

Secrets of Success

an online exclusive from Foodservice East

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



At age 62, the Culinary Institute of America has become a venerable institution, described by Chef Paul Bocuse as the "best culinary school in the world." It's a far cry from its post-World War II origins when it began with 50 students and three instructors. Founders Frances Roth and Katherine Angell had a vision. Realizing that returning veterans would require skills, they set out with a focus on the core fundamentals a chef would need.

Today the school's "progressive learning year" courses designed to provide "building blocks" of knowledge about cuisines and basic skills have led to 37,000 graduates and a worldwide reputation for excellence.

The Food Network's Next Iron Chef TV program recognized the school this year, taping three episodes at the Hyde Park, NY campus. FSE spoke with Senior Communications Manager Stephan G. Hengst, himself a CIA alumnus, about the accolade.

FSE: When and how did the taping come about?

HENGST: The CIA worked closely with the Food Network on a number of different projects over the last two years - ranging from Dinner: Impossible to the first-ever Food Network Awards show last April. As a result, they approached us with the idea of serving as the location shoot for The Next Iron Chef. Typically, this is not something we could have done, as the size and scope of the shoot would have gotten in the way of our classes. But we were closed for our summer break during the month of July - the same time they wanted to shoot the show - so it worked out perfectly.

FSE: What did it take to transform the space? What kinds of physical changes had to be made and who made them? After the taping, how did kitchens, classrooms and offices have to be re-transformed to what they were before?

HENGST: The shoot for the Next Iron Chef used more than a dozen CIA teaching kitchens, as well as numerous offices, conferences, and even one of our public restaurants, The Escoffier Room, which was turned into the production offices for the crew. The Food Network brought in millions of dollars of rented audio, video, and lighting equipment, and a staff of more than 80 people to make the show happen. Of course, equipment had to be moved and rearranged, and they had to dress the kitchens and spaces of the CIA to look like the Chairman's "palace" - it took a tremendous amount of work!

FSE: How long did it take to shoot each of the three episodes?

HENGST: It took 12 days to shoot the first three episodes of the six episode show. Where did the team from Food Network and the chefs stay during the taping and what were they doing during the time they were there? The crew and the chefs stayed locally at a variety of hotels around Poughkeepsie. As I understand it, Alton Brown was often seen eating at local restaurants after the conclusion of each day's shooting. When it came to down time, they did not have much of it. Most days started at 7am and ended at 11pm.

FSE: What is the usual use of the room with stained glass windows from the former Jesuit seminary that once occupied the building?

HENGST: Our Cathedral, also known as Farquahrson Hall, is usually used as the student dining room or the hall in which we hold most of our graduations.

FSE: Did Food Network bring in all the kitchen equipment or did they use yours?

HENGST: All of the plates, pots, knives, props, etc., were brought in by Food Network. In all, more than five pallets of equipment were shipped here for the show.

FSE: What was the biggest challenge in this project?

HENGST: The sheer size of the crew, and of course, the secrecy of having to keep the winner of the show (whom we knew since Sept.) concealed until the airing of the finale on Nov. 11th.

FSE: What were the greatest benefits to CIA?

HENGST: For the CIA, there were two benefits to being involved with the taping of The Next Iron Chef. The first was the visibility it brought the school. The second was the fact that in addition to the winner being a CIA graduate, we also had two other contestants, finalist John Besh, as well as Jill Davie that had graduated from the CIA. It was just spectacular to watch our graduates do so well on the program as it was a testament to the quality of the education that they received while here at the CIA. Now, two of the four Iron Chefs on Iron Chef America are CIA Alumni; Cat Cora '96, and Michael Symon '90.

FSE: How would you characterize the school's "secret of success"?

HENGST: I think it's the strength of the clear vision with which CIA was founded 62 years ago, with its emphasis on fundamentals. Today, many culinary schools are for-profit institutions. CIA is an independent, not-for-profit school focused on its faculty and resources. We seek to improve the educational process each year.

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Susan G. Holaday, Editor & Publisher
Richard E. Dolby, Publisher Emeritus

197 Eighth St., No. 728
Charlestown, MA 02129-4234
617-242-2217 / 800-852-5212

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