

FOODSERVICE EAST PRESENTS

# SECRETS OF **SUCCESS**

September 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.



## **Jay Hajj** Owner, Mike's City Diner, Boston, MA By Foodservice East

Jay Hajj grew up in a Greek/Italian neighborhood in Boston after his family moved here from Lebanon in 1977 to escape a civil war in Beirut. "We landed in Boston," says Hajj, who is still grateful to be in a growing, urbane city. In the mid-90's, the South End was "a bad neighborhood," he recalls. His investment in it and willingness to become a force for change, is now part of its history.

At Mike's breakfast is available all day with a wide variety of items, sandwiches, triple decker clubs, burgers and dinners ranging from three styles of grilled chicken to fish and chips, Mesclun steak salad with feta cheese, and beef kabobs with Greek salad, live up to the menu slogan: "Huge Portions, Great Food."

# FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

## **FSE: What led you to open a restaurant?**

HAJJ: I opened my first restaurant right out of high school and earlier, ran a sausage stand in Roslindale. I began washing dishes at age 12 and later was promoted to salad boy at 14. Later, I had a place in Brookline where I did ice cream, yogurt, rollups, falafel, hummus – it taught me a lot about running a restaurant. I think of it as my schooling.

## **FSE: How did Mike's City Diner come about?**

HAJJ: This was a bad neighborhood in 1995 and the space here was not doing well. I got it cheap and I was the only line cook here. Slowly, I built up the business. Politicians started coming here. The President even came! We did a show on The Food Network.

I was one of the first to open here. I helped form a neighborhood association. Today, I own space next door to Mike's and may do a restaurant and bar there.

## **FSE: What would you say is the "secret" of your success?**

HAJJ: My food is definitely 'comfort' food. It's all made from scratch with good quality ingredients. Our mashed potatoes are made with cream and butter. Also, you've got to be creative with specials. We have four a day. You have to keep it homey and give people a good meal for their money. And there's a charm to a diner – it's about being comfortable and customers want that.

## **FSE: What do you like to eat when you go out?**

HAJJ: I'm very picky. It's hard to get a good sandwich. I just like good quality and flavor – food made with a lot of love. It is hard to find a good simple sandwich.

## **FSE: What is your favorite kitchen utensil?**

HAJJ: A sharp knife and a good pair of tongs.

## **FSE: What's the biggest challenge for operators today?**

HAJJ: Finding qualified help in the kitchen is very difficult. Because the jobs are high stress and high heat, they're not easy. Culinary students coming out of school want to work for the high-end restaurants. I wish getting help was easier. Even in a time of high unemployment it's difficult here. If restaurants try to sponsor someone from overseas who wants to work, it's hard too - the immigration laws are complicated with lots of red tape. There should be a better way. Both restaurants and farms have a hard time with this. If it weren't so hard to get qualified employees,

operators like myself would open two or three restaurants.

## **FSE: Do you cook at home? If so, what do you like to cook?**

HAJJ: It's still work for me, but food is my passion. I'm not the cook here but I do six salads and show the cooks how to do them. At home, I have a smoker and I like to do pulled pork.

## **FSE: Which of your sandwiches are you especially proud of?**

HAJJ: Maybe the Grilled Reuben – it's corned beef, Swiss, sour Sauerkraut, and Russian dressing with fries and a pickle – it's a classic.