

FOODSERVICE EAST PRESENTS

SECRETS OF **SUCCESS**

December 2015

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



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By Foodservice East

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FSE: You began as a microbiology and engineering student but later, wound up at New England Culinary Institute. How did that come about?

EDELMAN: It was my sophomore year of college, and a career as a doctor or engineer felt way too distant. Ski season, on the other hand, was a month away and I decided to quit school, move to Killington and wash dishes and ski. I actually begged for that job- the Chef was a NY Times “Rising Star” at the time, and I was intrigued by the restaurant business. My parents...not so intrigued. That Chef took me under his wing and by the end of the season, I had worked my way up to becoming his Sous Chef. Instead of leaving town when the restaurant closed at the end of the ski season like most, I joined him for the summer, working side by side with him at his family restaurant- a 50 seat jewel that was the oldest fine-dining Italian restaurant in Vermont. He suggested culinary school and personally drove me up to New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier, VT. It was 1991- there was no Food Network, no Top Chef and no celebrity appeal to a culinary career. I just wanted to cook.

FSE: Were you interested in food while you were growing up?

EDELMAN: Absolutely, but I don't think I necessarily knew it. I grew up an hour North of NYC in a small, coastal Connecticut town. It was the 70's, and there were 5 working farms in town. My mother was (and still is) a fabulous cook and the quintessential host. Didn't experience much canned or frozen food growing up...mom cooked from fresh most nights, and I remember many a summer afternoon as a kid riding my bike to the farm down the street with a note from my mom...and biking back home with a chicken, eggs and fresh vegetables. I spent hours in the kitchen with my Mom learning how to cook most days! Dad was the summer-time Grill Man, Saturday breakfast cook and Sunday night saucier, and he taught me his repertoire as well. We may have been the last customer the milk man had when that era ended! On the nights Mom didn't cook, she and my Dad entertained their friends, cooking a feast, picking out service ware and setting the table. Always hors d'oeuvres, always a multi-course meal and always a great party. We spent a fair bit of time in NYC on weekends, always eating good ethnic food or going to new restaurants. My Grandmother...an inspiration as well. To this day I have her entire recipe card file of baked goods and ethnic holiday specialties. I was fortunate in that we also traveled a lot as a family, and ate our way through many countries. My mom still likes to talk about my fondness for escargots and frog legs...at age 4!

FSE: How did you wind up in the seafood industry, owing Seafood Specialties in South Boston in 2006 and later, in 2011, buying the iconic Wulf's in Brookline, MA?

EDELMAN: After I finished culinary school at NECI, I launched into a year-long stage around the world. Upon my return, I moved to NYC and got my first job there. I cooked in NYC for about 8 years, and at some point, “Great Chefs” started becoming popular, and Food Network was close behind. I guess I was highly impressionable- hours of cooking shows watching French Chefs tend their herb gardens and cook their hearts out at small country inns seemed like a great idea. So...I left NYC and moved up to Maine. The “Dream Job” I took was a disaster...and through a very unusual series of events and a bit of good luck, I wound up opening my own restaurant. It was the best of times and the worst of times. Although I fell more and more in love with food and the ingredients I was fortunate enough to work with, working morning, noon and night as the Chef-owner of a small, white tablecloth restaurant took its toll on me and burned me out. Sold the restaurant and moved to Boston, picked up some shifts here and there but I just wasn't feeling the restaurant business any more. My father suggested I seek guidance from a career counselor, which I did. What surfaced from that process...was that I was only a few degrees off from my calling. I liked the adrenaline rush of real-time service, I loved working with food and I thrived leading a team. However, I had unknowingly become a seafood-centric cook and had developed a particular interest in sourcing, portioning and cooking seafood. So...I looked for a seafood industry job in Boston and wound up taking one as a delivery driver for a small seafood wholesale company. Through yet another unusual series of events I bought the company. Seafood Specialties had a great run for quite a while. We were putting fish on the table at many of the nation's top restaurants. Another unusual series of events (there's a pattern here) led to my buying Wulf's Fish Market, one of the oldest fish markets in Boston. The wholesale operation learned from the retail operation, and the retail operation learned from the wholesale operation. We had an amazing team, we worked hard and we accomplished great things.

