

M I C H A E L I D E S

The Cincinnati Kid

In Cincinnati, Carl Bruggemeier is to foodservice what Pete Rose is to baseball. That's saying a lot. A year ago, you couldn't say that. Bruggemeier was unknown. In Cincinnati. Today, he's hot as three, four, five-way chili. Hot as the Comisars.

Since he was 19, Bruggemeier has been in the business. He's been smart in this business. Awards and accolades prove it. But never, ever, has he been *this* hot.

He is 39. A list of the 10 best would have to include Bruggemeier. Also, if you were so inclined, you might want to compare him with the tops. Someone, say, like Joe Baum (if Joe happened to be on your 10-best list).

At 39, having toiled in the backs and fronts of places like Commander's Palace and The Potomac, Bruggemeier is Baum's heir apparent. Baum's a foodservice wizard, an intellectual (there are as many intellectuals in foodservice as there are tarts in The Vatican). Baum has sliced through the baloney of this business to produce prime times: concepts daring, full of life, and true. Ditto, Bruggemeier.

(Innocently, I ask Bruggemeier, "Commander's Palace; no kidding? Paul Prudhomme? You worked for him?" He worked for me, Bruggemeier advises.)

Uncanny knack about Bruggemeier: he upsets people. He's a wise guy, a phony, they say. They don't like his self-confidence. He's too cocky. More to the point: they envy his success, his talent. Here's their drift: how can someone so young know so much? Here's my drift: age is not a measure of excellence. Remember Mozart? When Mozart was Bruggemeier's age, he had been dead for four years.

Bruggemeier exudes class—in manner, attitude, dress, speech. Com-

petitors don't cotton to people without flaws. How can you get a leg up on your rival if he's invincible? They wait for collapse; they pray for failure—at the very least, a pratfall; egg on the face. They want chinks—they look for them. Bruggemeier is chinkless.

Here's why else people dislike him. He's articulate. He speaks in complete sentences and paragraphs that make sense. He thinks. Those are rare traits to be found in anybody anywhere. In foodservice, they are as scarce as truffles. Bruggemeier communicates lucidly, not haphazardly, not in riddles. He uses the language well. Competitors hate that. People working for him love it. Result? They understand him. They know precisely what he wants. Things get done. Correctly. The risk of risk is minimized.

Bruggemeier works awfully hard. The proof is in the results. A blowhard radiates charm and contentment as he settles comfortably into the lap of mediocrity. Where Bruggemeier settles today is where he wants to be. Tomorrow, where he was isn't good enough. Demanding and fussy, he appears always to be superseding his standards of excellence in his quest for perfection. Which is why, more often than not, his customers are happy, his staff is happy, he—himself—is happy, his wife is happy.

June 1987, Bruggemeier descended on Cincinnati with all of the subtlety of Sylvester Stallone with a covered dish at a church supper. As a partner in Phoenix Food Services, Inc., he took control first of the staid Cincinnati Club (a private and stuffy club, it had collected dues and dust since 1893) and, with the self-effacing assistance of Paul Sturkey (who, at the time, was the Club's chef—and whose culinary creativity was confined to can opening) in less than a year, converted the Club's menu from a thing of duty to a joy forever.

Bruggemeier told Sturkey his cuisine was dull. He showed him how to make it shine. They worked side by side for two months teaching each other how to work with each other. Then he and Sturkey took on the rest of the building and created, designed, and developed The Phoenix, a facility that boasts a restaurant and a number of private dining and convention facilities.

He won over Sturkey. He won others over. He won over the community. Competitors, offended early on by his carpetbagging flash, came to see in his self-confidence, his cockiness, an unstinting zeal to bring to Cincinnati the kind of recognition of its culinary accomplishments enjoyed by other cities renowned for great eats. Not just for Bruggemeier. For everyone.

Here's what else Bruggemeier did. He put his money where his mouth is. He tossed a benefit that raised \$150,000 for charity.

Now, benefits tossed by restaurants often are regarded suspiciously, epitomizing for critics a sorry act of self-aggrandizement; a strained effort to turn the spotlight on owner and operation under the pretense of an accommodation for the community. Kind of like, "We support (fill in the cause); Eat at Joe's."

Because he overcame (without threat of intimidation) the city's reservations about his motives; because he had proved to the community he could deliver a quality product unsullied by compromise; because he backed up his swagger with sweat—the city accepted Bruggemeier's act, not as spurious or amoral, but as an extension of his honesty and the integrity of the facility.

Bruggemeier put his heart into The Phoenix and The Cincinnati Club. With his heart, he gave something back. ■