
Not Iron Chef, Christian Chef!

An Interview With Ira Krizo
Raymond Quan



**Ira Krizo, at the Calvary Chapel Conference Center in Murrieta, California, on December 6, 2001.
In this photo, Ira has just finished preparing the dishes described later in this article.**

Who is Ira Krizo?

Ira Krizo is one of the Head Cooks at the Calvary Chapel Conference Center in Murrieta, California, which is located approximately halfway between San Diego and Palm Springs. In this role, he works as part of a team that is tasked with producing as many as 6,000 meals per weekend for conference attendees. On top of this, Ira and his team are also responsible for preparing the weekly meals for between 300 and 600 students at the associated Calvary Chapel Bible College.

But Ira is not just a run-of-the-mill short order fry man. In fact, he's a real live professional chef! Educated at the elite Culinary Institute of America (known in the cooking world as the 'CIA'), where he graduated with an AOS (Associates Degree in Occupational Studies) degree in culinary arts in 1998, Ira has honed his skills through working as a chef at many fine restaurants around the world. His broad kitchen experience has included time at a French restaurant in Winchester, Virginia, and at

Roger Verge's (one of the great chefs of the 20th century) restaurant in Mougins, France.

Most important of all however, is how Ira has combined his considerable cooking skills with Christian ministry. While at the CIA, Ira formed a fellowship group for the other Christian students there, and from these roots, has gone on to found a truly unique organization: the Christian Chefs Fellowship (CCF). From its humble regional beginnings in 1998, the CCF has grown and grown, and today has approximately 550 members from 26 countries around the world, including 22 in Canada. As well, In addition to all these accomplishments, Ira also has some pretty serious skills in database and web programming, holds a multi-engine pilots license, and has almost attained his black belt in Ju-Jitsu.

This interview process started innocently enough. Being a big fan of the old BBC sitcom 'Chef!', on a whim I decided to see if there were indeed any Christian chefs out there. So I typed "Christian

Chef" into the Google search engine, and the God-given result is what follows. As you'll read, Ira really went out of his way for us here at NYCBC, and I think that that generosity says a lot about both the kind of person that he is, and the passion that he has for his ministry with the Christian Chefs Fellowship.

You can learn more about the Christian Chefs Fellowship by checking out their website at: www.christianchefs.org. Ira describes the website and the organization in the interview text, but I'll just quickly say that the website is very comprehensive, including, amongst other things, a newsletter, message board, job postings, and of course, bits of advice for the culinary professionals who are its members.

As for the interview itself, it was conducted via e-mail and phone during the first part of December of this year. As you'll see, Ira's story is far from a typical one.

The Interview: December 3-8, 2001

How did you become a Christian? Why do you believe in God?

I grew up in a semi-Christian environment and I believe I was saved at a fairly young age. During high school, I was heavily involved with youth groups, church, and other similar Christian activities, but I was doing it more for the social life than I was for getting to know God. When I graduated, I immediately went to college 1,000 miles away from home in Arizona to study to become a commercial airline pilot. During that time, I fell far away from God. Though the entire drinking/drugs/sex scene was all around me during my two years there, God preserved me from ever doing any drugs or having sex during that time. The house I lived in for much of that time was one of the largest marijuana-dealing houses in town, and all God allowed me to defile my body with was drinking.

Near the end of my two years in Arizona, I quit college; I was working too many hours at my two jobs, I couldn't keep up my grades, and my pilot training was going to cost me a whole lot more money than the school initially said that it would. One of those jobs was my first ever cooking, which was as a prep/banquet cook at the nearby Sheraton. After a while, I was working a different second job, during which time God called me back to Himself. A guy I was working with invited me to a meeting. I went, and this is where God put me on fire for Himself. I really wasn't too grounded in scripture at the time, so I was unable to tell if what they were saying was right or not, but I really started getting excited about God.

Not many months later, God told me in an all-but-audible voice to leave town. I was getting into credit card debt for my first time ever. My

roommate owed me a couple thousand dollars, my jobs weren't working out, and several other things were going on. I then moved back near my parents for a couple of months, got involved with the church I went to in high-school, and realized the group I had been going to was a cult (i.e., in not believing that Jesus is God). I then truly started to search the scriptures on my own. Not long afterwards, God confirmed to me that He wanted me in the industry, so I went to culinary school in New York. After a few months there, He brought me to lead the Christian club on campus, which was one step in the direction of His founding the Christian Chefs Fellowship through me.

