

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.



Jerome Picca

Executive Chef, North Hill, Needham, MA
By Foodservice East

Executive Chef Jerome Picca brings his embrace of local, sustainable foods to a Needham, MA retirement community where he's changing perceptions of senior living cuisine. Growing up with British, Indian and Sri Lankan cuisine, he trained in classical European cooking with strong French influences.

FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

FSE: What led to your becoming a chef?

PICCA: My original career goal was to pursue my artistic skills and go to art school. I started working in a restaurant when I was fourteen and soon realized that I could apply my art skills to food presentation and do a much better job than what I was seeing at the restaurants of the time.

FSE: What were the major influences on your culinary style?

PICCA: The first major influence on my culinary style was a book given to me by my culinary mentor at the age of 17. It was a book by Chef Paul Bocuse and I was so impressed with his culinary philosophy and knowledge I thought it would be so wonderful to be like him. I followed that with everything I learned as a student at The Culinary Institute of America and later working for Susan Spicer in New Orleans. The biggest current influence on my culinary style has been my wife. She is a fabulous interior designer and has a very good eye for presentation. I love hunting down new ingredients and collaborating with her on how to put the various flavors together to form a perfect dish in both taste and appearance.

FSE: What led you to come to the U.S.?

PICCA: Well I was only 10 years old and had no choice. My mother met and married my stepfather who was at that time an American serviceman in the U.S. Air Force. It was actually quite exciting moving from London to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Everything I ever knew about America seemed to be true: the country was full of cowboys and it was the 'wild, wild west.'

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

PICCA: Oh, that old myth. There really is no "secret" for anyone's success. It always takes a lot of hard work and a small amount of luck. If luck and opportunity come knocking you have to be ready to take the chance, but without many years of hard work and dedication to achieving your goals you can never succeed.

FSE: You moved from the restaurant world to the non-commercial side of the industry – what led to that shift and what different challenges do you have now?

PICCA: In many ways what I do now for North Hill senior living is very similar to the restaurant world: budgets have to be maintained, standards upheld, and staff trained, all of which is an ongoing process. The biggest difference for me is similar to what I experienced as ac at Harvard University, namely the guests are residents of our retirement community as opposed to visitors. Basically I am cooking in the 'home' of the people I am serving and this gives me daily access to my guests. I love the fact that I get to know my guests as individuals rather than sources of revenue. In knowing my guests on a more personal level than the restaurant business, I get to know each individual's personal likes and dislikes. The only downside

is in trying to satisfy every individual's personal tastes, an impossible task at any level.

FSE: What are the unique challenges of running dining operations for a senior living community?

PICCA: In addition to trying to satisfy every individual's personal tastes there is always the emphasis on healthy eating, a goal very dear to me. This can be challenging to accomplish with an older clientele because dining tastes are quite engrained and implementing change and improvement is not always welcome.

FSE: What do you enjoy most about your work?

PICCA: The camaraderie, the sense of belonging to a larger group dedicated to growth and improvement, and the personal interaction I have with residents and team members from all departments at North Hill senior living community.

FSE: What do you see yourself doing 20 years from now?

PICCA: Creating, creating, and creating: new dishes, new plate presentations, new opportunities for growth. I am still an artist at heart.

FSE: You work with young future chefs each summer – how did that begin and what are some of the things you tell them by way of advice about becoming a chef?

PICCA: The school is run by a non-profit organization called "Explo" and I became involved with the Explo in 2009 when I owned Small Plates, Tapas, and Wine Bar. The school was interested in introducing a culinary arts segment to the intermediate program and I have always been thrilled to teach culinary arts. I developed the program in collaboration with the intermediate program director and faculty assistants. The end result is the current Culinary Arts Focus Program for kids age 13 to 15. Many of these young culinarians go on to further their careers by doing a stage in restaurants and applying to culinary schools. I do give the kids quite a lot of advice but feel the best advice I give them is to mentor with a strong chef and apply themselves fully to their education.

FSE: Do you cook at home and if so, what's in your refrigerator?

PICCA: This is a very good question that will remain largely unanswered. I keep a slim pantry. I do covet my collection of salts, oils, vinegars, and molecular gastronomy toys, which I play with when my wife and I have guests for a casual dinner party. Feel free to drop by anytime.