

FOODSERVICE EAST PRESENTS

SECRETS OF **SUCCESS**

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



Levana Kirschenbaum

Chef, Educator, and Author
By Foodservice East

Her childhood in Morocco influenced the way Levana Kirschenbaum, former restaurateur, cookbook author and educator, looked at food. “All meals were taken together and every single meal was cooked (not bought or microwaved or whatever).” Her mother’s skill in the kitchen made an early and lasting impression.

FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

FSE: What influences led you to a culinary career?

KIRSCHENBAUM: I didn't learn cooking formally. In fact, I had an impulse to run away from it all, but seeing my mother, the ultimate artisan, at work with cooking and indeed every craft, I couldn't help but absorb all of it.

My mother's influence would have to come first and foremost. She is the ultimate artisan. I was amazed at what she could accomplish practically with her hands tied behind her back. We were a large household, and grew up with very modest means, yet we were always well-fed, well-dressed and fit. The incomparable Julia Child remains my uncontested master. I just love her practical un-conceited approach. I am only sorry we are straying from that model with all the celebrity chefs.

Writing has always been a passion. I surprised myself by discovering that food writing is a genre I could be really creative at: I admire Nora Ephron, MFK Fisher, Laurie Colwin, Anthony Bourdain, Ruth Reichl. Seeing food written about in such inspiring ways, food becomes something to respect, enjoy, long for and relate to.

FSE: Kosher foods have generated growing interest in recent years from foodies. To what do you attribute that?

KIRSCHENBAUM: I have to brag a little. We at my eponymous bakery-turned restaurant are described as the trailblazers of upscale kosher dining. That was some 30 years ago. We set our sights on great food and wine, very high in what was then a complete wasteland. But we persisted, against all odds, opened our restaurant, surrounded ourselves with talented chefs and gave them our guidelines for converting their recipes to accommodate the demands of kosher dining. We struggled with a very skeptical clientele. We were the inconvenient new kids on the block, the rebels! The rest as they say is history. Many wonderful kosher restaurants have since opened and are thriving. Surprise surprise: The kosher public *does* have an appreciation for good food and wines! All you need to do is, give it to them! Now kosher wines win in blind international competitions, people used to actually arrange to be in town for our legendary annual wine pairing dinners, and even though Levana Restaurant closed its doors three years ago, my brother in law Sol Kirschenbaum, co-owner of Nobo Teaneck still runs three very prestigious Passover programs at Fairmont hotels.

FSE: What's the 'secret' of your success?

KIRSCHENBAUM: It's this little line that I use tirelessly: 'Ain't nothing like the real thing, baby!' (Thank you Marvin Gaye: I couldn't have said it better!) I look around me and see so many gimmicky approaches to food and cooking, some insane spins on recipes that would otherwise be perfectly sound and perfectly delicious if only they were left in their natural unadulterated state.

FSE: Your new book, "The Whole Foods Kosher Kitchen," stresses the value of simplicity and health in eating, based on your mother's mantra from your childhood - "the cure is in the pot"

How does this apply to the commercial kitchen as well as the one at home?

KIRSCHENBAUM: I catered for many years, to a wide range of venues, from the most institutional to the most prestigious. I remember making meals from scratch for synagogues and old age homes on a shoestring, yet it was always good and healthy and natural. Cooking for crowds is a subject that is very dear to me: You are *not* saving money by choosing processed foods, exactly the opposite. Children in schools, like grateful congregants in synagogues, would in fact be immensely grateful for a delicious all-natural and ridiculously inexpensive lentil soup or pea soup, or rice and beans, fresh salads with oil and vinegar dressing, roasted chicken thighs, meatloaf, chocolate chip cookies, carrot cake and much more. The immediate reward it would deliver is, good health and fitness. Excitement can be acquired for the real thing: Just let it become the new *cool!*

FSE: What did you enjoy most about your restaurant? What was the most challenging aspect of serving diners every day?

KIRSCHENBAUM: Because we were the first of our kind, we took the brunt of the abuse. Even though we offered at all times a prix fixe three-course dinner that never exceeded \$35.00, educating the kosher public proved to be very hard work at the beginning. They were not accustomed to eating anywhere but at home. Now, believe me, they don't bat an eye when they pay up to a couple hundred bucks for food that is not always as distinguished as ours was. Still, I remember owning a restaurant gave us a great feeling of fulfillment and pride: We were responsible for making many joyous occasions memorable, we were always told our food was the best. Many customers became friends, and many of our chefs went on to become accomplished restaurant owners in their own right.

FSE: What kitchen utensil could you not live without?

KIRSCHENBAUM: The food processor – my workhorse!

FSE: If you weren't a cook, what would you want to be?

KIRSCHENBAUM: A writer, a linguist – always a teacher.

FSE: When you go out to eat, what do you enjoy most?

KIRSCHENBAUM: I enjoy seeing food that is delicious and made realistically: not too rich, with all the integrity of its flavors intact. Any restaurant making a delicious and not insanely rich dish with lamb shank, that's what I might order!

FSE: What's in your refrigerator?

KIRSCHENBAUM: Loads of homemade pastry items, condiments, spreads, dressings, dips and stuff I can slather on a totally unadorned piece of fish or chicken, for days I am too lazy or too harried to cook. A chapter in my book, "The Whole Foods Kosher Kitchen," has a chapter, "The Pantry." It becomes readers' best friend in no time as they understand how empowered it makes them!