

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.



Jeff Merry, corporate executive chef for Taunton, MA-based AGAR, guides the 69-year-old distributor's customers through the process of creating center-of-the-plate solutions for their individual establishments and helping them increase profitability and reduce operating costs.

He's a 25-year industry veteran, having served as executive chef at a number of Boston area hotels and later as an instructor of culinary arts at Newbury College in Brookline, MA.

FSE: What originally led you into the foodservice industry?

MERRY: While attending Penn State, I was washing dishes to make a few bucks as many college students do. I was introduced to the chef by a good friend and began to develop an interest in the culinary arts. You could say I hooked on to the business very quickly. From there I was accepted to the American Culinary Federation and their apprenticeship program and spent two years in an Italian restaurant learning the business. I fell in love with it because it was hands-on and it became infectious.

FSE: You began in Pennsylvania in a small French restaurant – how did that influence your career?

MERRY: Because it was a small place, there was not a big staff, which meant everyone had to learn how to deal with just about every situation. The other big influence was the chef I got to work with. He was European trained, had a real traditional style and I had the tremendous opportunity to gain a lot of knowledge and skills from him.

FSE: What would you say is the 'secret' of your success?

MERRY: My secret is that I love what I do and I continue to be inspired to help other operators with whatever issues they need assistance with in their operations. Every day is different here with different challenges presented to me and as we work in a kitchen which is a living, breathing environment, each day gives me another challenge.

FSE: What's the biggest challenge of being a chef in a test kitchen?

MERRY: There are so many good ideas that AGAR can present to a client in the Test Kitchen. It's almost endless. We have to decide very quickly what the client is going through; what their issues are, such as margin issues or a lack of foot traffic, and then determine how we can help them meet their goals and get their operation even more profitable.

FSE: You focus on the independent restaurant customer and help them market the products they buy from AGAR. How you do that?

MERRY: The small independent does not have the benefit of having access to a test kitchen like the big chains do. That was AGAR's thinking when we launched this project. When we have a client in the test kitchen, we look at their menu, their location, ask a lot of questions about their operation and then determine what products might help them. They sample products, I apply my knowledge of the restaurant business and then we come up solutions.

FSE: In dealing one-on-one with chefs and owners, what's most rewarding?

MERRY: I get many emails from other chefs and owners after they have left the test kitchen, thanking us for all our efforts and advice. That makes me and others here at AGAR feel great. We really try to advocate for that small independent so when we can help them build their business. Then we've done our job.

FSE: What do you see ahead next year for operators in terms of the culinary/menu issues they'll be raising with you as their supplier?

MERRY: I believe more and more chefs and operators will be more aware of allergens, gluten-free products and other ingredients that can trigger adverse reactions in customers. They will focus more on these issues as well as keeping a closer eye on the nutritional value of meals, and paying close attention to these issues as they pertain to children's menus.

FSE: What do you cook at home – what's in your refrigerator?

MERRY: Everything! I do favor fresh fruits and vegetables and locally cut meats.

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