

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.



Kyle Ketchum broke into the restaurant business much as many chefs have, by washing dishes. It's been a long journey from the San Antonio, TX neighborhood where he got his start to the custom-designed kitchen at the elegant The Chanler at the start of the Cliff Walk in Newport, RI.

Today, as he cooks at a custom-made \$100,000 Bonnet stove in the open kitchen at the Spiced Pear, he recalls that he "made a million mistakes" to get to today's level. He earned an associate degree in culinary arts and another in restaurant management from the Scottsdale Culinary Institute at Le Cordon Bleu.

Sixteen years later, he moved from posts at the best Midwest upscale restaurants and resorts. The last was at The Lark in West Bloomfield, MI, Detroit's only Mobil Four-Star operation where he was voted the Best Chef in Michigan. He came East to take over the kitchen at a property voted one of the 15 best new luxury hotels in the world by Food & Wine magazine in 2003.

The menu reflects a no-holds-barred approach to crafting menus using the highest quality fresh ingredients such as lobster, Atlantic salmon and Kobe beef and offering entrees priced from \$36 to \$55.

FSE: How did you decide to become a chef?

KETCHUM: My first job out of high school was a summer dishwashing job. After the summer season was over and it was time for me to go to college, one of the head servers who was married to the corporate chef asked her husband to consider me for their chef training. He did and the rest is history.

FSE: What were the major influences on your culinary style?

KETCHUM: Regional seasonality. I am fascinated with always learning as much as I can about a particular region I'm working in. With that knowledge, I then try to create a menu around familiar ingredients for our clientele but with a more refined technique and presentation. I write my menus wanting them to be described to the guest in such a way that they don't feel they would need a culinary degree to know what they are eating. I do like to have some fun at the same time.

FSE: It sounds like you put a lot of yourself into every dish. How would you characterize your culinary perspective?

KETCHUM: Have fun, but use restraint. Don't mask the flavor profile of your ingredients but rather, allow the ingredients to speak for themselves. Use fresh quality ingredients whenever possible and taste what ever you make. To me cooking is a matter of one's personal taste.

FSE: How old is The Spiced Pear and how did you happen to become the chef there? It's a long way from Texas and the Midwest!

KETCHUM: The Spiced Pear is five years old. I came to the Spiced Pear by way of Michigan. While I was working there, I went to Charleston, SC to attend their Food and Wine Festival. A friend of the owners of the restaurant I worked at recognized me from Michigan. He told me he had a friend who owned an amazing hotel and was looking for a new chef for its restaurant. Several weeks later the man tracked me down and called to follow up on my interest once again. During our conversation he told me to look at the hotel and restaurant website for more info. After reviewing the hotel and restaurant website I was hooked and was willing to do whatever it took to get the job. Obviously everything worked out for me and I have now been here for just over two years.

FSE: Were you involved in the design and equipment purchases for the Spiced Pear's kitchen, which sounds like every chef's dream?

KETCHUM: No, unfortunately I was the third chef brought on to the hotel, but was fortunate to inherit an amazingly stocked kitchen. I have, of course, changed a few things here and there and added a few things that represent me, but as a whole, upon my arrival there was really nothing I could ever want for.

FSE: If you weren't a chef, what would you be doing?

KETCHUM: I am fascinated with marine biology and photography, so something in either field, or owning a doggy day care as I have two amazing dogs that are my best friends.

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

KETCHUM: Never stop learning, be fair, honest, and always treat people as you would like to be treated. Know that in order to be successful, you have to make a few mistakes along the way but in doing so always learn from them.

FSE: What do you see as the biggest challenge this year, both for yourself and for the industry as a whole?

KETCHUM: Continuing to maintain excellent service and quality of food as our guests are getting more and more discerning each day and expect perfection as well as perceived value. You always have to continue to grow your business and be true to your business identity. Don't try to be something you are not as it will only confuse your guest.

FSE: If you could change one thing about what you're currently doing, what would it be?

KETCHUM: Nothing, as I feel truly blessed to be where I am and doing what I do for a living.

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