

The inside scoop on National Western Executive Chef Tad Pukansky

After 30 years as a culinary artist and feeding hundreds of thousands of people, National Western Executive Chef Tad Pukansky still loves to cook. "Food is my passion. I love to dabble with food," he said.

The food business has always been in Tad's blood. His mother owned a catering business in the Pittsburgh area, and he has vivid memories of helping his mom. He shared that he remembers jumping in the catering van and sitting on a crate among chafing dishes when he was just five years old.

Tad started his paid career in the culinary world at age 17 when he was hired as a soda jerk at a local restaurant and was soon promoted to flipping hamburgers. After graduating from high school, Tad enrolled in the culinary arts program at Allegheny Community College where he earned an associate of science degree. After several years of working as a chef in the dining rooms at a steel mill company as well as a bank he left Pittsburgh to move to Houston to work with Four Seasons, the world's leading operator of luxury hotels and resorts. After several years, he left that hotel and became the executive chef at a local restaurant. This restaurant expanded to Denver, and Tad was named executive chef. Eventually he found his way to the Denver Zoo, and then the National Western where he currently creates cuisine for buffets to barbecues to elegant black-tie dinners for groups of all sizes throughout the year.

Tad as a kid . . .

Growing up in Pittsburgh, Tad was a typical kid. He was a Boy Scout, played the French horn in the high school band and played right offensive guard on the football team. His favorite toy was his bicycle that he rode day after day, disappearing for hours in the streets of his neighborhood. Tad is the youngest of four children; he has an older brother and two older sisters. Even though most of his family lives in the Pittsburgh area, Tad likes it in Denver. He said the smartest thing he did was to move from Houston to Denver. He laughingly said the weather is better in the mile-high city. While a Denver resident for the past several years, he's still a Pittsburgh Steelers fan. Tad explained this obsession by saying when you're born and raised in Pittsburgh; it's hard to get it out of your blood. Steelers fans have always been known to be the most loyal and dedicated in all of sports.

Tad as an adult . . .

Tad claims his biggest personal accomplishment is having children, he has 14-year twins: Jake and Danielle. Tad describes himself as intense and passionate about his job and his family.

When asked what he does in his free time away from work, Tad laughingly said: "I'm not going to tell you it's running, because it's not!" However, when he isn't working, he enjoys spending time with his children as well as with Deb, his significant



other. They enjoy gardening together. Tad uses his home-grown tomatoes, peas, peppers, cucumbers and lettuce to create gourmet meals that are fresh, simple and seasonal.

On Tad's bucket list is a trip to Europe. He wants to experience the cuisine and the culture of Spain, Italy and Germany. "I think they have everything I like there," he said. Another desire is to dust off his remote control speedboats, which are stored on the basement shelves and get them sailing across the water again. "There's nothing like the satisfaction you get from making your own remote control speed boats," he added.

When asked about the craziest thing that he had ever done, Tad quickly replied, "Not telling!" He did share while riding a three-wheel ATV, it rolled down the hillside, and he tumbled off. He was quick to point out that he didn't get hurt.

With his busy schedule, Tad explained that a really great day is when he can sit and relax while reading the newspaper. Other publications he reads include *Gourmet* and *Saveur* and believe it or not, *Redbook* and *Good Housekeeping*. He said it's amazing what ideas on food preparation and presentation you can find in those popular women's publications.

Even though Tad's heritage is Polish, he prefers to prepare and eat Italian dishes. He said Polish food is Polish food with its emphasis on meat, cabbage and noodles, and Italian cuisine has more flair with its variety of different ingredients, ranging from fruits, vegetables, sauces, meats and pastas, commonly used.

The movies that Tad likes include *Avatar* and *Dancing with Wolves* as well as movies that he said don't put him to sleep! His TV viewing habits include watching the military science fiction series *StarGate* along with sitcoms of the 70s, *M*A*S*H* and *Hogan's Heroes*. Tad also enjoys listening to rock and roll music of the late 60s, 70s and 80s. "It's the music that I grew up with," he said.

Tad shared if he wasn't working for K-M Concessions, his ideal job would be to return to the Four Seasons as an executive chef. Over the years, he has realized that being a chef is just not about cooking and making food look beautiful, it's also about the ability to be business savvy, you need to run the numbers and know your food and labor costs. It's a profession that Tad views as not only a job, but an avocation. "It is hard work, it is grueling work, it is important work, and still, I would do nothing else," he stated.

