

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.



Jim Dodge

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By Foodservice East

Hospitality is in Jim Dodge's blood. He comes from a family with a long history of running hotels in New Hampshire's Lakes Country from the Pendexter Mansion in 1749 to his parents' The Inn at Steele Hill and the Squam Lakes Club. It was while working for James Smith at Wentworth-by-the-Sea in Portsmouth that he met the Swiss chef who influenced him to turn from hotels to becoming a chef.

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FSE: You grew up in New England, in New Hampshire's lakes region where your family had a hotel and farm and was an active owner of lodging facilities for seven generations. What was that like and how did it influence the direction you took in your career choices?

DODGE: It was a childhood of two worlds, a bit like the PBS Master Piece series Upstairs Downstairs. Except and had the advantage of participating in both. The front of the hotel and guest represented the formal upstairs that dressed for dinner. They were well educated, successful and some very famous, but all very modest. The staff, our farm and neighboring family farms represented the downstairs.

As in Europe it was just assumed that I would go into the family business. I started my apprenticeship the summer I was ten, weeding the flower gardens at the hotel and the large vegetable garden at our farm. Then helping to shoveling snow from the many patios, decks, and walkways at the resort. To avoid tracking sand or salt onto the hardwood floors and Persian carpet, everywhere we shoveled it was bushed dry. From then on I worked in every department of the hotel. With each new task details of how and why it was done a certain way were carefully explained. What stood out for me was how much my grandparents and parents enjoyed their work, a fantastic staff and the wonderful compliments from guest.

For my family the business was very much a craft that they took great pride in. The comfort of the guest was paramount; they keep detailed files on what kind of food they preferred, flours, if they ride horses English or western.

The food at the hotel was extremely important because most guests' stays were long and they ate at least two and often three meal a day. The menus changed everyday depending on the season and what was available. This is simply how it had always been done. My father purchased as much as he could from local famers many of who were hippies who were growing organic crops. Everything was made from scratch and fresh ingredients. My father who has work with a few fine French chefs was very knowledgeable about food groomed my pallet from and early age.

FSE: What influenced your choice of pastry/baking? You trained with Swiss chef Fritz Albicker, who had Strawberry Court in Portsmouth, and began to blend European

preparation and styling with your New England heritage. What led you to move to the West Coast to be executive pastry chef of Stanford Court in San Francisco for a decade? How did that move lead you to be who you are today?

DODGE: I have been very fortunate in my career with some wonderful opportunities and the first was my two-year apprentice with Fritz. This was a period when pastry was a dying art; at that time Strawberry Court was the finest pasty shop in the county. My family started pressuring me to go back to college and get a degree in business management or a job in a city hotel. At that time New York and San Francisco has the best reputations for 5 star hotels. I chose San Francisco because has had friends had move to the city.

That move was my second great opportunity. It 1978 there were many young American chefs who were taking over kitchens and I was very fortunate to be among them. It was a very exciting time, mostly because how supportive of a culinary community it was. Everyone was willing to help and share knowledge.

As a pastry chef it was paradise because I had access to great dairy products, flour and fresh fruits. It was also the first job that I was hired as the pastry chef and was free to develop my own style of pastry. I increased the amount of fresh ripe fruit and reduce sugar. At this time I also realized how important it was to work in a healthy supportive environment. When I interviewed for jobs I was assessing them as well, noticing how the executive chef and manager interacted with staff, the atmosphere in the kitchen, and was there a sense of pride in what they were doing? The hotel I worked in for ten years had all those management qualities and when it was sold I knew that would change and it did.

FSE: In '93 you took a post at New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier, VT, overseeing educational and operational quality including 2 fining dining restaurants, two moderately priced family establishments, three cafeterias and a bakery café. How did that change your perspective on foodservice, if it did?

DODGE: In San Francisco when I start to receive praise from my peers and the press, I was ask to give classes on a few schools. That expedience made me communicator and chef, because I leaned to be more patient and listen more. It also gave me more

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confidence and made me a better speaker partly because I understood what people wanted to know.

NECI was a great and with new challenges. Previously my work had been in mostly luxury hotels and fine dining and a staff of 10. The spectrum was much broader, not only in the wide range of dining but I was interacting with students, instructors, and guest. It made me realize the important of providing good food for everyone. They also have a team of very talented instructors from around the world from different cultures. To be the most supportive and effective I learned to present myself in different ways, sometimes direct and to the point or other times more tactfully by starting with a compliment that would relax them, explain the objective and then ask for their suggestions.

FSE: Your career took you next the Boston's Museum of Fine Arts where you redefined the Fine Arts restaurant and oversaw the Galleria Café and cafeteria, plus special events. What lessons did you take away from that experience?

DODGE: At the MFA I was hired to create a destination restaurant and improve the quality of the food and service in catering and the cafes. It was the biggest challenge of my career. The operation had become stagnant and without passion. Using all the skills I had learned from my past jobs I was able to resurrect a great team from the staff I had inherited. It wasn't that difficult to do, I simply treated them the way I wanted to be treated. Mine was an open door policy; an employee could ask to speak with me at anytime. When we meet I allowed then the time they need to explain their needs, I made not judgments until they were done, and I treated they with respect. In return I gained their trust and respect and they knew I would be fair. As a result we dramatically improved quality and profits.

FSE: Sixteen years ago you returned to California to join Bon Appétit Management where you now oversee training in specific cuisines and techniques and much more, including inviting Star Chefs to Bon Appétit cafés to do recipe-tastings and book signing events to promote new cookbooks. What new insights has the past 16 years contributed to your perspective on culinary arts, education and more?

DODGE: There have been so many changes in the past 16 years, because of the internet and television there is so much more information available. One

has always had to sift through and determine what is sound from incorrect, but it takes a lot longer to do that now.

More than ever it's important to have a culinary education from a certified school or well structured apprenticeship so you have a good foundation of culinary knowledge.

FSE: Your career has led to a long list of awards and recognition, as well as your involvement of many publications, books and your own "Baking with Jim Dodge." You've also worked with the Monterey Bay Aquarium and co-founded its' Cooking for Solutions. What can you tell us about that and how it broadened your perspective?

DODGE: Being on television, publishing books and receiving awards are great achievements. They do help open doors, but I am always known it's important to not let it go to your head and let it change you.

FSE: You've been involved for a long time now in the Farm to Fork program and have been at the forefront of the movement to local food, improved animal welfare, farm workers' rights and more. Where do you see the industry moving in these areas?

DODGE: So many more people are aware of the issues and concerned that I think we will see a lot of progress made in the next few years.

FSE: Do you cook or bake (or both!) at home? What is your favorite food to prepare and why?

DODGE: My culinary training started in the savory kitchen at my family's hotels, so I enjoy cooking at baking at home. If you stop learning as a chef you stop growing, so I am always trying out new methods and recipes.

FSE: Finally, what do you see yourself doing 10 years from now and how will the industry have changed?

DODGE: Perhaps semi retired, but still writing, teaching and consulting.