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THIS LOCAL CHEF IS HEADING TO A CULINARY SUMMIT TO REPRESENT CENTRAL IOWA

Think pulling off a five-course meal for a 1,500-person fundraising dinner or executing a lavish buffet for a 750-guest wedding reception is tough?

Try cooking a vegetarian feast for Paul McCartney.

"Every day's a new day here," said Chad Vander Ploeg, executive chef of the Iowa Events Center. "That's what I love about it."

This weekend, Vander Ploeg will represent Iowa at this year's inaugural Spectra Culinary Innovation Summit. The weekend-long event will take place Aug. 8-11 at U.S. Foods Headquarters in Rosemont, Illinois.

This includes top chefs from all around the country who handle all things culinary in arenas and stadiums, casinos, convention centers and other cultural attractions. He hopes this event will grow in the upcoming years.

Chef Vander Ploeg works with a team of 25 culinary professionals to cook for crowds from 50 to 1,500 people for concerts, conventions, weddings and many other types of events. That's where McCartney comes in.

Vander Ploeg recently put together a 80-person vegetarian dinner for the legendary rocker and guests during his recent concert in Des Moines. Vander Ploeg created adventurous dishes like Israeli grilled eggplant with za'atar — a Middle Eastern spice blend — and piri piri tofu skewers (piri piri is a spicy African chili pepper). Vander Ploeg said that McCartney's guests raved to him about the food.

Vander Ploeg, 47, grew up in Indianola and entered into the culinary arts and management degree program at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha. He traveled around the country working for restaurants and then discovered his passion for working for larger facilities, like the Verizon Center in Washington, D.C., Churchill Downs Racetrack in Louisville, Kentucky, and Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center in Nashville, Tennessee.

But Vander Ploeg saw the opportunity to come back and work in Des Moines seven years ago. He now oversees all food production for the Iowa Events Center's widely varying schedule, from huge banquet setups for galas to private backstage catering for concerts.

In attending this summit, Vander Ploeg will collaborate with other industry chefs with hopes to bring at least six new ideas for dishes to integrate into the banquet menus at the Iowa Events Center. He will be collaborating with many other large-venue chefs, including Executive Chef Travis Wilson of the Pensacola Blue Wahoos Stadium in Pensacola, Florida, and Executive Chef George Fisher of the Atlantic City Convention Center in Atlantic City, New Jersey.