



# CHEF LUKE KOLPIN

## *Shaping a Culinary Legacy at The Lodge at St. Edward Park*

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

### FINDING BALANCE BEYOND PERFECTION

Stepping into the role of Executive Chef at Cedar + Elm inside The Lodge at St. Edward Park was both a leap and a necessity for Chef Luke Kolpin. After years in Michelin-starred kitchens, including a formative period at Copenhagen's world-renowned Noma, Kolpin knew he wanted to build something different—a program rooted in excellence, but also balance.

"This is my first executive chef role, and it's quite an undertaking," Kolpin explains. "We're running breakfast, lunch, dinner, brunch, banquets—seven days a week. It's a lodge, so the scope is broad. But that's exactly why I wanted it. After years in kitchens where perfection was the only standard, I needed to find a healthier relationship with food and leadership. This role allows me to build a team, put trust in others, and create a program that can run even when I'm not in the room."

### A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF LEADERSHIP

Kolpin admits that this kind of transition has been both challenging and deeply rewarding. "I've learned a lot about myself here. At Noma and places like that, you can become obsessive. If I wanted a future where I could open my own place and have a life outside the kitchen, I needed to learn how to lead differently. It's about building a team, not trying to do everything yourself. Kitchens are like relationships—you rely on one another, you communicate, and you grow together."

### COLLABORATION AT THE CORE

Kolpin's philosophy is evident in how he structures collaboration throughout the culinary program at The Lodge at St. Edward Park. When Kolpin first arrived, much of the dinner staff had left, so he built the menu gradually, based on the strengths and interests of the cooks who remained. "I ask for input where it makes sense. For example, I'll talk with the protein cooks about what they want to work with, or I'll give direction to Rachel, one of our chefs who's more pastry-driven, and let her run with it. Recently, she developed a dessert featuring the first Washington cherries of the season. That kind of initiative makes the menu stronger."

Still, Kolpin strikes a balance between freedom and structure. "I can't just hand the whole menu over to the team, or it turns into chaos. However, when people feel a sense of ownership over a dish or technique, they become more invested in it. Sometimes, the team might contribute ten percent, while in other months, the contribution might be higher. It depends on what the program needs."

### MANAGING SCALE WITHOUT LOSING SOUL

The program itself is large-scale, often stretching his team's capacity. On a recent Saturday, they plated for nearly 200 banquet guests across multiple rooms, while also serving 50 diners in the restaurant and attending to bar guests. "It takes a lot of staff to pull that off," he says, "but that's the reality of a lodge like this—there's always more going on than just the dining room."

### FROM SEATTLE KITCHENS TO COPENHAGEN'S NOMA

Kolpin's journey to this point was anything but conventional. He did not start cooking until he was nineteen. Encouraged by a best friend, he enrolled at Seattle Central's culinary program—a choice he admits was practical as much as passionate. "It wasn't a fancy school, but it was accessible. And honestly, a week before, cooking hadn't even crossed my mind."

What followed was a steady climb through Seattle kitchens—McCormick & Schmick's, a year at Canlis, and helping to open a small bistro—before Kolpin made the leap to Europe. "I got a copy of the Noma cookbook, and it was a revelation. They were using ingredients from the Northwest, but in ways I'd never seen before. I sent an email to the head chef, applied for an internship, and when I was accepted, I told everyone it was a job trial. I needed that pressure. I quit my job, moved to Copenhagen, and pushed myself as hard as I could."

### LESSONS FROM THE WORLD'S BEST

The gamble paid off. At Noma, Kolpin immersed himself in one of the world's most influential kitchens, and the lessons he carried back were not just about technique but also about philosophy. "I tell my cooks it's





okay to be inspired by others, but give homage. Don't just copy—transform it, make it your own, and acknowledge where it came from. Most great music, art, and even food borrow from somewhere. What matters is honesty and joy in the process.”

#### NO ROMANTIC CULINARY BEGINNING

Unlike many chefs, Kolpin does not have a romantic childhood story of cooking alongside grandparents or mastering family recipes. “I mostly made boxed macaroni and cheese,” he laughs. “But I’d get bored with it and start experimenting—adding sausage or trying new things my mom picked up at the store. That was probably my earliest version of creativity in the kitchen.”

#### A MOTHER’S CHALLENGE AND A MEATLOAF LEGACY

Kolpin admits that he was a picky eater until his mother issued a challenge when he was about ten years old. “She told me, ‘From now on, you have to try everything I put in front of you. If you don’t like it, I’ll never make it again.’ I thought I’d be eating mac and cheese and pizza for life. But the joke was on me—I liked everything.” That moment, paired with the persistence of a mother who worked long hours as a charge nurse and still cooked every night, opened his palate and taught him the value of curiosity.

When pressed about a favorite childhood dish, Kolpin does not hesitate. “My mom’s meatloaf. My sisters hated it, which may have made me love it even more. I always wanted the crispy end pieces. She made it for birthdays, and after I came back from Copenhagen, she skipped her own anniversary dinner to make meatloaf for me. That’s still the most special thing she cooks.”

#### FIVE INGREDIENTS, INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

As for what he would do with just five ingredients today, Kolpin’s answer reflects both his training and his philosophy. “I’d choose mushrooms and seaweed—they’re sustainable, versatile, and full of flavor. Then, a fish like salmon or steelhead. The last two would depend on the day, but those three—mushrooms, seaweed, and fish—are where I’d start.”

#### COOKING FOR FLAVOR, NOT PERFECTION

At Cedar + Elm and throughout the culinary program at St. Edward in the Park, every dish celebrates bold flavors, seasonal abundance, and the joy of sharing food. Here, it’s less about chasing perfection and more about crafting meals that satisfy, inspire, and linger on the palate long after the last bite. The kitchen thrives on collaboration, creativity, and a passion for taste—ensuring that every dining experience is as memorable as it is delicious. ❖