And why I believe in God is easy. Looking back at my life, I've seen God's hand in it time after time, working in ways that *couldn't* possibly have been by chance or coincidence, especially when I fell away from Him in Arizona. The other reason is that from studying the Bible, it's impossible for its contents to be anything but the truly inspired Word of God, for innumerable reasons. Knowing that the only way to eternal life comes from it, what other *logical* choice is there but to follow God?

How did you choose your career? What made you switch career paths? How did you sense God's call?

Well, I didn't exactly choose this career. One day about 6 years ago, I was looking for a job to help pay for college, and went to the most well-known restaurant that I knew of, to get the average college student's job of waiting on tables. While waiting for the personnel lady to return from her lunch break outside her office with the application, this giant came walking around the corner. I was a scrawny 17-year-old, and he was big, tall, loud, and very intimidating. He asked if I was looking for a job. I said "yes." He then asked if I wanted to cook, and I said "sure." Two hours later, I started. Now, if you know anything about the industry, you know that the chances of that event alone transpiring are nearly *impossible*, because usually in order to get into the industry, you must start as a

dishwasher and work your way up. I didn't care much about cooking, and I wouldn't have accepted a job washing dishes to do something that I didn't care about. So therefore, even though I was fallen away at the time, the only reason I can see explaining how I got into the industry was God alone bringing me there. Even though I got yelled at nonstop for most of the time that I worked there (as did everybody else), it ended up *growing* on me. Studying to be a pilot wasn't working out real well for me either at the time, as I was working too much and studying too little, so I continued cooking.

After that job, I tried a number of other industries, from sales, to going back to what I grew up doing (farming), to factory work, but God ended up putting me right back into the kitchen. After knowing that this was where God wanted me, in order to make it a career rather than just a job, I researched all the best culinary schools and drove across the country to the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, and have been cooking ever since. Since then, God's allowed me to cook in Colorado, Virginia, France, and Australia.

The Christian Chefs Fellowship - how did it all start? Where do you see it going at present?

During the time when I was attending culinary school, leading the Christian club on campus there, God put the thought in my mind of how awesome it would be to have a similar group for cooks and chefs all over the world. The thought almost sounded ludicrous to me, for how could I, a broke college student with many thousands of dollars in student loans, start a group like that? It was always something in the back of my mind throughout school, but I never had any clue about how it could possibly work out. Little did I know that just a few years later, God would bring us to being represented in the over 25 countries that we are now. In fact, the current list of countries that have members in the CCF reads as follows: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, China, Cuba, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Spain, France, Indonesia, India,

Italy, Jamaica, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, United Kingdom, United States, and South Africa.

I had always been good with computers, but it wasn't until my internship from school in Colorado that I got my first computer. It didn't take me real long to figure out that you could get a website for free, so the CCF's website started in February of 1998. Teaching myself, it took a while for me to build something that actually looked decent, but I just kept on studying, and to this day I am still the webmaster, and still learning more about web-programming all the time. October of 1998 was when God really got it off the ground, which is when the first newsletter was released, and it's been going strong ever since. It was not necessarily my original intention to use a website as the vehicle for the CCF. I did it mainly because it was the best way to launch the organization, given the state of my finances at the time. But today, God continues to minister through the CCF mainly through the online format, which saves a lot of costs for a group like ours.

Most cooks work on Sundays, and hence don't get a chance to know other Christians who understand what they're going through in the industry, so through the CCF website, God is able to minister to them at where they're at, to help bring them closer to Himself. We highly recommend that our subscribers get involved with a good local church, and we never attempt to replace that. But at the same time, many of our subscribers unfortunately do not or cannot attend church, and CCF is sometimes the *only* form of ministry that they are in contact with.

Currently, God has provided a myriad of different resources through CCF. We have the newsletter, industry job listings, culinary learning articles, message boards, games, recipe contest listings, culinary charts, recipes, and more. We're unsure exactly what God has in store for us in the future, but a lot of our members have been interested in

having local chapters of CCF in their area, in which cooks could meet, cook, and have some great Christian fellowship. Other ideas that God may or may not allow to occur through CCF are a land-mail magazine, an international conference, a Christian culinary school, and maybe even a Christian cooking show.

Do you have a signature dish? How do you feel when you make it?