FSE: What led you to Stavis?

EDELMAN: Not all good things come to an end...but many do. Our wholesale plant burned down in a nasty fire in 2009. We rebuilt the business starting later that day, and experienced rapid growth during difficult financial times. Unfortunately, we never really recovered from the fire and the associated expense of saving the company. It was a

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sad and difficult day when Seafood Specialties went out of business, but everything happens for a reason. Fortunately for me, my largest vendor was Stavis Seafoods and the Stavis family are wonderful people. I had been working closely with Rich Stavis as a fellow Director of the Boston Fisheries Foundation. When the news broke that I lost my company, Rich gave me an office to work out of...the same day...while I settled my affairs as best as I could, and it developed into the best career opportunity I never knew I would have. Maintaining Wulf's was a conflict and I stepped aside in order that the current owner could carry on the tradition. Fast forward...and I am the Executive Chef and Director of Project Development for Stavis Seafoods, and it's the most exciting job I have ever had.

FSE: Sustainability plays a big role in the seafood industry today. What changes have you seen in recent years in the way seafood is sourced?

EDELMAN: The short version is that I have seen some species virtually disappear from product lists and menus. I have seen others shrink drastically in size. I have seen many increase drastically in price. Aquaculture still confuses the general public due to much "dis-information," and the discrepancies between the best-practices and worst-practices, but it is very important. What HASN'T changed?

The long version- when I arrived at Stavis my knowledge base on this was quite limited. I knew what I had read and what seemed to resonate with Chefs. Nowadays, I get to work very closely with Rich Stavis and I am quickly learning his posture on sustainability, and our company's "Road to Responsibility." Rich has been in the industry for 30 years and is a genuine "thought leader" on the subject. He is slowly but methodically teaching me our company values here, and much of the work being done quietly in the back drop. We prefer "responsible" to "sustainable" for many reasons. The essence, as I am learning, is that although the oceans are vast, resources are waning. If every US citizen were to start voraciously consuming the species which are considered to be "sustainable" (the US is the second lowest seafood consumer in the world!) we would, in effect, eat them all into oblivion- and/or find ourselves high in demand and low in supply. Marine resources which carry badges and certifications of sustainability, rightfully so, are often more expensive than the average US consumer can afford. Eating seafood will make children grow better and adults live longer, and it needs to be available to everyone, on every budget. We believe that "responsibility" means doing our best to source products with integrity from properly managed

fisheries and farms from around the world. Sustainability of individual species is paramount, but also important is the sustainability of our global industry and the people who rely on their jobs. Fish, water, energy, packaging materials, people...they all tie in together under a greater umbrella of things which need to be managed and respected responsibly. Wild fisheries management...this is something which is certainly critical but also a difficult subject for people to agree on. No matter how well we learn to better manage wild stocks in the Earth's oceans...statistics show that the world population is increasing, and therefore so is the need for more food. Supporting Fisheries Improvement Projects (FIPS) and chain of custody certifications, and supporting the sustainability of wild stocks through every avenue possible, supporting fishermen and farmers...this is all so important. Most unfortunately is that much of the best work being done in the field of sustainability is not a newsworthy and exciting read for the general public. It's scientific and policy-based content that is incredibly important but doesn't satisfy peoples' "how can I help right now" nature. The single biggest potential game-changer I see currently is freshwater and marine "RAS" (recirculating aquaculture systems). There are scientists and companies working hard, world-wide, to figure out how to grow fish naturally and responsibly in closed-containment systems. If the RAS business models can get in sync with the science...the seafood industry will be able to subsidize the amount of marine and fresh water protein we can responsibly harvest from the rivers, lakes and oceans with healthy and well-bred seafood...and feed the world responsibly and affordably. There is a healthy balance here of wild fisheries, open-ocean aquaculture and closed-containment aquaculture which will be necessary in order to feed the world and respect the planet.

FSE: Stavis is a big supporter of fishermen's rights and sources fresh and frozen products from around the world. Today, it's expanding into Miami. What can you tell us about that move and what it will mean for the company?

