

FOODSERVICE EAST PRESENTS

SECRETS OF **SUCCESS**

April 2011

An ongoing series of interviews with chefs, restaurateurs and foodservice operators, Secrets of Success looks at the paths taken to professional recognition and acclaim.



Brenda Michaels

Partner, Fly Creek Cider Mill, Cooperstown, NY
By Foodservice East

Brenda Michaels grew up in a family business with her brother, Chef Charlie Palmer, and the family enjoyed using local foods and ingredients and cooking together. “If it looks and tastes good - eat it! My best memories are of our family chicken BBQs and the fun while grilling it to perfection on the old Weber grill with charcoal. There was always a bonfire after and we’d make dessert on the bonfire. I think the simple pleasures are the most memorable,” she says.

Today, at Fly Creek Cider Mill & Orchard, a major attraction in the Cooperstown, NY area, she and her husband view old fashioned service as the key to success. She’s the recipient of WISE’s (Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship) annual Ann Michael Distinguished Entrepreneur Award for a High-Growth Business Venture.

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FSE: How has your background, growing up in a family that raised two food lovers, influenced you?

MICHAELS: My background growing up was a frugal one but we always had food and good home cooking. My parents had a garden that we worked in evenings and weekends. My brother, Charlie Palmer, now a chef, used to practice making gourmet meals and I was his clean-up crew. We all took an interest in foods and using everything we had available to us, even if it wasn't expensive meats or ingredients. I think that's why we appreciate all foods today.

FSE: What drew you to the world of business and history? You've created something very unique with Fly Creek and at the same time, taken a historic property and turned it into a living entity that restores experiences from its past, making them relevant to today's visitors. How did that come about?

MICHAELS: My interest in business is because of my family and growing up in our family appliance business. My Mom ran the store and my Dad was a plumber and electrician. I then watched my brother create his restaurants. When I met my husband and married into the cider mill business, I worked with his parents the year before we decided to purchase it to get my "feet wet" and to gain knowledge from them. They had created the mill and offered some items for purchase. We expanded their ideas and created a mill store marketplace with specialty foods, more gift offerings and expanded the menu at the snack barn and bakery. We started the farm winery when we realized how many people were asking for hard cider. All of our growth stems from what our customers want and request.

FSE: You're offering customers salsas, wines, apples, ciders, pies, fudge and aged extra-sharp cheddar cheese. Will there be more products added to that mix?

MICHAELS: We plan on offering new items as well as our most popular ones because it keeps things fresh and new. It's always fun to taste new foods. We enjoy it so we are most certain our customers will also.

FSE: How do you interweave your business life with your family life?

MICHAELS: Our business life is very much a part of our personal life. I think that is the only way you can live if you are both in the business. We do take vacations from business. We enjoy boating, swimming, skiing, traveling and entertaining. Sometimes we think of our best solutions while we're doing fun things and traveling to new places.

FSE: What's most exciting to you about the Mill and your business?

MICHAELS: I think the most exciting thing is that we are able to create anything we want to! We are fortunate to have a business that people feel good while they are visiting. Most of our visitors create memories that last and it's really nice to know we can affect so many people in a positive way. We strive to make everyone feel welcome, carefree and comforted. I first realized the importance of what we offer after 9/11. Many people came to the mill looking for relief from the stress of daily happenings. Feeding the ducks is relaxing and almost therapeutic. The simple things in life are important and it's rewarding knowing that we provide simple pleasures to visiting families.

FSE: What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?

MICHAELS: Part of our mill philosophy is that we want to give back to our community and so we invite different organizations to come to the mill on busy fall weekend to hold fundraising events. I see myself doing more fundraising in 10 years. It's very important to us to share in our success.

FSE: What is the "secret" of your success?

MICHAELS: I believe the secret of our success is that we try to treat people the way we would want to be treated. I think our old-fashioned service and friendly team members make our mill a special destination. I personally greet as many customers at the front door during our busy season so I can keep in touch with our visitors. I think that the little personal details make a difference and we'll continue to do all we can to make it special.

FSE: How did you and Bill meet and decide to buy the Mill?

MICHAELS: My husband and I met at RIT. I was studying design and he was in the hospitality program. We were friends for many years, then dated and married. We purchased the Mill from his parents the same year we had our daughter. It was quite a challenging year.

FSE: What is the biggest challenge for Fly Creek and how are you dealing with it?

MICHAELS: The biggest challenge is to find the right team members. It's what makes the business run smoothly and allows you the time to grow your business. I am sure most owners would agree it's one of the most challenging aspects of ownership. We are very blessed to have such a wonderful core team of people.