A signature dish, not exactly, but I most definitely do have a favorite cuisine! That is the food of the Mediterranean. This includes the cuisine of the south of France, Italy, Spain, and some of Greece. The climate there is semitropical, so a great deal of the food there is fairly light. Fish is obviously very popular, and most of the sauces are light and flavorful, rather than the heavier classical sauces and dishes of the north of France. After working in a Provencale (a region of the south of France) restaurant in Virginia for one-and-a-half years, God opened up the door for me to actually live and work in France. From this experience, I was also able to travel around much of the rest of Western Europe, which truly gave me a love for the food of that area.

I love so many different foods; although I don't have a signature dish, one of my favorite Provencale-style dishes to make is an appetizer; a Tomato-Basil-Mozzarella Salad with a Balsamic Vinaigrette and Proscuitto (an Italian style ham that tastes better than any other). I've rarely ever found anybody who doesn't like this dish. I've even served it to people who say they don't like tomatoes and after talking them into one bite they finished every bite of it. After they taste it, they then say that they don't USUALLY like tomatoes! It's extremely easy to make, and you can make a fabulous plate presentation with it if you decide to plate the meal. It's great followed with a nice soup; say a Roasted Butternut Squash soup. Then if it's served at a luncheon, you can leave it as that, or if served at a dinner, you can follow the soup with your choice of a main course and dessert.

I'll bet that there are some people who have the idea that being a chef in a fine restaurant is really easy. What's it really like? Do you have some stories to share?

Being in the industry for 6 years now has provided me with an unbelievable number of experiences, and very few of those include the word "easy." As I mentioned before in describing why God started the Christian Chefs Fellowship, I've been in a number of different industries, and I believe this is by far the most anti-God and ungodly industry that there is. There's good reason why cooks don't generally have any communication with the guests.

Almost every job I've ever had has included a chef who yells during a great deal of the day (especially during service), very little pay, and some very long and grueling hours. Picture yourself in a job in which you are getting yelled at all day, standing for 10-16 hours a day on hard tile, and working 6-7 days a week. On top of that you are never allowed any breaks other than to go to the bathroom, and have the constant pressure of meeting countless great deal of deadlines to put out nothing but *perfect* food. No matter how busy you are, if it's not absolutely perfect, you make it all over *again*. And that's truly how many kitchens work. I've seen knives thrown, and have many friends who've seen people cut *on purpose*, burnt *on purpose*, pans thrown, and people just plain abused. Though not all kitchens are like that, most in the fine dining realm of things are. Cooking for a Christian organization is obviously a bit different, which is what God has had me doing since I returned from Europe about six months ago.

Why does anybody do this? As a Christian, I don't recommend anybody getting into this industry unless God has unquestionably called them into it. As I mentioned before, God specifically brought me into this industry, and I absolutely love both cooking and serving others. The only problem is that I've seen a lot more fallen Christians than I

have devout Christians in the industry, as it often finds ways of corrupting people. But it's possible that someday God will be starting a Christian Culinary School through CCF, which would be a great tool God could start and use to train students to enter the industry both spiritually, and with adequate culinary knowledge, so that this might not happen so much. That way, more Christians could speak to the lost and hurting world of today's professional kitchens.

Do you see any conflict between being the creator of what some people would call "luxurious" food and being a Christian at the same time?

No, I don't. In itself, I *truly* don't believe that the cooking of "luxurious" food has any conflict with being a mature Christian. Actually, I've seen it as just the opposite, as those Christians who do have the knowledge in how to prepare that type of food can better *serve* their brothers and sisters in Christ through hospitality. Through cooking, God has allowed me to be a *witness* to many nonbelievers, as well as *blessing* a lot of believers. This is especially true now, through the work He does in this kitchen at the center, which serves mostly Christians. This level of cooking is more in knowing how to cook rather than in having knowledge of the ingredients themselves, so it's no real difficult task making a great meal out of everyday ingredients.

Still, as with almost anything, there can be a time when the same becomes conflicting to God. It is fairly easy to become a bit prideful of preparing luxurious food, but where the real conflict regarding the food itself oftentimes comes in is on the other side of the kitchen door, with the guests. I've always had a bit of a problem with fine dining, as many of the customers just come to brag about their worth. A couple of years ago there was even a guy who came into the kitchen to say "hi," only to brag about his newly purchased Rolls Royce, to the extent of even showing us his receipt so we'd know exactly how much he paid for it. Even so, I believe many people that come to these restaurants have

good motives as well. There's nothing wrong with splurging on a person's anniversary or other special occasion if you're able to do that, but there's really *no* reason for paying \$150+ per person on a regular basis *just* for nourishment.

