

# Master Chef

*Charlie Denk '11 teaches the techniques of clever cooking*

*By Paris Wolfe*

Charlie Denk's life was on a success trajectory. Denk '11 had graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a degree in biological engineering and had a full-time job as a Project Engineer at the Cleveland office of Turner Construction. He was married to his high school sweetheart and they had a house in Ohio City. He was living the life.

But it wasn't working for this dynamic millennial. He found himself in a "quarter-life crisis." He used that self-awareness to change his path.

"I had made a series of very practical decisions in life and followed society's 'playbook' instead of following my heart. I had lost my identity in a lot of ways," he says. "When I got into the real world and threw my life on cruise control, it subconsciously really ruined my value system until I hit a breaking point. I knew I needed to rediscover what made me happy."

The answer? The uncertainty of entrepreneurship. "I was convinced that starting a business was the answer. I genuinely believe some people just have a loose screw such that they can't enjoy life if they're not doing crazy things," he says.

Cooking classes seemed the like perfect business.

"I have always loved cooking and I really believe it's an amazing part of being human," he says. "But the choice of this business was

much more about filling a perceived market gap and developing what I am convinced is a viable business model."

Denk originally thought of this opportunity as a passing fancy when he was just 15 years old. Back then he had taken his girlfriend (now wife) to a retail store's cooking class. With few options for classes and most sold-out, he thought, "If I ever start a business, it's going to be cooking classes."

In summer 2019, he opened stir studio kitchen on West 45th and Lorain Avenue. They host hands-on, instructor-led cooking classes for both public and private customers. His schedule is full, and most classes are sold out weeks in advance.

"Our classes range from Thai and Indian all the way to fried chicken and fresh pasta," says Denk. As the owner he is hands-on. The day might find him selling, teaching or washing dishes.

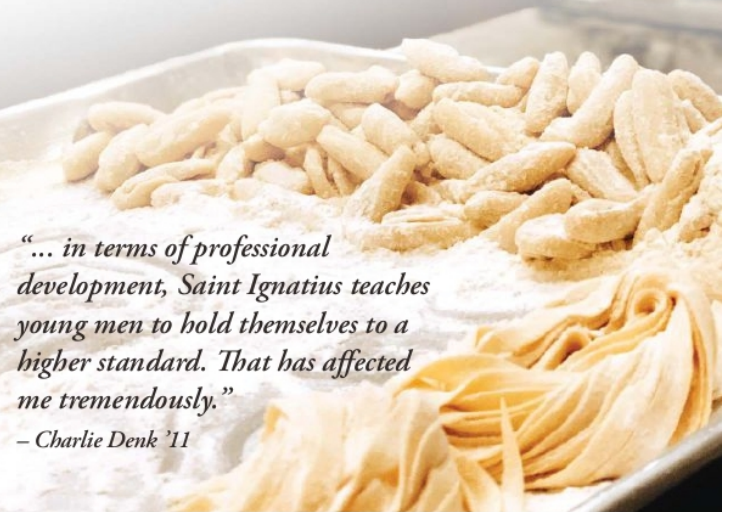
"I love working hard. I feel very alive," he says.

When he's not working, Denk is often dining out for research. His favorite restaurants are close to home and work. "The Plum (Ohio City) is amazing and very intentional and the physical space is awesome," he says. "But I am convinced that the best \$20 you can spend on food in this entire region is at Herb 'n Twine (in Ohio City). I literally structure my life around having to eat their sandwiches at least twice per week."

Looking back, Denk sees Saint Ignatius High School as a formative force. "I definitely didn't value my time there like I should have. It's a big regret of mine," he says. "However, in terms of *professional* development, Saint Ignatius teaches young men to hold themselves to a higher standard. That has affected me tremendously."

He continues his relationship with the high school by working with interns from the Ignatius SIEntA program. [In fact, he hired one of his interns.] And, Denk leads an affinity class for The Welsh Academy.

"I heard somewhere that you won't fully realize what your time at Saint Ignatius really means to you until you hold your child for the first time, say your wedding vows, or some other major life event," he says. "I think I'm just now experiencing some of that."



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