

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.



Emma Roberts, founder of Capers Catering, grew up in a home in Providence, RI that both respected food and instilled that in its children. Her father collected old cookbooks and took her along on expeditions to “ferret out old tomes,” great ingredients and interesting new cooking equipment. After an early career in advertising, she took a big step, enrolling in the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts where she graduated with honors in 1992. With a sense of purpose and a well-honed focus, she’s built a successful catering operation and most recently, taken on a new challenge, The Exchange at The Wenham Teahouse on Boston’s North Shore, said to be the country’s oldest continually operating teahouse.

FSE: What led you into culinary arts and away from your initial start in advertising?

ROBERTS: I grew up in Providence, RI, a Mecca for food lovers. My very intellectual father was my greatest influence. We voyaged to Federal Hill to pick out the perfect chicken to be slaughtered; to Warren, RI for fish; to the Asian grocer because the produce was better and the owner would explain how to tell which melons, for example, were at their peak; to the cheese shop for sample shavings of artisanal cheeses and one small wedge of buttery heaven; to one bakery for croissants and another for tea cookies; to Miller’s Delicatessen for pickled herring; and to a nut wholesaler for Spanish peanuts. The list goes on and on. Food was always respected.

I went to Miss Porter’s School and ate my way through New York City! After graduating from Denison University, I moved to Boston and drifted into advertising because I was an English major and it seemed like a fun environment.

It was the first experience I had had in a volatile market.

Watching co-workers being laid off each Friday was certainly an eye-opener, and it was then that I made two promises to myself: one, that I would do something I loved and two, that I would create a company that I controlled.

FSE: Why catering?

ROBERTS: I had continued our family tradition of shopping for food far and wide and created meals in my small apartment for friends. I even had swiped a few of my father's cookbooks and was busy learning all that I could. It was time to quit advertising and enter culinary school. After graduating, I worked for a number of caterers in the Boston area.

What I loved most about catering and still do today is that every menu and client was completely different. Each day was unique and the pace was exciting.

I started Capers Catering in the fall of 1993 when I was 27, working out of my apartment in the Back Bay and am currently in a 5,500 square foot commissary in Stoneham, MA.

FSE: Today, you are engaged in what looks like a major juggling act, between Capers Catering, your Flip Flops Clambakes & Barbecue division, and The Exchange. What is the 'secret' of your success?

ROBERTS: Juggling all of this can be a challenge, especially with each division continuing to grow rapidly. I am very fortunate to have a skilled staff that has been with me for many years, and we work as a team in all of our endeavors. Waking up very early and working long days is a must, but it is what I love to do.

Capers Catering is a custom catering service that provides complete event services and gourmet food, creatively presented and expertly served. We try to ask the right questions, listen to our customers, tailor each event to the client's desires, and exceed their expectations.

FSE: What's been the biggest thrill?

ROBERTS: Winning Best of Boston from Boston Magazine in 1997 was definitely a thrilling victory, and one that I look back on fondly.

FSE: This winter you announced plans to refurbish and run the Wenham Tea House. What are you doing there?

ROBERTS: The Exchange at The Wenham Tea House is now serving lunch, tea and pies, and to-go and will be adding dinner and Sunday brunch.

When I took over in March, we replaced a small dining area with a bakery and to-go room. We are now serving local New England fare with breakfast and lunches to go, and a full service lunch menu.

We wanted to breathe new life into an historic site, so we renovated the interior and expanded both the retail and restaurant offerings. The to-go menu includes things like an individual sherried shrimp casserole, a lobster pie, and a chicken, corn and black bean casserole, with prices from \$12.95 to \$16.95. Our take-out is roughly 15 percent of sales.

FSE: How has the menu changed?

ROBERTS: Menu entrees have changed from the pies, quiches and soups of the past to meat loaf and glazed salmon fillet. We are also doing full service catering and corporate delivery catering from the teahouse.

Our sales have been terrific so far, and we will continue to grow as the turn-around of this business takes hold. We are moving to dinners four nights a week in the fall and then adding Sunday brunches.

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