

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.



Evan Percoco brings a diverse background to his new role as executive chef and partner of BOKX 109, a modern American steakhouse at the new Hotel Indigo in Newton, MA. From tabletop accessories to menu items such as the \$9 Berkshire pork belly cured and Boston Baked Beans appetizer to the \$44 Brandt Farms Tenderloin Steak, every detail reflects contemporary luxury.

Percoco was the youngest executive sous chef in the history of Washington's distinguished Mayflower Hotel, the personal chef of a Saudi prince and executive chef of Hard Rock Hotels in Orlando. His innovative approach to food has brought a fresh perspective to the steakhouse category.

Growing up on Long Island with parents who were interested in food, he enjoyed helping his father each Christmas Eve with the preparation of the traditional "Feast of the Seven Fishes" dinner. Like many American chefs, he began his career during in the dish room of a local restaurant and quickly began moving up the ladder after graduation from the Culinary Institute of America.

FSE: What is it about the dish room that starts so many culinary careers?

PERCOCO: My father came to wish me a Happy Birthday when I turned 16 – at that time he also showed me some tough love that day and gave me two weeks to go out and find a job. I got my start at The Sals Wander In. I started in the "dish pit", working 2-3 nights and then bussed tables 2-3 nights of the week. The owner took a liking to me, which led to my first food prep job, peeling garlic. I could peel garlic faster than all the rest! From there, I was hooked. I was also influenced greatly by my Mom. She truly pushed me to become a chef and follow my dreams.

FSE: At the Mayflower, what did you do in the banquet operations that led to such a fast track in your career?

PERCOCO: I trained under a phenomenal chef who taught and pushed me to exceed what I thought were my limits. By the time I was 23 I was promoted (I didn't have a choice) from Chef de Cuisine of the fine dining restaurant to Executive Sous Chef of the hotel managing 40 cooks and a \$15 Million banquet operation! What made me different was being able to go out and talk with guests and get them excited about the food we were creating for them. The Mayflower has always catered to the most celebrated (and discriminating) clientele of our nation's capital and having the confidence of senior management, Lou Carrier especially, really allowed my creative horizons to grow. That's where the friendship and partnership began with Lou.

FSE: What was it like to serve as personal resident chef for a Saudi prince? Did you cook every meal? And what led you from that back into the fray of the commercial kitchen?

PERCOCO: I prepared the Prince's meals six days per week. I also cooked for all the staff of the consul's estate as well as visiting delegations invited to the residence. The Prince was a very personable man and we had a great relationship – he wanted me to work the rest of my life for him. I was looking for more growth in my career and knew I needed to get back to practicing my craft on a larger scale. When Lou gave me a call to work with him at Loews Hotels the timing was right.

FSE: What do you like to eat when you're not cooking?

PERCOCO: I like Vietnamese food. I am a huge fan of Pho. I also like a really good Neapolitan-style pizza – in fact I cook that at home a lot – I'm just missing the authentic wood fire grill. Lately I have been enjoying baked Kettle Crisp chips as a late night snack when I get home... pretty basic stuff.

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

PERCOCO: You know, I really love what I do. I love interacting with people, I am a "people-person." I think it's important for chef of any caliber to not just be in the back of the house. You must have confidence in the abilities of your staff so when you do go out to a table to chat, you absolutely know that the people enjoyed their food.

FSE: What do you enjoy most about your job?

PERCOCO: I enjoy creating memories for people and sparking old memories through cuisine. I really encourage people to enjoy the moment when they come to experience BOKX 109– it is something they'll never forget and look forward to coming back to.

FSE: What would you be doing if you weren't a chef?

PERCOCO: I'd be flying airplanes – if there was one superhero power that I would love to have, it would be flying. My wife and I talk about getting flying lessons all the time. In fact, my brother-in-law flies 747s and his dream would be to become a chef. It works out, we share our work experiences and stories with one another quite often.

FSE: What advice would you give to up and coming culinary students?

PERCOCO: I would say be patient with your career growth. Take the "beating." Understand that people are doing it because they truly care about you and want to see you succeed. Also, always have a sharp knife. A dull knife equals dulls skills, a sharp knife equals sharp skills. The knife tells you everything about a chef. Lastly, loyalty, dedication, and commitment are three words to live by when it comes to this field. It sounds almost like a marriage.

FSE: What was the inspiration for BOKX 109? What led you to make the kinds of decisions – the highest quality food products, cutting edge tabletop design, etc.

PERCOCO: Lou Carrier, the president of BOKX 109 American Prime was committed to creating a destination restaurant unlike anything in the Boston market. His partners, Normandy/BlueHawk were very like-minded which is why they secured Lou. The restaurant has lots of sizzle and lots of flair but is founded on a commitment to superior design, service, food and wine. It's very fair to say that Lou left nothing to chance to deliver a unique experience. (cont next page)

From interior design right down to the cocktail stir sticks! Lou and I have collaborated on many projects, going back to the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC. When he joined Loews Hotels and later was tapped to open and run Hard Rock Hotels, he called me to join him. When he described his vision for this restaurant, it was all about high quality, high-end experience and “All American”... Lou refers to this as “American Prime”! BOKX 109 was my contribution. Because this is our first steakhouse, we wanted to do something clever with the name. “BOKX” is a reference to the food industry term for meat packaging, “boxed beef” and “109” comes from the International Meat Packers Order Guide for the most “luxurious” cut of meat, the prime rib.

FSE: BOKX 109 is not your usual suburban hotel restaurant. What’s been the response from customers and how are sales?

PERCOCO: Well, it isn’t a hotel restaurant! Even though it sits inside a great boutique hotel, it was built with the idea that even if the hotel wasn’t there, the restaurant would have been built anyway. Lou is always quick to point out that there aren’t very many free-standing restaurants that can claim to have fire pits, cabanas, a pool, and gorgeous outdoor lounge areas like we have. We know that these elements have certainly contributed to the incredible financial results we’ve enjoyed since opening because people tell us everyday! It is a place that even the most experienced of Boston’s sophisticated diners are blown away by. It’s swanky!

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