



**OWEN
MAASS, 33**
Bel Lago Waterfront Dining

His style: If there's one thing Owen Maass loves as much as food, it's fashion. And if there's one thing he hates, it's traditional chef garb. "It's a ridiculous, asinine outfit that serves no function," he says. "I think it's uppity and pretentious, and I haven't worn a chef jacket in a long time." Instead, he shows up to work impeccably dressed in a button-down shirt and tie, jeans and designer shoes. A relative newcomer to Columbus, Maass has worked as the executive chef at Bel Lago for less than a year. Previously, he was the head chef at Cumin in Cincinnati, where he earned a reputation for dreaming up some of the city's most creative dishes. For him, food, fashion and art are all connected. "How I cook is also how I dress," he says. "I was a painter before I became a chef. I love color and texture, and that's one of the things that drew me to cooking."

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Peer into the kitchens of the city's restaurants, and you'll find more than a few chefs ditching the white jacket in favor of more stylish work wear.

STORY BY IVY LAMB • PHOTOS BY TESSA BERG

Crisp white jacket, checked or striped cotton pants, a towering paper toque—the military strictness of the traditional chef's uniform signifies discipline, cleanliness and professionalism. Most of us seated in the dining room expect to identify the head chef (and perhaps also judge the quality of his cuisine) by his outfit. But what about chefs who are tossing tradition out the window?

While the standard uniform still reigns supreme in many kitchens, some chefs are shucking off the traditional jacket in favor of more stylish options. These chefs put as much personality into their outfits as they do their menus, and they don't buy into the idea that how you dress indicates how well you cook.

"In one job (the restaurant will go unnamed), I had to wear the white chef's coat

MARCUS MEACHAM, 33

Kraft House No. 5

His style: When asked to sum up his sense of style, Marcus Meacham pauses and then says, “Wu-Tang.” He’s referring, of course, to the influential ‘90s rap group, and it aptly describes his hip hop sensibility. If you didn’t already recognize him (he’s been steadily building a reputation in Columbus with his innovative food, first at Bodega and now at Kraft House No. 5), you probably wouldn’t guess he cooks for a living. At work, Meacham favors a short-sleeved button-down Dickies shirt, a custom denim apron and skater shoes. He also gives his staff the same freedom to dress how they like. At Kraft House, the kitchen staff wears the same Dickies shirt and an apron, but everything else—hat, shoes, pants—is up to them. “Style is a way to express yourself even more,” Meacham says. “We love what we do; we work long hours and put out plates of food that look like art. Now we also get to wear what we feel, too; we’re not hidden behind a white flap jacket.”



Hat: My hat I actually bought for the World Food Championships in Las Vegas. It’s a snap-back skater hat from Neff that says “Most Fresh” on the front. I felt like I needed something like a shield going into the biggest food competition I’d ever been to. That’s what I wear almost every day in the kitchen now.

Shirt: Everything has to be functional. The Dickies shirts are catching on in NYC, too, because the collar keeps the apron off your neck, and it’s more comfortable that way.

Pants: I prefer jeans over the thin cotton chef pants because if I spill something hot, it doesn’t sink in as quickly. And I can go straight to the bar after work, and no one knows I just got off.

Shoes: I have shoes by Mozo that are no-slip, waterproof, functional shoes for being in the kitchen, but they look like skater shoes.

Apron: I have two aprons that I like. One is by Silas Caeton [former Veritas chef]; the other is a custom denim apron from Butcher and Baker. I had it made just for me because it’s more durable and it looks cool.



Shoes: I have slip-on Vans and vintage Nikes that I wear a lot. I even wear Ferragamos in the kitchen. Of course, I polish them and take care of them. Last year I went on a “learning to be a man” kick, learning to shave with a straight razor and polish my own shoes, that kind of thing. Every man should know how to polish his own shoes.

