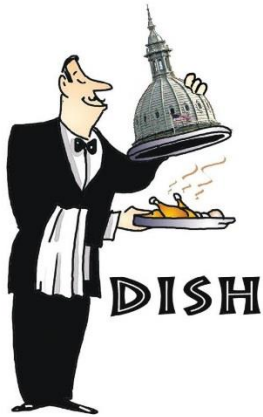


# This fusion chef has a surfboard and a sweet tooth



By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

Recipes, like scientific breakthroughs, build on one another. Take, for example, Isaac Newton's gravity, Charles Darwin's evolution, Albert Einstein's relativity, and Stevie Ray Thomas' sea bass with caramelized bananas and fried leeks on a sweet potato pancake.

Even Newton admitted he stood on the shoulders of giants, and the executive chef at Gilbert & Blake's in Okemos gladly acknowledges the inspiration for his signature sweet-and-surf dish.

Not long ago, while visiting the Beale Street Blues Festival in Memphis, Thomas got drunk with his father for the first time (another memorable thing that happened that day).

"I needed to use the bathroom,

and told him I was going to walk into the first place that had one, whether it was a bar, restaurant or whatever," he recalls.

They ended up sitting in a tiny Russian restaurant with an unpromising ambience. "It was a hole in the wall with lime green drop-ceiling tiles, big, old-fashioned Christmas lights and a belly dancer. It had an old European air about it. They wrote the menu by hand every day."

"The food was phenomenal," Thomas says. "I got over the atmosphere. Although the belly dancer was a nice touch."

**Gilbert & Blake's**  
3554 Okemos Rd., Okemos  
(517) 349-1300  
Mon.-Thur. 11 a.m. - 10 p.m.  
Fri.-Sat. 11 a.m. - 11 p.m.  
Sun. Noon - 9 p.m.

That's where Thomas found out that nothing cuddles a creamy filet

of fish like sugar-dusted, fried bananas.

In Thomas' version of the dish, as in the original, the bananas have a light crust of sugar, and collapse softly into the huge wet flakes of snow-white sea bass when pressed with a fork.

It's a heavenly effect, but not quite enough action for Thomas. "It needed something else," he says. So Thomas decided to ground the dish with a sweet potato pancake that balances sweetness and savor, soaking up

the buttery caramel juices of bass and banana.

The pancake is a complex study by itself, with red peppers, green onions, a hint of vanilla and a falafel-like matrix of seasonings, including allspice.

Thomas also thatches the whole creation with lightly breaded and fried leeks, adding a light crunch to the soft layers of textures.

The whole thing is sophisticated yet rustic. You get the feeling Thomas, an avid surfer, would whip it up if he were trapped on a desert island.

Although not overpowering, this is one of the sweeter main dishes a diner is likely to encounter. Thomas' affinity for concocting sweet things goes back to his single-digit youth in Ypsilanti, when he stood on a milk crate and helped his grandmother make Christmas candy.

After high school, Thomas lived on the West Coast for a few years, going to culinary school in San Diego. From April to October, he'd work "insane hours" at a yacht club kitchen — 90 or more a week — and surf up and down the coast the other six. "Winter surfing is the best," he says.

After a while, Thomas got tired of the yacht club. "It wasn't very democratic," he says. He felt much more comfortable at Chelsea's Common Grill, where he worked nine years under chef Craig Common. "My real love is a public restaurant," he says. "I like



Sweet swim: Stevie Ray Thomas of Gilbert & Blake's in Okemos stockades his buttery sea bass with caramelized bananas, fried leeks and a sweet potato pancake.

to go out and ask people how the food is. Chefs like instant gratification."

On one occasion, the chef

himself was grilled — by Secret Service agents, who vetted him

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for a hospitality team during a fall 2004 visit to Ann Arbor by Gerald Ford. "I've also cooked for Jeff Daniels," Thomas says, taking honest delight in modest Michigan celebrities.

Decades after standing on Grandma's milk crate, Thomas still has a knack for sweet creations. Last year, he took the fan favorite title at an annual event held

at the MSU University Club, where chefs compete to make scrumptious concoctions out of Girl Scout cookies. "I made brownies out of my favorites, the Caramel Delights," he says, calling Samoans by their old name. The recipe also got him on the Food Channel — "my 15 minutes of fame," he calls it.

Thomas hopes to defend his title Tuesday, although he's not quite sure what he'll enter. Having already taken Samoans to another level, he's thinking of building a cheesecake of from the lemon pastry crème variety. Science marches on.