

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.



Canadian-born David Gibbons, known for a distinguished career in hotels, actually began on the restaurant side of the industry, working in nightclubs and later, chains such as Elephant & Castle. He “took a right turn into the hotel business,” transitioning into food and beverage where he found a whole new set of opportunities.

Hotels presented “a bigger stage,” recalls Gibbons who became g.m. of the Drake Swissotel in New York in the mid-1980s and subsequently assumed that post in Boston where he also later managed the Lenox Hotel.

Boston’s 273-room Ritz-Carlton, a landmark in the Back Bay since 1927, was sold to Indian Hotels Co. Ltd., Mumbai, India in 2007 for \$170 million and Gibbons was named general manager of the classic property that made its mark with rigidly formal standards – coats and ties in the dining room, for example – throughout its history.

FSE: What was the lodging industry like when you first began?

GIBBONS: At first I was shocked at food and beverage accounting. Then, hotels had money-losing signature restaurants. The mission was to be famous, not make a profit. Now people want a more responsible business model. When I first went into hotel f&b, I was questioned because I “didn’t know room service,” but I knew that it lost money and I couldn’t do any worse.

FSE: What are some of the major changes you’ve seen over the years?

GIBBONS: Then, we were mimicking Europe (in hotel restaurants) and just beginning to establish our own American identity and cuisine in the kitchen. At that time, there were chefs who’d change their name just to sound more European. Jack would suddenly become Jacques. But we eventually married with the rest of the world in food, service and design and leveled the playing field. It’s a flatter world today. Today, cooking professionally is viewed differently. Young people want to become chefs.

Now, we are engaged in “talent wars.” You fight to get people and have to make a big investment in training. There are a number of new hotels coming down the pipeline in both Boston and New York. Hotels are often a gateway for people coming to America. It’s harder finding talent but if you hire talent, those people often attract more talent to an operation. Talent is infectious in the workplace. Human resources today is much more important than it used to be and you must engage sophisticated trainers.

FSE: What have been some of the major challenges?

GIBBONS: The economy now is so up and down. There are strong fundamentals but lack of confidence can hurt. The financial industry is such a big part of our industry's business in both Boston and New York. The loss of those clients such as Bear Stearns can affect the hotels' food and beverage business.

FSE: How is the Boston Taj positioning itself for the coming round of competition between high-end luxury properties?

GIBBONS: The transition (from the old Ritz-Carlton) was an exciting adventure. It was like jumping on board one of the most ingrained cultures of any hotel. We softened the approach of the staff to a more empathetic approach to the guest and added soft touches, softer staff uniforms, more relaxed dress codes and different 'talk lines.' There was an intense amount of training and a huge investment. We have a great, creative team food-wise. I give them license. With the Taj, there is no 'chain' approach. We currently have a French chef and food and beverage director, but there are Indian touches and there's one Indian dish on the menu and in banquet service, we have an Indian station integrated into our offerings. Indian culture is not 'imposed' (on what we do).

The big thing is passionate enthusiasm. We gave to train and steer creativity and that gives you a recipe for success.

FSE: What is the 'secret' of your success?

GIBBONS: I've been lucky in surrounding myself with talented people and they make you successful. My secret is the sum total of the people with whom I work.

FSE: Do you cook at home?

GIBBONS: I enjoy cooking at home and I try to learn from the chefs I've worked with over the years.

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