

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.



Karen Henry-Garrett

Chef-Owner, Dot 2 Dot Cafe
By Foodservice East

Living in England, Karen Henry-Garrett had what she saw as a “great job” working with international students in a study-abroad program, but her boss “went out of his way to make employees miserable.” Fed up with “ranting,” she took a hard look at what else she could do, and realized she enjoyed cooking and wanted to hone those skills. Culinary school made “absolute sense in order to access a certain clientele and to give me the confidence to completely change the course of my career.” She wound up a Le Cordon Bleu in London.

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FSE: What led up to opening Dot 2 Dot Café in Dorchester, MA?

HENRY-GARRETT: When my husband and I decided to move to Boston I left a fairly lucrative catering business behind in London. I didn't know anyone here and had no contacts to build another catering business. It made sense, at the time, to open a restaurant in order to create a 'face' for the type of food I wanted to offer which could eventually lead to catering jobs. We also lived in the neighborhood and quickly realized that there were no local cafes or breakfast places in our immediate area.

FSE: Had you owned restaurants previously?

HENRY-GARRETT: No I hadn't – this has been my first experience and it is definitely a steep learning curve! Catering is such a completely different ballgame. You know your numbers, your overheads are much lower, you work within a certain time frame. Not knowing who or when, or even if, anyone is going to walk through the door is a much scarier prospect.

FSE: What's the biggest challenge running a neighborhood café?

HENRY-GARRETT: For us it's been all about the location. While many local residents have embraced the café and supported what we are trying to do, there are others who live very close by and have never set foot inside. We are not close enough to any T stop to benefit from commuter traffic and we don't offer any 'fast food' to compete with the other eateries. Crime can be an issue at times. The biggest challenge has been to create visibility, to get the word out that we are here and that we are staying put. Dorchester has a very diverse population and our customers reflect this diversity. Every time one of these Dorchester residents becomes a regular – it feels like a mini success.

FSE: Why don't you serve dinner except sometimes on Friday?

HENRY-GARRETT: Unfortunately, without an alcohol license we have struggled to make dinners financially viable. I believe our food can compete

with any of the local restaurants but there is no profit without alcohol and we get by-passed as a dinner spot without a license.

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

HENRY-GARRETT: Success is a relative term and I don't think there are any secrets other than a willingness to work hard at everything – which includes still being the one to mop the floor at the end of the day! I have tried not to bend to everyone's wishes but accommodated those requests that have been consistent (I had no idea what grits were before coming to the US but they are now on our menu!). My motto has always been to cook everything from scratch and that is not something I will compromise on so we will never be a fast food restaurant. Cooking from scratch means that you are already half-way up the ladder to cooking healthily. It also means that we can improvise and offer alternatives to any guests with very specific demands. So I think that success here has been to bring a range of cuisines to the neighborhood and slowly change the expectations of those who come through our doors.

FSE: Your menus at Brunch and Lunch are delicious, simple and healthy – how did you come up with the dishes?

HENRY-GARRETT: I cook along the lines of what I want to eat so it's rather like you are coming to my home. Other dishes have morphed from one stage to another. The French toast started as a bread pudding dessert that a former chef used to make but once we started making the brioche it seemed only natural that it would make a great breakfast dish. The corn beef hash was really a result of not understanding how anyone could eat that stuff out of a tin! I didn't want it to be top heavy with potato or to look like a mess on the plate so the combination of a crisp potato rosti topping with our own sautéed corn beef was the result and it has become a big success. So I guess the short answer to this is that we eat simply and healthily at home. I play to these strengths and offer the same to those who come to Dot 2 Dot.

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FSE: Tell us about your ‘flapjacks’?? They’re rich, buttery and very tasty little cookies. How did you create them and what are your plans for them?

HENRY-GARRETT: Your description of them should already alert readers to the fact that flapjacks at Dot 2 Dot are not pancakes. Flapjacks are a staple of our childhood in England. It’s almost the first thing you learn to cook in Home Economics at school. Everyone has their own twist on them and I have mine. They are a big success at the café and I can’t pretend that they are healthy because they are way too yummy (although the oats are in fact the largest ingredient). I would love for these to be sold on a much larger scale. They can be kept refrigerated and their shelf life is long, they can be made quickly and in large quantities. I have often played with them by adding nuts or chocolate and they package well. My next move is to find a buyer who wants them in large enough quantities that we can start making a profit. Anyone out there?!

FSE: When you go out to eat, what kinds of food do you enjoy?

HENRY-GARRETT: I really like the Asian fusion cuisine that is on offer now – not so elaborate that it gets lost in the concept but enough to stimulate and excite the taste buds – sort of a culinary challenge. I also really enjoy Italian food when it is simply prepared and I miss good Indian food. I will eat foie gras whenever I can get it! I also like trying food that I couldn’t possibly cook.

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

HENRY-GARRETT: I do cook at home but often defer to my husband who has an expanding repertoire, and looks kindly upon the fact that I have just spent all day standing and cooking for others. When I’m in the mood I like to make sauces to accompany the dish I am making – balancing the acidic with something buttery or fruity, complementing with a creamy or cheesy sauce. I like getting my hands dirty – either boning or filleting. We will always have chili oils, black bean or

yellow bean sauce, sambal oelek, lemon grass puree, banana peppers, fresh coriander, and lots of fresh salad where we throw just about everything in.

FSE: Are there plans to expand Dot 2 Dot at some point and offer dinner?

HENRY-GARRETT: Offering dinner has always been on the back burner. We do offer dinner on nights that we have events, such as Open Mic, dinner/movie nights, book club etc., because we can guarantee enough of a crowd to make it viable. With the new legislation on liquor licenses just being passed, we are keeping our fingers crossed that we will have a chance to acquire one and then we can really push the boat out on serving dinner. It’s been a long time coming but it looks like we might, finally, be getting there.