**What "makes a day" for you in the kitchen?
What aspect of being a chef gives you the
greatest satisfaction?**

Great question! Just last week I had just about the best day I've ever had where I work right now. Currently, I work cooking at a Christian Conference Center/Bible College, helping to supervise the cooking of 500 to 3,000+ meals a day. That may seem like a bit of a downgrade from what I'm used to (having worked in nothing but fine dining restaurants prior to now), but God has really blessed this kitchen with the abundance of fine dining experience that a few of us head cooks have. And because of that, it's much easier to change from cooking great food for 100 people a night, to cooking great food for the many thousands here, than it is to know how to cook for thousands without knowing how to make good food in the first place.

Last week, however, we had no retreat at the conference center, and most of the bible-college students were away, so the few of us left to cook over Thanksgiving weekend had the opportunity to really have some fun with some everyday ingredients. On a typical day like today, for example, there were a total of about 70 people working in the kitchen for the whole day, for 8 hours each, and we had a fairly big day of cooking. But on *that* day there were just 2 cooks and 1 dishwasher. We started off with a nice omelet station for breakfast, having a variety of ingredients for the remaining staff and students to choose from, then we started on lunch. I made some roasted garlic and rosemary dough for pizza while Manny (one of the other kitchen managers at the center) worked on the toppings. Lunchtime came, and for 100 students we made individual-sized pizzas to order. I rolled and tossed the dough, Manny put the

toppings on to order, then I cooked, cut, and called out the names.

You may be thinking that this may seem like a normal day for a Pizza Hut employee, so why was it so exciting? Well, it was because the two of us *really got our blood moving*, it was a *treat* to all our *friends* eating there, and it reminded us about some of the excitement of the fast-paced kitchens we used to work in. Those reasons, and it being a reminder of my excitement of recently being in Italy watching pizzas being made from the originators of the dish, made it all the better.

Another day that's extremely vivid in my mind was at the last restaurant I worked at before God brought me to Europe. It was New Year's Eve, 1999, in a small French restaurant called 'L'Auberge Provencale' in Northern Virginia. Our night consisted of a 7-course menu, and the absolute maximum number of patrons the owners could possibly fit. As the four of us cooks at that restaurant often did, due to our busyness, we had already been working 75+ hour weeks (7 days/week, 10-14 hours/day, no time for breaks), and now the biggest night of the restaurant's history was upon us. Prior to then, and since then, I've never moved so fast in my life. There were a few different choices within the courses, and all four of us were working as fast as the eye could see. Take any one dish of the evening and it could have been the subject of a great photographic moment. Working that many hours, and then doing something like that, at that scale of quality, made me realize that having God's help was the *only* reason I was even standing, much less working faster than I ever had before or since in my life! That morning we arrived around 8 am. Without breaks, we worked until the first seating for dinner, continuing nonstop through the second seating, and finally after a long cleanup and a quick celebration of our own, got out of there just before sunrise, New Year's Day. I don't know if God will ever allow me another day so exciting as that one. Although it was extremely tiring, it was so much fun!

What's the most unusual thing you've cooked?

I've cooked (and eaten!) almost all there is to cook and eat. I've worked with pretty much everything from escargot (snails), frog legs, foie-gras, to the moldiest cheeses in the world, and even fresh black truffles on occasion (hundreds of dollars a pound because of their rarity).

You may think that these are what makes fine dining fancy, but they really aren't. Almost every dish on a menu is prepared with *regular* ingredients you can get at any well-stocked grocery store in town.

Contrary to popular belief, people usually do leave fine dining restaurants completely satisfied with the quantity of food that they've eaten, too. Many restaurants actually have a fixed price menu where you get a set hors d'oeuvre, a choice of appetizers, a choice of soups (and/or salads), a choice of main courses, and a choice of desserts. Although the portion sizes may be small, there's still plenty of food consumed throughout the meal. We try not to feed the guests too much, because we all know it's *never* a pleasant experience to go home absolutely stuffed. And we most definitely never want to serve too little, for how could it get any worse than having to stop by McDonald's after eating at a fabulous restaurant just because they didn't give you enough food.

