

Q & A with Chef Jeff!



Renowned chef will deliver keynote address at the State Education Convention

Jeff Henderson is an award-winning culinary figure known simply as Chef Jeff – although simple would hardly be the way to describe his rise to fame. Growing up poor in southern California, Henderson quickly fell in with one bad crowd after another. When he was 24, he was nabbed for drug peddling and was sent to prison for nearly a decade.

While incarcerated, Henderson worked in the prison kitchen where he found sustenance and salvation in cooking. Today, he is a *New York Times* best-selling author and television personality who will be speaking at the 92nd State Education Convention in Milwaukee in January.

► **When did your passion for food ignite?**

I was placed on pots-and-pans detail in the prison kitchen. I realized the kitchen staff, like in any restaurant, gets to eat the leftover food. I thought, “OK, maybe this is the place to be.” The opportunity came for me to learn to cook by helping the head inmate cooks, and I got very good at it. I was very fast at seasoning and organization.



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Six months after I worked in the kitchen full time, the head cook left and I was promoted to head inmate cook and eventually head inmate baker. I had to be creative with the ingredients — onions, garlic powder, salt, pepper, top ramen noodle seasoning packages, canned tuna, a piece of bell pepper, some squeeze cheese. Whatever it was, we'd create these dishes.

Chef Jeff re-entered society with gusto, becoming the first African American to be named executive chef at Café Bellagio in Las Vegas.

► How did you make that transition?

I took the same drive and tenacity that I had on the streets into the corporate world. Prison makes you very disciplined, and so do the streets. That added to my ability to move quickly up the food chain in the corporate world. I was the first one in and last one out every day. I studied the best talent around me. I bought the same shoes they wore, the same chef jackets, the same eyewear, and the same books. I watched how they moved through the kitchen, how they held knives, how they seasoned, how they held a pot handle, a sauté pan, and incorporated it all into what I do.

► What does food represent to you?

It means a lot of things. Early in my life, it was survival. In prison it was an opportunity for me to eat better. After prison, food became a career. It became that vehicle for my redemption. The power of food is like a metaphor; food changes life. I get e-mails and letters

and blogs and tweets from people who talk about how food changed their lives.

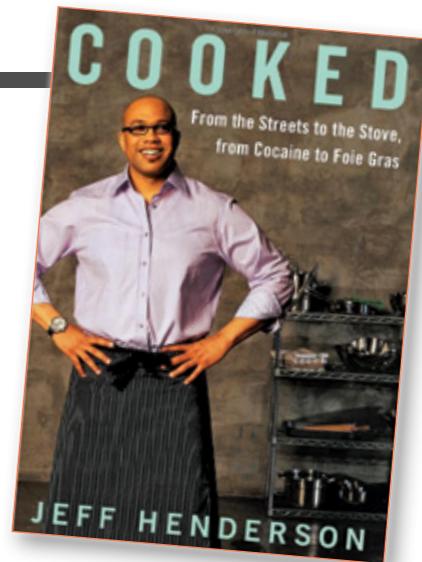
► What is the Chef Jeff Project?

It was born out of my Los Angeles business called the Posh Urban Cuisine, where we catered to Hollywood celebrities and corporate executives. I would always hire at-risk kids through Job Corps, Pro Start, and local culinary trade schools. I would take these young people into multimillion-dollar estates and catering events and teach them how to cook. Many of these kids had social challenges. They didn't smile, they sagged their pants, and their facial expressions were intimidating. So I wound up teaching these kids the importance of self-presentation. Then the Food Network reached out to me after I was on the Oprah Winfrey show and said, "Chef Jeff, we want you to do a show."

► So how are you able to break through to the kids you work with?

Most teachers don't come from poverty so they don't understand the mindset. They don't understand the trauma that these kids have been through. Until you understand that, you can't connect. You can't get them to buy in to the idea that education pays off. You get them to buy in by building up their self-esteem. You have to help them discover their gift and figure out what they want to do [in life] and cultivate that. In my travels, I meet kids who have never been on an airplane, never saw the ocean, never been to a white-tablecloth restaurant, never been to a museum, never been told that they were smart, never been told that they have potential. These kids were born in poverty to drug-addicted parents, abusive single parents, and broken family homes. It's them against the world and the odds are stacked against them. So you've got to let them taste it, feel it, and see it, so when they go back to that environment that little voice talks to them and says, "You know what, there really is an ocean, there really is a New York, there really are opportunities." ■

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HEAR CHEF JEFF'S STORY at Convention

Chef Jeff Henderson will be the keynote speaker on **Friday, January 25, 2013**, at the State Education Convention in Milwaukee. Hear his amazing story of how he transformed himself from a drug dealer to one of the nation's most respected chefs. He also works extensively with at-risk youth — hear his ideas for reaching and engaging these students.