Apron: I have a collection of about 25 aprons. I have khaki, gray, denim, purple stripe. It ends up being another part of my overall outfit. I like Hedley and Bennet out of LA—they supply all the aprons for our staff—and I also like Stanley and Sons out of [Long Island]. Aprons are like the rest of your clothes in that you want them to be high quality.

Shirt and tie: I love color. I don’t think I even own a white dress shirt. Food changes like fashion—different things come in and out of style—so how can I represent the latest food trends if I can’t also present a fashionable image?

and tall paper hat, and I hated it,” says Marcus Meacham, head chef at Kraft House No. 5 in Powell. “It’s so outdated, and to me it’s less functional. I found it hard to cook in that.” For Meacham, functional work clothes can also be stylish—he dresses to blend in at the bar after work, and he’s not alone. “Kitchen style is definitely changing,” he says. “These days, the people designing shoes, aprons and jackets know that chefs want to express their own sense of style.”

Some chefs also want to avoid the associations that come with wearing the traditional uniform. “There’s a weird fear factor with the white chef jacket,” says Owen Maass, executive chef at Bel Lago Waterfront Dining in Westerville. “People go, ‘Ohhh, there’s the chef.’” Maass says he’d rather not elicit that reaction when he walks through the dining room. “Food is scary enough already. So why not make it more approachable?”

At Rishi Sushi Kitchen and Bar, making food approachable means creating a bright atmosphere that matches the bright, fresh

ingredients. Here, the cooks wear red and orange chef jackets paired with ball caps and blue jeans. “It goes with the theme of the restaurant and the colors of the food,” says chef and owner David Kim. Others, meanwhile, are focused on comfort more than anything else. At Angry Bear Kitchen, there is no uniform, which you’ll notice if you take a look into the open kitchen. “We spend 60 to 80 hours a week in the kitchen, and between our kitchen range and our grill, it can get up to 115 degrees,” says chef and co-owner Daniel Scalzo. “You don’t want to be wearing a long-sleeved jacket in that.”

Of course, all this style talk comes with one big caveat: What a chef wears means nothing if his food doesn’t shine. Each chef was quick to point that out? “It’s just like extra bragging rights to look good while you cook good food,” Meacham says. Both Meacham and Maass in particular take those bragging rights very seriously, so we asked them to give us a more in-depth look at their kitchen “uniform.”

BUILDING A BETTER APRON

All the components of a chef's uniform, the apron is perhaps the most personal—and the most customizable—item of clothing. Deceptively simple and humble, aprons protect the cook from myriad stains and spills, some of them more dangerous than others. Naturally, a chef's apron needs to be comfortable and durable above all else, but once those basic requirements are met, an apron can be colorful or conservative, long or short, denim or cotton. Every chef prefers something different.



KITCHEN + THREADS

One local chef took it upon himself to design and sell his own line of aprons. Silas Caeton, until recently the chef at Veritas Tavern in Delaware, couldn't find an apron that fit properly. "I'm taller than average and, on me, most aprons look like little skirts in the front," he says. "So I decided to design my own." Once he did, he realized his aprons might be useful to others as well and used a successful Kickstarter campaign to get his new business, Kitchen + Threads, off the ground. The thoughtfully designed, colorful aprons are made from 100 percent organic cotton. "The more you read about [the cotton industry], the more you realize what a big problem it is," Caeton says. "So we chose to go with responsibly sourced materials." Kitchen + Threads has also pledged to donate 10 percent of every sale to a group that fights human trafficking. kitchenplusthreads.com

AJUMAMA

"I have a collection of what I call my Korean housewife aprons," says Laura Lee, owner of the Korean food truck Ajumama, laughing. The Korean-style aprons fit her petite frame better, and she has them in a range of quirky fabrics like Hello Kitty and cartoon owls. "The crazier the apron I can find, the better."

TILL

"There's a hidden language there," says Magdiale Wolmark, chef at Till Dynamic Fare. "No matter how casual you dress, the apron shows how serious you are." Working off that philosophy, Wolmark prefers a dark, businesslike blue.

PHOTO: WILL SHILLING

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