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Arrowhead Grill Chef Keeps Dream Alive Amid Bad Economy

By Barbara Yost

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Chef Charles Wade Schwerd owes his success to burritos and beef jerky.

The 1987 Maryvale High School graduate is the son and nephew of two men who moved to the West Valley from Idaho and opened a meat-processing plant. Every day, Chuck Schwerd's Red Steer Meats churns out 14,000 burritos for institutions around Arizona - mostly bean and cheese, and mostly for schools.

"I've always been around food," says Schwerd, now 43 and chef-owner of Glendale's Arrowhead Grill, which celebrated its third anniversary in August.

In a tough economy that began to falter just as Schwerd was getting started, his is one of the rare success stories.

Jeff Larson, Red Steer assistant plant manager, remembers the young man he calls Wade working at the plant 25 years ago.

"He'd clean up for his dad and cook the beans," Larson says.

That work forged a foundation in the food industry.

After high school, Schwerd attended the Scottsdale Culinary Institute, graduating in 1989. His degree led to an internship at the Ritz-Carlton, Phoenix. From there, he earned his chops at the Arizona Biltmore and then as saucier at the Wigwam.

Fine dining was satisfying. The resorts were glamorous. But Schwerd's ambition was to work as a sous chef. Valley restaurateur Paul Fleming (who now owns such restaurants as Fleming's Prime Steakhouse and P.F. Chang's) gave him that opportunity at the Phoenix steak house he had recently taken over: Ruth's Chris.

Schwerd's friends from culinary school needed him. "It wasn't fine dining," Schwerd says.

But he had found that at resorts and hotels, profits were made in room rates, not the kitchen. When it came to food, frugality was irrelevant. He knew that if he ever wanted to run his own restaurant, he'd have to learn to be fiscally responsible.

Inspired by his father, he did want his own place.



"I was attracted to that independent spirit," he says. The elder Schwerd encouraged him to learn the business side of food. "My dad got it right away."

Today Schwerd considers working for Fleming "the best move I ever made." He stayed with Ruth's Chris in the Valley for five years, then was tapped to open one in La Jolla, Calif. When Fleming sold the business, Schwerd instead cut the ribbon on a Ruth's Chris in Irvine, Calif.

Married to a woman who had been raised in the Valley, Schwerd promised her they would give California a try for three years. If it didn't prove satisfactory, they would move back to be near her family.



In 1999, they moved back, and Schwerd went to work for Mastro's steak houses, where Schwerd enhanced the menu with fresh fish dishes.

Seven years later, Schwerd was on the move again when a difference of opinion caused a break between him and owner Dennis Mastro. Schwerd was off to Denver, this time a divorced man, to open Denver Broncos star John Elway's eponymous steak house.

Schwerd's destiny to have his own place finally led him back home. In 2006, he returned to the West Valley, and with his dad began planning his dream restaurant. Scouting locations, Schwerd looked around east Phoenix and Scottsdale, territory he knew well.

But he feared those areas were saturated. The West Valley needed him.

Settling on a spot in Glendale, he says, "was like a homecoming." He opened Arrowhead Grill in August 2008.

And then the economy took a nosedive.

"It's like you design your dream house, but when you move in it's worth 10 percent of what it was," Schwerd says. "I was discouraged. I was challenged. But I believed in my concept."

He calls the current economy "the worst we've ever seen in the restaurant industry." That might be good news. "It can only get better," he says brightly.

Schwerd has been able to break through the chain-restaurant mind-set that pervades the Valley with his menu of prime hand-cut steaks, fresh fish and seafood. He crafts such appetizers as lamb chop fondue, cedar plank salmon and chicken street tacos and finishes with desserts like crème brûlée, warm flourless chocolate cake and his own butter cake.

With a solid and creative menu, Schwerd has weathered the financial storm. His rent is reasonable, less than what it would be in many areas of Phoenix and Scottsdale, where good restaurants collapse under the weight of leasing contracts.

Arrowhead Grill has built its customer base by word of mouth,

Schwerd says, drawing from surrounding neighborhoods and from Surprise. Some patrons even travel from Scottsdale, many of whom enjoyed his work at Mastro's.

Perhaps the best indicator of Schwerd's success is his launching of a second restaurant, Blu Agave Arizona Kitchen in Peoria, whose menu captures the spirit of the Southwest. Blu Agave opened in January. Owners of a retail center in the Vistancia community asked Schwerd to create a family restaurant featuring Mexican food. Not content to serve up the usual fare, he instead created a menu seasoned with the flavors of New Mexico. That includes Santa Fe Shrimp, pork posole, New Mexico-style stacked green chile enchiladas and something as simple but luxurious as warm homemade tortillas spread with agave nectar butter.

Even running two restaurants, Schwerd has energy to spare. He confesses to having "a couple of sticks in the fire," including a plan to write a book. It won't be a cookbook. The world has plenty of those, he believes. He'd like to pen a guide to running a restaurant beyond creating a tasty menu. The business side of the food industry, which he himself was eager to master, is something given short shrift in culinary school, he says.

"People could learn from it," Schwerd says of his manual. "If I could help people, it would be worth it."

Details: Arrowhead Grill, 8280 W. Union Hills Drive, Glendale. 623-566-2224. arrowheadgrill.com. Blue Agave Arizona Kitchen, 28615 N. El Mirage Road, Peoria. 623-433-9815, bluagaveaz.com.

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