

## The banquet master -- a chef's journey

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Allan Wambaa speaks softly and carries a small stick -- a cooking thermometer that perches in a small holder in the breast pocket of his white chef's jacket. It's the tool of his trade as executive chef for Bell Harbor International Conference Center, a position he's held since last October.

He oversees a staff of 20 full-time employees and up to 60 part-time workers who help him handle the hundreds of special events and parties held at the downtown Seattle waterfront facility.

A bear of a man at 6-foot-6, the 31-year-old chef speaks nostalgically about how he got interested in cooking when he was growing up in Muthaiga, Kenya, near Nairobi.

"Ever since I can remember, I always wanted to be a cook," Wambaa said. He used to help his mother cook the family meals because his older sister wasn't interested. But it was his grandmother who was his real inspiration.

"My grandmother had a little restaurant, and on school holidays I'd get to help her in the kitchen," he said. He remembers from about age 7 watching his grandmother make chapati, which he describes as "something like a tortilla, but thicker."

"If you don't make it right, it'll crack and be dry," he said. "My goal was to be an expert at making chapati, like my grandmother."

He studied cooking at the Career Training Center in Nairobi, and apprenticed at the Safari Park Hotel, one of the top restaurants in the city.

His next job took him to Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a personal chef to the royal family of Prince Fahd bin Khalid Al-Saud, a position he landed with the help of his sister, who was a nanny for the family.

He was immediately immersed in the Arabic language, culture and cuisine.

"It was a little bit of a culture shock," said Wambaa with characteristic understatement. "Communication was difficult."

Wambaa recalls that when the Muslim household was called to prayer five times a day, he would stay behind by himself in the kitchen, where he would wander about, examining the labels of the foods and spices.

"I learned Arabic in three months. It's easy if no one speaks your language," said Wambaa, whose first language was Kikuyu, a Bantu language of Kenya. He now speaks seven languages.

Later he moved to Seattle because he had an aunt here. At first, working at cooking jobs for temp agencies helped him adjust to the American lifestyle and palate.

He worked at the Palisade Restaurant in Seattle's Magnolia neighborhood, then spent six years as executive chef with The Compass Group in company dining rooms at Qwest, ZymoGenetics, Microsoft, Boeing and Eddie Bauer. Before moving to Bell Harbor, he was chef at Benaroya Hall, where he worked under renowned restaurateur Wolfgang Puck.

Wambaa exudes a sense of pride as he strolls through the huge kitchens at Bell Harbor. The challenge of preparing meals for hundreds of diners doesn't seem to daunt him.

"It's all about timing," he said. "And I have a great staff that makes it happen."

He enjoys coming up with unique presentations.

"I love playing around with the (demonstration) plate," he said. Sometimes I don't know how I'll arrange things until I start, and then I might go back and change it."

Although he acknowledges that he has a very sensitive palate, he's no food snob. When he goes out



Photo: Dan Schlatter  
Allan Wambaa picked up seven languages in his path toward becoming executive chef at Seattle's Bell Harbor International Conference Center.  
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to restaurants, he goes simply to enjoy another chef's cooking.

"I used to be critical as a young chef," he said. "Now I don't like critiquing other people's food. I know what it takes and how much work and pressure there is to put it out there. Now I just enjoy."

And when his day is done, when he's at home relaxing with his fiancée and his 4-year-old son, Rodney, he enjoys preparing something simple, something easy to snack on.

Might that be chapati?

"Yes!" he said with a broad grin. "I do love that."

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