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pg. 16

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page 10



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# THE GOURMET WAY

AT **FREEDOM VILLAGE AT BRANDYWINE**, EXECUTIVE CHEF RAYMOND MAXWELL LEADS A SEASONED CULINARY TEAM COMMITTED TO OFFERING EACH RESIDENT A FIVE-STAR EXPERIENCE.

**N**estled in the heart of bucolic Chester County, Freedom Village at Brandywine provides a haven for older adults looking to enjoy the good life. Freedom Village's cup runs over with a host of wellness and lifestyle amenities, including an enviable dining program helmed by a hospitality veteran with a penchant for flavor, freshness, and creativity.

Raymond Maxwell came to Freedom Village as executive chef five years ago. He brought with him 30 years of industry experience and an abundance of skills honed in the kitchens of some of the area's most beloved restaurants, including a few he started on his own.

Maxwell credits his grandmother, a former culinary director with Wilmington, Delaware's Red Clay Consolidated School District, for inspiring his love of cooking. He has fond memories of the time he spent on her farm.

"My brother and I used to stay at my grandparents' house in the summer," he recalls. "When we used to get in trouble, Grandma would separate us and put us in the kitchen to wash dishes, or send us out to pick beans. I think that's what got me started."

His appreciation of fresh meat and produce blossomed into a full-blown passion when he took a culinary-arts class in 10th grade. His teacher, Susan Cole, encouraged him to further explore his talents. He followed her sage advice and enrolled in the Philadelphia Restaurant School—now Walnut Hill College—after graduation.

"My passion was deeper than most people's," he says. "I was a sponge, and I did a lot of reading. My goal was to be a master chef with my own restaurant."

## Out of the Frying Pan

Hard work and copious study landed Maxwell his first kitchen position at the Dilworthtown Inn, at the time a premier French restaurant in Chester County. From there he moved to the Chadds Ford Inn, where he excelled as a sous chef and assistant pastry chef. A bit of networking led the chef to open his first restaurant, the Hockessin Inn, shortly after.

"This was back in my 20s, when I was a kid," he says. "It was a learning experience, and the fulfillment of a dream."

When that restaurant closed, Maxwell worked in a number of renowned kitchens, including the Rolling Green Golf Club in Springfield and Maxwell Creeds outside of Longwood Gardens.

"Mushrooms were my thing," he says. "I was actually the winner of the Mushroom Festival cook-off for three years in a row."

After a brief time at the helm of a BYOB, Maxwell turned his sights to jazz with Maxwell's on Market in Wilmington. When a statewide ban on cigarette smoking indoors dampened the jazz club's business, Maxwell found himself at a crossroads. He chose to settle nearer to his hometown, working for Wyncote Country Club in Oxford for six years before moving on to the Stone Barn, a rustic, country-style restaurant and wedding venue.

Networking once again led to an opportunity when the owners of the Brown Derby restaurant, just down the street from the Stone Barn, offered Maxwell the chance to take over that space. After three years, Maxwell sold that spot and returned to a country club kitchen—this time, Applecross in Downingtown, not far from Freedom Village.

Once again, a guest suggested Maxwell explore a new opportunity—this time, in a role unlike any he'd ever had.

### Finding Freedom

While skeptical at first about the amount of creativity and freedom he would have helming the kitchen of a retirement community, Maxwell took a leap of faith. Five years later, he hasn't looked back.

"I started just making awesome menus, changing the approach to the culinary scene here," Maxwell says. "When I started, it was more batch cooking; now, we have a whole program like you would see in a restaurant, with an almost brigade system. We have a sauté chef, a grill chef, and an expediter on the line. We change the menu every day."

Since taking the reins, Maxwell has implemented myriad positive changes that have improved the dining experience for residents across the board.

"We have a great [culinary] staff," he says. "They all know what I expect and they are all trained. It was tough in the first six to eight months, getting everyone to buy into changes—taking tickets, cooking to order—but it works and I proved it. Residents expect a five-star experience."

While Maxwell trained in the French tradition—butter, foie gras, and rich delicacies not necessarily associated with heart health—he marries the French focus on freshness and simplicity with a menu that is more health-forward.

"We get great fish like barramundi, diver scallops, tons of awesome vegetables and proteins," he adds. "The way I prepare them now is more focused on roasting, braising, and smoking, getting flavors from that."

"I use some traditional demi-glaces, but when it comes to seafood, I use a lot of lighter vinaigrettes and gastriques that are healthier for the residents," he continues. "I tend not to cook with a ton of wheat, and sodium can be a problem for people who are aging, so I work to make dishes flavorful



Examples of the culinary offerings created by Chef Maxwell's team.

without easy enhancements like salt and pepper."

The sky is the limit in terms of ingredients, thanks in large part to Freedom Village's commitment to providing a culinary experience of the highest quality.

"We are in a great area where we have access to some of the best produce, and definitely some of the best seafood coming out of the New Jersey-Baltimore area," he says. "We have tons of Amish farms around the area, and I 100 percent cook with the seasons. Right now some great things are starting to come available, like spring greens and early baby vegetables that are awesome for roasting."

Freedom Village residents have multiple options in terms of where to dine, including a newly opened casual-dining concept called The Village Bistro. Several years in the making, The Village Bistro opened its doors earlier this year with a menu featuring casual fare such as salads and a lineup of brick-oven pizzas that rotates every few weeks.

"All the major dining rooms are formal,

where residents will wear a jacket or collared shirt and slacks," Maxwell says. "I always had the vision for a restaurant here that had more of a California bistro-pub feeling, where if you've been at Longwood Gardens for the day in shorts and a polo, you don't have to get changed to grab a sandwich or pizza and a beer and hang out."

Maxwell feels fortunate, even blessed, to work in such a dynamic sector of the culinary arts. At Freedom Village, he not only enjoys the challenge but also appreciates the opportunity to "give back."

"A handful of residents here I've known for 25 years, because I've cooked for them [before]," he says. "It's a unique, full-circle experience for me to still be able to be around some of the people who have supported me for such a long time."

"I'm like a personal chef to the residents who live here," he continues. "I have an open-door policy and people can share the specifics of their diet. I'm very fortunate to be here and be loved by so many—it's an awesome feeling." ■



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## Freedom Village at Brandywine

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