

Pastry Chef Jeff Barnes, Disney's Contemporary Resort

Inspired by his mother and grandmother, Chef Jeff Barnes became a pastry chef even though his bachelor's degree from West Georgia College in Carrollton, Ga., was in Business Administration.

"Both were great cooks," says Barnes. "My grandmother was known throughout west Georgia for her cooking – she lived on a 100-acre farm and raised all the family's food." Barnes recalls churning butter at her house, and hand cranking ice cream.

"There were always three or four pies or cakes on the dining room table, and my favorite was her apple roll, made with apples from her own trees, with lots of butter and sugar," recalls Barnes. "It was unbelievable, and always eaten warm with milk poured on top."

Barnes' mother followed in her mother's footsteps. "Her dishes were always the first to go at church suppers," says Barnes. "Her reputation was equal to my grandmother's." To this day, Barnes requests his mother's chocolate fudge pie for his birthday (though wife Melissa makes it now).

All those culinary memories led straight to an apprenticeship in the kitchen at Cherokee Town and Country Club in Atlanta when Barnes was 21 years old.

"I took a job as a chef's apprentice," says Barnes. "The kitchen already has a Swiss master pastry chef, one of the best in Atlanta, so I started at the bottom and worked my way up." He moved on to executive pastry chef at the Ritz-Carlton in Palm Beach, Fla., and Amelia Island Plantation on Amelia Island, Fla.

Barnes joined the Disney culinary team in fall 2009 as pastry chef at Disney's Contemporary Resort, where he and his team create all of the sweets for the resort, including California Grill. With the re-opening of California Grill in September 2013, Barnes created a whole new menu of sweet endings, like a light, refreshing Meyer Lemon cheesecake, chocolate pudding cake with banana fritters, and his favorite, the Sundae Sampler, a trio with a Coke float, strawberry sundae and caramel corn sundae.

He also created two new breads just for California Grill – a whole-grain sourdough and a lavender-infused focaccia made with fresh California lavender, olive oil and herbs.

Barnes has won numerous awards and medals in dessert competitions, and has prepared desserts at the famed James Beard House and the Culinary Loft, both in New York.