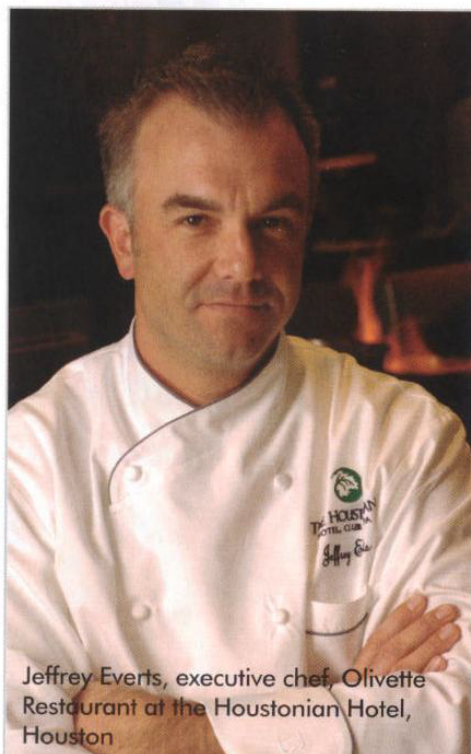


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Jeffrey Everts, executive chef, Olivette Restaurant at the Houstonian Hotel, Houston



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In addition to menuing innovative dishes at Olivette Restaurant at the Houstonian Hotel in Houston, executive chef Jeffrey Everts takes time to teach elementary school kids the values of cooking and eating well.

### INSIGHTS

## Beyond the stove

A Houston chef's healthy cooking benefits patrons and the community

by Maggie Sheo

Jeffrey Everts, executive chef of Olivette Restaurant at the Houstonian Hotel ([www.houstonian.com/olivette](http://www.houstonian.com/olivette)), has received national acclaim for his role in shaping some of the trendiest hotel restaurants across the country—from Blue on Blue at Los Angeles' Avalon Hotel to Citron at Viceroy Palm Springs and Spire at Boston's boutique hotel Nine Zero. Naturally, Everts was born and raised in California, the land of the trend- and health-conscious where he gained the foundation of his food philosophy. So it was an unlikely fit when his family moved to Nacogdoches, Texas, a little town of 20,000 about two and a half hours outside Houston where Everts lived for six years and attended high school.

Yet, four years ago, after he and his wife attended his 20-year high school reunion, he felt the tug of his humbler days spent hunting and fishing in the woods of Nacogdoches, far from bright city lights, and began looking into a possible move back to the Houston area. Six months later, he got a call from the Houstonian with an offer to work for its only restaurant open to the public. He seized the opportunity to leave L.A. and take the helm of a restaurant kitchen that focuses on more traditional cuisine with an emphasis on local ingredients.

"When I was in L.A. and Boston, I worked in boutique and frou-frou hotels where they wanted to do everything—really cutting-edge—the cool lighting, the cool plates and the cool food—where everything is flown in," he says. "And the Houstonian is a pretty traditional hotel with a strong membership base. They're not so much looking to be different. They want to have some foundation in the food and some substance and foundation with what we're doing in the kitchen. So we can have fun and play with food, but it can't be too far out there or too crazy because it's a traditional hotel, so the food needs to match it."

#### Sneaking in whole grains

Though he wouldn't call himself a health nut by any stretch, Everts often looks for creative ways to incorporate whole grains and legumes into his menu instead of potatoes and white rice. "I try to stay away from having mashed or roasted potatoes. I'm always trying to do legumes or whole grains instead of a potato," he says. When menuing less common items such as quinoa and rye berries, for example, Everts uses familiar preparations like risotto and simply swaps out the rice for the healthier grain option (though



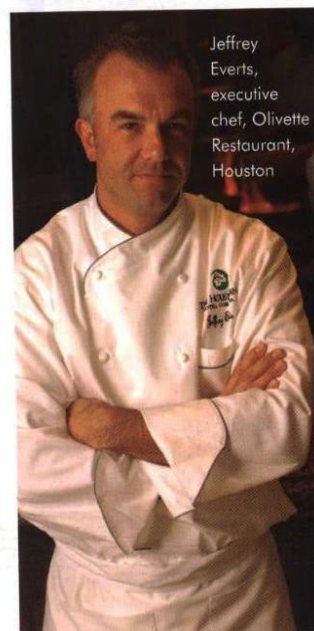
Everts (back center) poses with Gross Elementary fourth grade class during a Recipe for Success cooking class.

([www.recipeforsuccess.org](http://www.recipeforsuccess.org)), an organization dedicated to combating childhood obesity and encouraging lifelong health in children. Everts and the other chefs make monthly visits to elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods of the Houston Independent School District to teach kids about healthy eating and growing their own fruits and vegetables.

"This is probably the first hotel where I've worked that I've had an opportunity to step outside and do things in the community versus being locked down behind the stove and not having enough staff. I could finally say yes," Everts says. This past March, he made his first visit to a fourth grade class at Gross Elementary, where he, with help from a Recipe for Success team leader, now regularly goes to encourage healthy eating through hands-on teaching of simple, healthful recipes like fresh herb pesto, quinoa and ratatouille. He also shows the students the value of growing their own produce and herbs. "Recipe for Success has gotten donations from some large companies to help them plant gardens in the schools. At the beginning of each class we talk about what we're going to do, and then I'll pick a couple of kids and go out to the garden where they will pick whatever it is that we can ap-

ply to the recipe for that day," Everts says. "It's really cool."

Everts' involvement in Recipe for Success resonates with other areas of his life and career. The organization's emphasis on working with local farmers to secure ingredients is a mantra he follows in his own restaurant when possible. He uses Texas farmers for poultry and tomatoes, and has used the same San Diego farmer for eight years to get herbs and micro greens. "It's getting easier to do local ingredients than it was five or 10 years ago. There are a lot more talented chefs [in Houston] now that the demand is getting stronger for farmers to grow more things and start selling to restaurants and hotels," he says. And as a father of two, teaching children healthy eating habits is as much a family matter as a community one. "Having two kids myself—a nine- and five-year-old—my wife and I are always trying to make sure they eat well and understand food. So Recipe for Success is my chance to give back, as corny as that might sound, since I know food as a chef and I know kids since I have my own. Recipe for Success ties into everything—the more I talk about it, the more I realize that," Everts says. "Everything is coming full circle."



Jeffrey Everts, executive chef, Olivette Restaurant, Houston

he concedes that he still uses his share of fat for flavor).

"If we were bringing in some Himalayan red rice by itself, no one would really want to try that," he says. "But if we do a Himalayan red rice risotto, fold duck confit and Parmesan cheese into it and treat it like a risotto, or do a rye berry like a risotto, people will think of it as a risotto and try it. We have quinoa on the menu, but we fold in some dried fruits and chicken cracklins, for example, to try to give it a little something people can associate with but still give them something they've never tried before or heard of before."

#### The children's chef

Everts has spent almost his entire career behind the stove as a chef, but he recently got the chance to step out and volunteer his time and culinary knowledge. Last year, he was asked to join some 50 local chefs in volunteering for Recipe for Success