

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.



Photo credit: Joel Benjamin

Hana Quon

Pastry Chef, Cafe Madeleine, Boston, MA
By Foodservice East

Hana Quon, pastry chef at Café Madeleine in Boston's South End, was a Zagat "30 Under 30" recipient this past year for her talent and dedication to her craft. Her desire to pursue her passion led her to a career in pastry where her skills and talent were honed, sharpened and reward by great mentors.

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FSE: What's your background and what led you into pastry?

QUON: I've loved cooking from an early age, starting with picking up various Korean recipes from my mom while she cooked. When I was in college, I started playing around with baking a little bit more, making various cake, tart, and cookie recipes that I found in cookbooks and on the internet. Both of my parents have graduate degrees so coming out of undergrad with degrees in both English and Linguistics, I considered going down the academic route. However, after working for in an office for a few years, I realized that life is too short not to pursue my passion. So I took the leap and went to the pastry school at L'Academie de Cuisine.

FSE: How did you wind up leaving the National Endowment for the Humanities Arts and studying in France to be certified in pastry and then work with Chef Frederic Robert?

QUON: My journey was driven by a desire to pursue something I knew I truly loved. I decided to leave the National Endowment for the Humanities after receiving my pastry certification and realizing that I had to give baking a real chance. I took another leap of faith and moved from D.C. to Wellfleet, MA. to work at PB Boulangerie & Bistro and it was there that I met Fred. Fred places a huge emphasis on professional development and after working together for a year, he helped me further build my expertise by getting further pastry certification in France at École Bellouet in Paris and working in Lyon. Although the language barrier was tough, I learned a ton and wouldn't trade those experiences for anything in the world.

FSE: You were recently named by Zagat in Boston to its 30 Under 30 honorees. Were you surprised?

QUON: I was surprised and thrilled! This was something I definitely wasn't expecting so when I found out, I was ecstatic. The recognition helped validate all the blood, sweat and tears that I had put in to opening Café Madeleine.

FSE: Of all the pastries you make for Café Madeleine, which one is your favorite?

QUON: My favorite is the croissant. I love how careful and exacting you have to be to create the numerous flaky layers of butter and dough.

FSE: Which one is the most difficult to make?

QUON: The most difficult thing to make is actually our brownie. You wouldn't think it but Fred's recipe requires a lot of extra steps and technique to get the texture to be fluffy yet ooey gooey delicious.

FSE: What pastries are Boston customers' favorites?

QUON: Our customers rave about the almond croissant. It's usually the thing that sells out first so you better get in early to get it! The ham and cheese croissant is also a very popular seller.

FSE: What can you tell us about your several star mentors and what you learned from them?

QUON: My mentors all have taught me several recurring themes about what it takes to be successful in this business. The first thing is a genuine respect for food and the artisanal craft and history that goes into making it. We are building on a tradition so doing things in a way that honors that tradition is important. Secondly, my mentors have all emphasized the need to put in a lot of hard work. This isn't an easy job - we work when other people are celebrating holidays or on vacation - but by putting in the requisite time, you can get the ultimate satisfaction from practicing your craft. Finally, my mentors have also given me a good appreciation of giving back and passing these techniques down. I was fortunate enough to be able to learn from some of the best pastry chefs in the world and one of the best parts of my job is being able to teach others what I learned.

FSE: Where do you see yourself 10 years from now and what will you be doing?

QUON: I think one of the best things about the food industry is that you never know where it will take you and it offers the flexibility to cook in a lot of different settings. So I'm not sure, but I do know it will definitely involve baking and creativity.

FSE: What's your favorite activity when you're not working?

QUON: I'm an avid reader so I spend a lot of time outside work reading for fun. I recently plowed through the entire Spenser detective series by Robert House Parker, which is a great read and really fun because it takes place in Boston.

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FSE: When you go out for coffee and pastries, where do you go?

QUON: I'm not a big coffee drinker but I'm always exploring what's out there in the pastry world. Some of my favorite shops are Levain in New York for their famous cookies and b.patisserie in San Francisco for kouign amann.

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

QUON: I enjoy cooking at home and make a variety of different dishes both Korean and European. I'm never without kim chi and gochujang (Korean red pepper paste) which is the base to a lot of Korean dishes. I also love pasta and there's always a variety of cheeses in my fridge as well as tomatoes which I can't live without.

FSE: If you could be a pastry chef anywhere in the world, where would you want to be?

QUON: I would choose Hong Kong because to me, it's the ultimate food city. You can get amazing Italian food at Toscano and then turn around and have the best Cantonese food at Lung King Heen. I think working in such a diverse environment would be really exciting and an opportunity to learn even more.