

## PRESSURE COOKER

By [Laura Reiley](#) and [Jim Webster](#), Times Staff Writers

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CLEARWATER — What do you serve the country's most famous chef when he comes to dinner? Chris Ponte confronted this dilemma on Saturday night.

It's not like Ponte hasn't served culinary luminaries before. His Cafe Ponte is practically the staff cafeteria for Home Shopping Network's stable of celebrity chefs. When in town, Wolfgang Puck snarfs pizzas in the courtyard overlooking Ulmerton. Todd English of the famed Olives restaurants holds court in the dining room.

But what happens when you learn that you have a reservation for Thomas Keller, party of six?

Thomas Keller, whose French Laundry in Napa Valley has twice been named the best restaurant in the world. Thomas Keller, James Beard best chef in America 1997, holder of seven Michelin stars and winner of nearly every culinary award on the planet. Thomas Keller, who has launched the careers of dozens of the country's superstar chefs.

"Trying to prepare for the best American chef was pretty intense," said Ponte. Keller, whose sister lives in Pinellas County, was in the area to celebrate a family birthday.

Here's how it went down, based on our observations from a nearby table and a conversation with Ponte on Sunday:

**2 a.m., July 21:** Ponte stares at the ceiling as he tries to plan a menu for Keller's visit. "Don't reinvent the wheel, do what you know. You don't experiment on Thomas Keller." A plan starts to form. How about a culinary voyage around France? Ten small courses of classical French fare. After all, Ponte and Keller have this in common: They both trained at Taillevent, the vaunted restaurant in Paris founded in 1946 by André Vrinat.

The week progresses: "To get the best, I needed to call upon my purveyors. I got Dan from Pinellas Meats to send me Chairman Reserve New York strips for steak au poivre. We went to Gateway Farms in Clearwater to pick fresh herbs — thyme and ginger flowers to put in the cheese course."

**10 a.m., Saturday:** Making the chocolate mousse cake with lemon curd and raspberry layers, Ponte gets cake all over his shirt. Preparing the sauce for the bouillabaisse, the blender explodes. Nerves. Thomas Keller is coming, and it looks like it's going to be a full house, with a catering job in St. Petersburg for 100 people that will siphon off half the kitchen staff. Stay focused.

**7:15 p.m.:** Service is going smoothly. An empty table in the center of the dining room — directly in sight of the open kitchen — is ready for them, a "Sweet 16" balloon flying above the chair reserved for Keller's niece, Elizabeth.

**8 p.m.:** Keller arrives, looking suitably California-hip in dark jeans and a navy blazer. No one in the dining room seems to notice culinary royalty is among them. First course, tiny classic gougere, a gruyere cheese puff of *pate a choux*. Ponte's kickin' it old school.

**9 p.m.:** The tuna nicoise course gets nixed. A bouillabaisse is added, complete with garlicky rouille and toasts. Ponte struts his stuff with his signature mushroom soup, white truffle perfume. Necks crane in the kitchen. What does Keller think of the food? "I think he really loved the foie gras. We watched him devour that one." The foie got a cherry compote, a pillowy bit of brioche French toast and a few candied baby walnuts. Yes, 10 courses, but small ones — "I made sure I didn't overdo with too much food. He's used to people throwing too much food at him."

**9:55 p.m.:** For the first time this evening, other guests approach the table. A group of three seated next to Keller's table rises to leave. They give their best wishes to the birthday girl and coo over the little boy sleeping across two chairs. If they recognize Keller, they give no indication.

**10:15 p.m.:** Most guests are gone. The Keller party stands to leave. This is the opportunity for restaurant staff to get a photo with a legend. A stack of French Laundry and Bouchon, another Keller restaurant, cookbooks sit on the bar to be autographed. After posing for photos, Keller offers to return the favor by inviting Ponte and his fiancée, Michelle Mahoney, to the French Laundry. "He's a gracious man, such a gentleman," Ponte said "Beyond his cooking genius, his demeanor really makes people feel comfortable."

**1 a.m.:** Ponte, spent, sleeps.

Later he said, "Not everyone gets to cook for someone who has two of the top five restaurants in the world. It was almost surreal."

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