

LOCAL

'Top Chef' star tells graduates, President Biden, this Delaware school 'changed me forever'



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A "Top Chef" star and President Joe Biden were both in Middletown Sunday morning for St. Andrew's School's Class of 2023 graduation ceremony.

Gregory Gourdet, a James Beard Award winner who starred on two seasons of the Bravo TV culinary series "Top Chef," graduated from the private New Castle County boarding school in 1993. He returned to Middletown last weekend as the school's commencement speaker.

Biden and first lady Jill were at St. Andrew's School to watch and applaud their granddaughter Natalie Biden. She is the daughter of Hallie Biden and the Bidens' eldest son, Beau, Delaware former's attorney general, who died eight years ago on May 30, 2015.

Natalie will attend her father's alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, in the fall.

Biden family members have a long history with the university; the president and first lady attended the Penn graduation of another granddaughter, Maisy, on May 15.

The University of Pennsylvania also is the alma mater of A. Felix du Pont, who founded St. Andrew's School in 1929. Du Pont was the cousin of Pierre, Alfred I. and T. Coleman du Pont, creators of the modern-day DuPont Co.

St. Andrew's is an Episcopal, coeducational, all-boarding school for grades ninth through 12th. The school sits on 2,200 acres off Noxontown Road in Middletown and has 318 students. Its tuition is \$64,150, according to the St. Andrew's website.

St. Andrew's is perhaps known to most as the setting for the 1989 movie "Dead Poets Society" starring the late Robin Williams. For the film, the school was called Welton Academy.

The famed 2001 "Two Cathedrals" episode of the TV series "The West Wing," which showcased the fictional President Bartlett first meeting his secretary Mrs. Landingham, also was filmed at St. Andrew's. TV Guide has called it the ninth-best episode of the 21st century.

Gourdet, a chef, restaurateur and cookbook author, competed on two seasons of the Bravo culinary series "Top Chef" and appeared on the Netflix series "Iron Chef." His cookbook "Everyone's Table: Global Recipes for Modern Health" won a 2022 James Beard Foundation Book Award.

Delaware dining heats up: 'Top Chef' stars boost Wilmington dining scene and aid independent restaurants

Recipes from his cookbook, free of gluten, dairy, soy, legumes, and grains, often are used for dishes served in the St. Andrew's dining hall, according to Joy McGrath, the head of the school.

Gourdet's Portland, Oregon, restaurant Kann, which he opened in 2022, was named one of the 50 best restaurants in America by The New York Times.

Kann, which showcases traditional Haitian flavors alongside dishes inspired by the cuisines of the African and Caribbean diaspora, is a finalist for the 2023 James Beard Foundation's Best New Restaurant award, which will be announced at the gala on Monday in Chicago.

Gourdet, 47, said St. Andrew's holds "a special place in my heart. The four years I spent there 30 years ago changed me forever."

Gourdet, a city kid from Queens, New York, said he learned to love the outdoors while at the Delaware school.

After graduating from St. Andrews, Gourdet studied pre-med at NYU and then wildlife biology at the University of Montana, where he graduated with a degree in French.

Living in Montana, Gourdet said he discovered cooking brought him joy and attended the prestigious Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

He did an internship with celebrity chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten and after graduation, he worked for Vongerichten for nearly seven years.

Gourdet told the St. Andrew's graduates that life can sometimes take you in different directions than you might expect. At the height of his career with Vongerichten, Gourdet said he battled drug and alcohol addiction.

Gourdet said he sought help, changed his lifestyle, and began exercising regularly and eating healthy.

"The linear path to success is a myth or at least the exception. No journey worth taking is without stops and starts. No one can predict what's to come," he said. "It's not the shape of the path, but your ability to persist that will get you somewhere worth going."

Where is POTUS eating? President and first lady dine at Wilmington's The Quoin. And they didn't get the same dish

Gourdet has been back to Delaware within the past year.

Last March, Gourdet was in Wilmington to participate in fundraising dinners for the Independent Restaurant Coalition that was co-hosted by Tyler Akin of Wilmington's La Cavalier. Gourdet teamed with Chef Dwain Kalup and owner Bryan Sikora at La Fia on North Market Street.

The Bidens were briefly mentioned at the beginning of St. Andrew's graduation ceremony.

"Mr. President, Madam First Lady we are honored by your presence as we celebrate the commencement of our class of 2023," said Scott Sipprelle, a member of the board of trustees.

Gourdet posed for a photo with President Biden and posted it on his Instagram account.

He said it was "lovely" meeting the First Family and gave them his cookbook.

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