfolded!” Kane politely refuted that he was just “prepping for Paris”... the Hilton sister with a record, who was scheduled to show up at his tony club, the Estate, the following night.

“This is where it gets kinky, baby,” said English, taking control of the melée. He then waved burning rosemary around the room—to ward off evil spirits—before sternly advising guests to keep their hands to themselves. Next he instructed everyone to down the shot glass filled with lobster and lemongrass soup before tasting the moist chunk of lobster in the oversize ladle. (The waitstaff stood by attentively, guiding wandering hands to their respective plates. This was definitely the touchy-feely part of the night.) The delicacies were paired with a crisp Domaine Schlumberger '03, a Gewurztraminer from Alsace.

Chinatown pig roast was the next course, a tribute to the best of English’s travels in Asia. Roasted pig with bok choy in an Asian pear glaze was served with a steamed bun and Tsingtao lager from Qingdao, China. The beer was a welcome and unexpected finish to the main course.

Robin Dawson of Boston Film Festival fame and two very tall male guests from Hollywood raved about the night’s ambience. Producer/director Brian Ide and actor Dustin Booth began offering roles in their upcoming film about the life of Paul Revere, tentatively entitled *The Ride*. (Tony V and M.L. Carr battled over which of them should play Paul.) For the evening’s grand finale, English had flown in Alfred Stephens, his head pastry chef from New York, to prepare the dessert dubbed chocolate D & D—a child’s fantasy of pink cotton candy and a chocolate doughnut presented with a mini Olives’ espresso martini. “This is the only reason you guys stuck around so long, for the doughnut and cotton candy,” said the proud boss, calling in Stephens from the kitchen. “Stephens is a superstar!”

English then brought out his culinary team— Olives executive chef Joe Brenner and chefs Michael Crain and Eben Leonard—all of whom beamed before the sated guests.

"I'm so fortunate to have such a great staff, 'cause Lord knows I could never do it myself," said English. Looking at the lighthearted crowd, he added, "I've known you guys for years—you've been great friends."

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