

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.



## **Rafael Barbosa**

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By Foodservice East

# FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

## **FSE: What's your background?**

BARBOSA: I was born in Minas Gerais Brazil and came to the US at the age of five with my parents. My parents both migrated toward the restaurant business and have been in the industry for the past 25 years. I followed. I started working at my first restaurant as a busboy and dishwasher at the age of 15, and have been in love with the industry ever since.

## **FSE: How did you get involved with Fire + Ice and the underFiRE concept?**

BARBOSA: A few months before graduating college, an old boss approached me to come work for him as restaurant manager at FIRE+iCE approached me. I turned down the management, since I was months away from having a degree in marketing. Lucky for me, the company was also hiring an entree level Marketing Coordinator. Worked up the ladder, became Director of Marketing 3 years ago, Director of Operations last year and Operating Partner at the beginning of 2015. underFiRE was my brain child.. Our goal was to revamp our 1<sup>st</sup> floor space at our Berkeley st, location to establish a better product-market-fit. We're surrounded by thousands of business men and woman, but were unsuccessful bridging the gap between our seats and their wallets. Our old bar didn't fit their needs and in short, wasn't "cool enough". After years, of research, and brainstorming, underFiRE was born. A non-pretentious hangout for the Back Bay area serving up craft cocktails, micro brews and high quality bar food.

## **FSE: You did a lot of studying and traveling to learn about tacos—tell us about that! Where did you go and what was the learning process like?**

BARBOSA: Indeed! I traveled to the west coast 4 times to study up on Tacos and visited 50+ Taco shops, trucks and restaurants to truly familiarize myself with everything about American influenced tacos. Most of the learning process consisted of ordering two of everything... One I ate, and enjoyed – the other I deconstructed to see how it was put together and what ingredients were used to create the taco. During these many visits, I also was privileged to speak to many cooks and chefs about their tacos and what made them unique. The most important thing I realized after my Taco pilgrimage had concluded was that Tacos are nothing more than a vessel... the possibilities are endless. Example, one of my favorite dishes is a homemade pesto, chicken, fresh tomatoes and {Parmesan cheese over

linguini. These ingredients come together to form a well-balanced, delightful flavor pairing. Now, swap the linguini with a flour tortilla and the Parmesan cheese with Queso fresco and boom - Italian inspired taco that's simple, but delicious.

## **FSE: How does the lava rock cooking work and how does the cooking stone get to 600 degrees?**

BARBOSA: The lava rocks menu is the next iteration of FiRE+iCE. Essentially, we're brining the grill to you. You order a meal, and the protein is served raw on top of the 600 degree rock. Within minutes, steak and seafood are cooked to the desired temperature. In order to get the stones to the required temperature, we use a special oven designed just for the lava rock stones.

## **FSE: What was the design process like as underFiRE was created?**

BARBOSA: The design process was fun. I worked with an Interior designer and architect to make sure my visions were in order with the brand we were trying to create. I told the designer how I wanted a heavy emphasis on dark wood, metal, and bold colors. I designed the bar itself and picked out the furniture, she did the rest.

## **FSE: What do you enjoy most about your job?**

BARBOSA: I most enjoy the satisfaction of seeing a guest enjoy their dining experience. I love hosting and feeding friends... as the Director of Ops for a restaurant chain, I get to host close to half a million friends a year!

## **FSE: What do you like the least and how do you address those challenges?**

BARBOSA: Tough question. I least like when a guest has a negative experience due to an operational fault. Ex. Maybe the restaurant was really busy and the bathrooms have paper towels on the floor, or if a server got too busy and didn't get a guest his check in an acceptable amount of time, if a vendor messed up an order and we ran out of something, etc... To address those challenges, I constantly strive for me and my restaurants to operate more efficiently.

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## **FSE: Your background is Brazilian—how has that influenced your palate?**

BARBOSA: Well, I love meat; especially, red meat! Putting that fact aside, like many cultures, Brazilian cuisine varies great depending on what region of the country you're in. Luckily, I lived in several areas and my parents LOVE food as much as I do. Therefore my palate had the luxury of trying various cuisine types from all over the country. In addition, my parents would often breakdown the ingredients and their flavor pairings as we were enjoying a meal. This early exposure to ingredient pairings trained me to analyze and breakdown my meals on a regular basis as an adult. The result has been a large mental glossary of ingredient pairings.

## **FSE: What do you see yourself doing in the next 10 years?**

Still in the business running and opening restaurants! Within the next five years, I'll be moving to Brazil to bring American-style restaurant concepts to the country. The US has mastered the art of creating restaurant concepts. It starts with a strong brand, backed by a delicious product with high value and precise operations. Add, a great location and that's the formula for success in the restaurant biz.. Strong Brand + delicious food + high value perception + efficient operations + good location = Successful restaurants. I plan on opening three different styles of restaurants... an underFiRE with lava rock cooking, a Mexican Cantina and an Italian style pizza shop.

## **FSE: If you weren't doing your current occupation, what would you like to do?**

BARBOSA: This is a tough one. I'd be one of three things.. .A world champion in Brazilian Ju-Jitsu, a Marketing Guru for a fun brand like Lego or an architect – I love designing spaces and often admire great architectural designs.

## **FSE: You're into cooking so what's in your home refrigerator?**

BARBOSA: I typically buy products to be cooked on that day or the next.. FRESH is always better. Right now there's fresh salmon, lemon grass, garlic and asparagus, which is for tonight's dinner. Aside from that, the usual...half eaten jar of pickles, condiments, salad dressings.

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

BARBOSA: What is the secret to my success? I attribute my success to a few things... number one, my mother. She served as the backbone of my family

- a hard working immigrant mother, who worked 50-60 hours a week to give me the opportunities she didn't have growing up. Her dedication to my future inspires me to succeed.

Another factor that I attribute to my success is my unmediated ADD. The ability to focus on multiple tasks at once is critical to success in the restaurant industry.

## **FSE: What can you tell us about your struggles with weight?**

BARBOSA: Yes, I had a major weight loss nine years back when I was 21. I became obese after moving to the U.S. and having easy access to fruit juices and junk food. By the time I was 18, I weighed 320 pounds. At my heaviest I weighed 340. One day I accompanied my father to a doctor's appointment to review his diabetes. After the appointment, the doctor asked me to stay a minute to have a chat. I thought he was going to talk to me about my father, but instead the topic was my weight. In short he said something along the lines of "Your grandfather is a diabetic, your father is a diabetic, your uncles are diabetic and one day you'll have diabetes." He then said, if I contracted diabetes at my current weight, I would be in serious risk of harm, even death. That scared me. The following week I told the story to a close friend. She did everything in her power to bring me to Bikram Yoga. The first class was brutal! An hour and a half of yoga at 109° - no joke! I stuck with it in a couple months later I was down 20 pounds. My recent weight loss then propelled me to become a healthier person. I never "dieted", I lived healthy. Diets are not permanent. Living healthy is. A few years later I discovered one of my true passions, Brazilian JiuJitsu and MMA. This elevated fitness to a whole other level. I currently weigh between 210 - 225 lbs depending on the time of year. I try to look a little bit leaner for summer.