EDELMAN: Stavis believes that fisherman are the ultimate stewards of the Earth's oceans, and as such our company must support them however we can best do so. Stavis has maintained facilities in Miami since 2004. These facilities have always been significant in support of our efforts toward bringing "southern" wild species to market as a primary importer. We recently expanded our operations in Miami to include dedicated fresh processing space as well as frozen storage, in order that we can offer

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our entire product line of fresh and frozen seafood through Miami as well as Boston. The expansion will allow our company to serve many existing and new customers better and faster. It's always desirable to distribute seafood from facilities closer to our customers, and much of the country can be well-served from this location. Our expanded Miami facility will also help us grow Caribbean exports due to its optimal location for this in Miami.

FSE: You help the industry's buyers source 1,100 products. How has the way restaurant/foodservice operators buy fish and seafood changed since you became involved in the industry and where do you see that going?

EDELMAN: There is much about our industry that never seems to change. Seafood knowledge is specialized, experience is earned and we work with perishable inventory. Foodservice operators tend to trust experts, and with good reason. Chefs rely on their fishmongers for their daily seafood deliveries. On the other hand, many successful foodservice operators are growing their businesses- from that single location to 5, 9, 12...and they are facing the reality that they have purchasing power along with the logistical challenges of operating multiple locations. To that end, many broad line distributors are "upping their game" in an effort to provide seafood solutions for their customers. Sustainability (responsibility?) is definitely an emerging criterion for many...but at the same time, everyone is trying to figure out what that means. Although I am no longer a full-time working fishmonger in boots and an apron, swinging a knife (still happens sometimes!)...I really enjoy when end-users reach out directly for knowledge and guidance. One of my favorite parts of my job is working with Chefs and restaurateurs designing seafood programs and consulting on menu strategies with a keen eye on all that I am learning...every day...from the seafood experts I am surrounded by here at Stavis.

FSE: What's the biggest challenge in sourcing seafood today and what advice do you give operators?

EDELMAN: Steady availability and pricing in an ever-changing world, remaining relevant and being nimble along the way...it's a daily battle! Our livelihood relies upon our doing right by our customers, and they depend on us to source well and sell fairly. Advice? Read a lot, seek the truth, be responsible, loyalty goes a long way and integrity is everything. And don't over-salt;

FSE: What is your 'secret' of success?

EDELMAN: Work hard, really hard. Be honest, very honest. Say what you are going to do and do what you say you will. Maintain your passion and resist the pressures of work and life which can easily make you fall out of love with your chosen path. Smile at the first person you see every morning and let their return smile energize your day, and figure out how to have fun doing your job well. Try and make the world a better place however you can, through whatever you do. When I tuck my 5-year old little girl in at night...it makes me realize how some of the things I do today might very well impact the world she lives in many years from now.

FSE: What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?

EDELMAN: Whatever my role might be at Stavis Seafoods. There are more Stavis family members getting smarter and old enough to work here as we speak. I would be fortunate to work for and with them, and continue the path I am on. Stavis won the 2015 Massachusetts Family Business Award, and with good reason. The people I work for value me and my family as much as they value my work. I'm 44 now and figure I've got about 22 good working years left, anyway – this is a great place to be. I am not really in the mood for any more "unusual series of events" in this lifetime;

FSE: How does your culinary background influence the way you view fish/seafood?

EDELMAN: When I look at seafood products...I do not see finished goods. I see raw materials that somebody talented and passionate is going to make into something special, which is going to make someone else very happy and healthy...however simple the recipe. Food is both sustenance and love all in one.

FSE: What is your favorite food when you go out to eat?

EDELMAN: I love food! All of it! Maybe not bitter melon. It's really quite bitter. Stylistically, I love honestly cooked, classical French bistro food.

FSE: What fish/seafood do you enjoy when you cook at home?

EDELMAN: Always have a place in my heart and my 'fridge for oysters, clams, mussels, Jonah crab, lobster and scallops. I'm a New England kid. And Maine Shrimp. Oh those sweet, ruby-red little treats...getting harder to come by. :(