

# “Best Job I Ever Had”

*Former commercial chef finds ‘dream job’ in senior dining facility.*

**F**or Chip Fegert, it doesn’t get any better. Fegert, executive chef for the new Mather Lifeways senior living community in Evanston, IL, oversees seven dining outlets at the site, which opened last fall. “The best job I ever had,” says the veteran of several high-profile Chicago restaurant companies, noting that each of the outlets changes its menu daily, giving him plenty of room for creativity.

They range from casual to white tablecloth, from pizza and wraps to steak and lobster. Everything is made from scratch with high-quality, organic, locally sourced ingredients. For a chef, it’s like being king of a culinary dream kingdom.

And Fegert has the skill and imagination to make the fullest use of it. He (in tandem with Mather Sous Chef Chivo Montero) demonstrated that by winning the Iron Chef Challenge of the American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging (AAHSA) last November.

Currently, Fegert serves some 120 Mather residents, but when the community is fully built out, that number will swell to around 400. He oversees a culinary staff of 25.

**How did you get interested in cooking?**

It started with my mother. Growing up, I was always interested in helping her in the kitchen. When my father opened a couple of restaurants in downtown Chicago I helped out by bussing tables, but kept gravitating toward the kitchen. I just had a passion for it, even as a kid.

**What about after finishing culinary school?**

I went to work for Levy Restaurants at

Chestnut Street Grill in the Water Tower Building. It was the first restaurant in Chicago with a display kitchen. I was a line cook there for three months, then was promoted to sous chef at City Tavern in the theater district. When the chef left, I became the chef. After City Tavern, I went to Benchers, a seafood restaurant in the

Sears Tower, where we changed the menus every day. That was a lot of fun for me at that age, to be able to create whatever I wanted. We had eight different seafood specials every day.

**You were a real go-getter...**

My father taught me about having a work ethic. He started in steel mills as a kid, then became a newspaper boy and worked his way up to vice president of the Chicago Sun Times. While my friends were out partying, I was the guy staying around and learning to clean lobsters and crabs, and how to do ordering and inventories.

**Do you have a culinary specialty or special interest?**

I really enjoy working with seafood. I got involved with it while working for Benchers. In fact, the joke around here is, ‘Are you ever going to put meat on the menu?’ Which of course I do...

**How did you wind up at Mather?**

I was working for Rock Bottom Brewery as a senior regional chef, which required lots

of traveling. I was getting tired of that, so I was putting my feelers out. At first I was hesitant to interview with a senior dining facility because I thought it meant powdered mashed potatoes, meals from freezer to oven, things like that. But my meeting with [Dining Services Director] Cara Baldwin, which was supposed to be an hour, turned into a four-hour interview, and what she told me they wanted to do with the menu was extremely enticing and exciting. At the end, I said, ‘That’s a chef’s dream job!’

**How have the residents taken to your food?**

I thought some of the people would be set in their ways, but they’ve been totally open to the food we’re trying.

**How did you get into the AAHSA Challenge?**

Cara signed up for the competition before I was hired but I had no problem with it. I like competition. When I was with Rock Bottom, we did a lot of local competitions. Now, I admit I was a little nervous because it was an open kitchen in front of a lot of spectators, so if you make a mistake... But fortunately, we didn’t.

**Did you know any senior dining chefs before?**

Never. But I’m starting to. I networked quite a bit at the Iron Chef event.

—Mike Buzalka



***Favorite Dish***  
Alaskan king crab legs with hash browns and grilled asparagus

***Favorite Dish to Make for Friends/Family:***  
crispy potato quesadillas with creme fraiche

***Chef Hero:***  
Thomas Keller

***Cookbook Recommendation:***  
El Bulli, by Ferran Adria

***Favorite Chicago Restaurants:***  
Topolobampo, Charlie Trotter’s, Lou Malnati’s Pizzeria, Hot Doug’s

***New Chicago Restaurant Recommendation:***  
Edzo’s