

FOODSERVICE EAST PRESENTS

SECRETS OF **SUCCESS**

October 2016

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



Adam Eskin

CEO, Dig Inn Seasonal Market
By Foodservice East

Adam Eskin founded Dig Inn Seasonal Market and is CEO of the growing restaurant group which opened its first restaurant outside Manhattan in Boston's Copley Square this summer.

FOODSERVICE EAST

SECRETS OF SUCCESS

FSE: What led you into the restaurant business after leaving the world of finance?

ESKIN: When working at Wexford Capital, I was part of the finance team that invested in a little restaurant chain called ‘The Pump’. I liked the original concept around eating healthy, balanced meals, but saw an opportunity to embrace more mindfully sourced ingredients. The farm-to-table movement was already happening at the fine-dining level in New York but I saw that by rolling out a similar model on a larger scale, the concept could have a lasting impact on America’s food systems. Coming from a background in finance, I’ve always been inspired by opportunities to create an innovative way to solve everyday problems. In this case, Dig Inn was created to democratize the farm-to-table movement, and create an accessible model.

FSE: Many chefs claim to offer fresh, seasonal fare, and focus on healthfulness, but Dig Inn seems to do this in a more direct way. How did you develop the business model?

ESKIN: Dig Inn grew from the idea that good food should be available to everyone. We aim to showcase incredible, seasonal produce, at affordable prices, while developing a business model that leaves the world a little better than we found it. We truly believe our close relationships with farmers helps this model thrive—I can’t imagine too many other businesses knowing the first names of every single farmer on their menu. We are wholly invested in these partnerships, always looking for ways that can best serve the interests of producer and consumer—whether that’s dropping in for lunch and a chat, or investing time alongside our farmers to better their practices. By sourcing food directly from farms, we remove various cost layers in the supply chain. Not only does this ensure more money ends up in local communities, it also helps us drive down prices in store. We want to offer Americans a better way to eat, and a huge part of actualizing this vision centralizes on creating a common table where all are welcome.

FSE: How do you choose the farms and find enough to keep you supplied?

ESKIN: Sourcing is a critical part of our business, encompassing a knowledge of the seasonality of crops and how farmers operate. We’ve been working hard to strengthen our relationships with current farmers, build new ones, and develop a value system to guide our sourcing. These values centralize on minimizing waste at the farm and restaurant level—

by purchasing rare and heirloom varieties, using seconds, and ensuring any leftover food is donated; committing to both wild and free-range ABF proteins; supporting a diverse community of farmers who are minimizing chemical input, adopting IPM techniques, and treating workers fairly.

We’re learning a lot about farming, and due to the seasonal nature of our food, other regional and national partners sometimes need to fill the void. But we only source nationally when the northeast climate proves challenging. Most important to us is that we own the relationships with our producers directly—we really want to understand how our food is grown and be a part of the conversation to ensure that both our standards and the needs of our farmers are being met. We’re still trying to push the boundaries even further on sourcing—we recently worked with one of our farmers to plant an heirloom crop of squash for the fall season, which we bought in its entirety before it was even planted.

FSE: What was the most difficult part of opening in Boston and how long did it take to make that happen?

ESKIN: Boston was most certainly a labor of love—at least two plus years in the making. Hiring restaurant staff is definitely no easy feat. When you’re beset with the woes of construction and shifting deadlines, it’s not realistic to ask hourly employees to wait another month for you, unpaid. So that was definitely tough. But we really wanted to focus on the kitchen design and functionality of the restaurant, to make sure we could attract the right kind of cooks—that would then be able to cook really well in a way that helps both their futures, and our business grow. I would say we largely accomplished those goals. We opened the doors, and within the first hours and days lost the use of two of our three ovens...So that was a kind of intense Fawcett Towers moment for our staff!

Supply was also a big one we wanted to tackle and get right. Before Boston, sourcing was only local to a single city. But we are committed to becoming a local national company as we scale—meaning each restaurant we open is impacting and supporting the local community. The reality is, a lot of people would consider New York farms local to Boston, but we don’t. So we spent a lot of time traveling and getting to know local Massachusetts farmers, and figuring out what supply and distribution might look like when we expand across the country.

FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

FSE: What's the average check?

ESKIN: About \$12.90 in Boston. Although this is still early data.

FSE: Is staffing an issue in NYC and also in Boston and how do you go about finding qualified help?

ESKIN: We've partnered with community organizations, culinary schools, and have implemented information sessions within our hiring process to attract individuals who are hungry to learn. As we're building out our culinary development program, and organizing stagiers with leading restaurants in the industry, we're looking to enhance our community through food, and bring future chefs on board who are looking to jumpstart their careers and evolve with us.

FSE: What do you see as the biggest issue for restaurants today, especially in moderately priced ones serving three meals a day?

ESKIN: Attracting and retaining talent... but we believe we have a winning formula. We are very focused on making sure we are giving back to our staff and want to make sure that young cooks that come to us with a desire to learn, are given the right tools and opportunities. And that the Chefs we are attracting to run our restaurants, are supported and inspired in a way that will enable them to become great business leaders: Both within our Dig Inn community and family, and even out in their own communities, when they leave.

FSE: What's the response been to Dig Inn in Boston? Can you say where next location will be and roughly how many you plan in the Boston area?

ESKIN: The Boston community has welcomed us with open arms. We're thrilled to now call Boston home and excited to be a part of the fabric and the culinary community here. We've signed two more leases in Boston—Downtown Crossing and the Prudential Center—which will likely open this winter, though we haven't confirmed details beyond that...stay tuned!

FSE: After Boston, what's the next market you're eyeing?

ESKIN: We're committed to expanding in the Northeast before making the big move across the country, but we're now actively considering locations

nationally. We're looking to grow at least 50% over the next year—opening 5-6 new locations by early 2017. Our recent Boston opening shed light on how our business model is transferable from place to place. We're excited for the many lessons to come!

FSE: Who do you view as competition?

ESKIN: There are a lot of great concepts out there in the growing fast-casual restaurant space—too many to name who are doing exciting things in the industry. There is a groundswell around eating better food, and we support anyone who's a driving force in that space. Rather than focus on competition, we prefer to channel our energy into building our brand and delivering the best food experience possible to the Dig Inn community.

FSE: What is your greatest pleasure in what you do and what's the secret of your success?

ESKIN: Every day I feel truly blessed when I look around our headquarters, or restaurants—I have the pleasure of working with some incredibly passionate, brilliant people everyday. And working with everyone on a product I love (that can always be better!), means I'm involved in so many projects and facets of the business. I'm constantly using both sides of my brain—business and creative—which makes work super interesting and fun everyday, and most importantly, makes me feel like I'm still learning from everyone around me.

The work we're doing in with our farmers, partners, and in communities—like rescuing waste, working with homeless shelters, helping small farms scale, and young culinarians grow—is perhaps the most rewarding part of what we're doing here. By making great food accessible to those that couldn't otherwise eat it, we're actually doing good in the world. And that makes me really proud.