Thank you Ira! Looking back at your career and life so far, what comes to mind?

Unquestionably, the most vivid memories I have of my life and career are of God *being with me* at all times! Throughout the anti-Godliness of today's kitchens, seeing the knives thrown, getting yelled and screamed at throughout most of the first few years of being in the industry, and all the other unmentionable things that I've seen (don't worry, bad things rarely ever get done to the food itself,

just the people preparing it), God has really brought me through many extremely difficult times. A few times, I've just been so physically and spiritually drained because of all this, that I've just felt like quitting right there on the spot, as cooks often do. But God has always given me the strength to look at all the problems in my life as *challenges* that should be *given* to Him to bring me through, rather than just a problem to confront.

I've seen so many Christians who seemed very strong fall hard through all these pressures, and who to this day, deny God, rather than giving their life and problems to Him to take care of. Looking back, I personally have had a few times where I've started falling away from God, focusing more on life's challenges than the *Conqueror* of those challenges. Focusing on the challenges kept taking me farther and farther from perfect fellowship with God. It got so bad that God brought me to finally give up and let Him bring me back. So many times I'd try to do good stuff in order to grow closer to Him. But in all actuality, I needed to do just the opposite, in that He desired me broken and open to His taking over, rather than in my being puffed up in the good deeds I did myself. Therefore, I could claim it to be nothing of myself to grow closer to Christ other than brokenness, and everything of Him to bring me to where He has me today.

How about a recipe?

The following are the recipes for two of Ira's favorite dishes, which were mentioned in the interview. Ira actually took the time to prepare test examples of both during the week that he was answering my questions (hence the pictures you see accompanying this article, which were provided courtesy of him and one of his friends), in order to ensure that he'd gotten the amounts right for the recipes below. Now that's really going "above and beyond," and we thank Ira for his thorough professionalism.

Tomato-Basil-Mozzarella Salad with a Balsamic Vinaigrette and Prosciutto

Serves: 4
by Ira Krizo



Ingredients:

120ml (½ cup) - Balsamic Vinegar
355ml (1 ½ cups) - Extra Virgin Olive Oil
10ml (2 teaspoons) - Chopped Garlic
15ml (1 tablespoon) - Chopped Red Onion or Shallot
to taste - Salt and Pepper
5 each. Large Ripe Tomatoes
1 bunch - Fresh Basil
230g (8 oz) - Mozzarella (preferably the kind found as small balls in liquid)
8 slices - Prosciutto (a thinly sliced very flavorful Italian ham, found at most grocery stores)

Procedure:

1. Put vinegar in a bowl. Chop 6 large leaves of basil and add. Whisking rapidly, slowly add the olive oil. Add salt and pepper to taste.
2. Slice tomatoes very thin – approximately 7 slices per tomato excluding the end pieces.
3. Slice mozzarella into pieces the same thickness and approximately half the size of the tomato slices.
4. On a plate, going in a circle, alternate the following ingredients: tomato/basil leaf/mozzarella all the way around.
5. Five minutes before serving, whisk the dressing briefly to incorporate. Spoon it over the salads.
6. Finally, place 2 slices of prosciutto in the center of the plate, scrunching them some for height. Add fresh ground black pepper on top and serve.

Roasted Butternut Squash Soup

Serves: 4

by Ira Krizo



Ingredients:

2 each - Butternut Squash

60ml (¼ cup) - Olive Oil

¼ each - Chopped White Onion

30ml (2 tablespoons) - Chopped Garlic

45ml (3 tablespoons) - Dried Italian Herbs

about 710ml (3 cups) - Chicken stock (or store bought chicken broth)

to taste - Salt and Pepper

240ml (1 cup) - Heavy Whipping Cream

Procedure:

1. Peel, remove the seeds, and dice the squash to 1 cm (½ inch) cubes.
2. Toss cubed squash with olive oil, onions, garlic, and dried Italian Herbs. Place a thin layer on a cookie sheet tray.
3. Roast at 230°C (450°F) until golden brown (cooked thoroughly when tasted).
4. Using a blender or food processor, puree the squash, adding chicken stock until desired consistency (careful not to make it too watery).
5. Add pureed squash to sauce pan, add salt and pepper to taste, bring to boil, add cream, bring to boil, remove immediately from heat and serve hot (can also be served as a chilled soup on a hot summer day) garnished with a basil leaf and roasted pumpkin seeds.