

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.



Rachel Klein, executive chef, and OM Restaurant in Cambridge, MA, were honored last year in Esquire Magazine's 'Top 25 Best New American Restaurants' issue. A graduate of the New York Restaurant School, Chef Klein worked with Peter Hoffman of Savoy and Anita Lo of Anissa in New York before becoming executive chef of John Elkhay's X.O. Café and later, at Lot 401 in Providence, RI. This year, Klein adds to her achievements with the birth of her first child, Ethan. She recently introduced monthly vegetarian and vegan dinners at OM.

FSE: How you decide to become a chef? How did your upbringing contribute to that decision?

KLEIN: I come from an Eastern European family. My father came to the USA right after World War II. I grew up in a household with strong tradition of coming together at the dinner table and the rule of no sitting in front of the TV and eating. The dinner table was a place to talk and solidify our family at the end of the day.

I grew up eating a lot of Eastern European cuisine. My mother hated junk food, preservatives or overly processed products. So, I was fortunate enough to visit the NYC farmers' markets, places like the Brooklyn Botanical Garden to smell herbs and see the different plants and to shop at local independent markets. Some of my earliest memories are the smell of the sawdust on the floor of the local butcher and playing with the cat that stood guard over the front door.

Growing up I watched a lot of PBS - Julia Child, Frugal Gourmet, etc. At a young age I also loved to work with my hands. I was very lucky to travel through Europe and the US and experience different cultures and their cuisines. My parents would find the best 'hidden jewel' of a restaurant instead of going to the most expensive fine dining restaurant. Fine dining was saved for special occasions, but my dad always seemed to know where the best Afghani buffets were, the best hole in the wall Spanish restaurant with live flamenco and of course, the best places on what was once the Lower East Side, like Sammy's Roumanian, Katz's Deli, Ratner's etc.

When I was young, I loved sneaking downstairs and creating elaborately set tables, written menus and cooking the most awful breakfast cuisine.

In high school I decided I wanted to go into hospitality so I did an externship in a three star New York restaurant, where I was the chef's personal assistant. Later, I went to school for art history and finally found my way into the kitchen and have never looked back. I realized one day that there such things as culinary schools and that I better get into one.

FSE: What have been the biggest challenges for you?

KLEIN: My biggest challenge was making the transition from cook to chef. All of a sudden I had to be a bit more grown up and at the end of the day, I was always responsible for the good or the bad; It can still be overwhelming at times to feel so responsible and liable for a guest's experience, a cook's education, or making sure the costs are in line at the end of the week.

As far as being a women chef, I think because there are so few of us, it actually helps us stand out a bit more. I think being a woman chef is way better than it's ever been, but I would still like to see more women in the kitchen.

FSE: What's been the biggest thrill in your career to date?

KLEIN: The first time I cooked at the James Beard House will always stick in my mind as a stamp of approval for a young chef. It's an electrifying feeling to actually be invited to produce your own dinner. My first dinner at the Beard house was a very humbling experience.

FSE: What would you say is the secret of your success? What advice would you give young women seeking to become chefs?

KLEIN: Seek out other successful women that you can learn from and aspire to be like. Also, work for the best chefs you possibly can at a young age. Never let your gender be an issue in your head and if it becomes one, move on and find a kitchen where the chef bases his/her critique you on your abilities and what you bring to the table, not your sex. I always worked harder to show that I could keep up or surpass the boys. It was a mental game I played with myself to push myself harder, but at the same time, I never worked for a chef who had issues with women on the line. Stay humble.

FSE: What do you like least about what you do and what would you change if you could? What does the future hold for you? How will your baby change things?

KLEIN: I hate when I cannot find the best way to manage an employee effectively to get the best out of them; what works for one may not work for another. As I get a little older, I miss spending the holidays with my family. I need to find the time to travel a bit more; I am overdue for a good working-vacation.

As far as the baby, I am such a workaholic and control freak that the running joke is that I will be back after a week of giving birth on a part-time schedule. Seriously though, I think the baby will force me to prioritize and schedule more efficiently. I think having the baby will make me a stronger and more well rounded person and probably more aware and sensitive.

As far as the future, I am in the process of developing an all-natural baby food line that is cost effective. I would like to get more involved with nutritional programs helping less fortunate urban areas .I would also like to become involved in helping develop school lunch programs that are healthy. Having a baby has made me less selfish and more aware of the bigger issues out there.

FSE: Where and what do you want to be doing five or 10 years from now?

KLEIN: I plan on owning my own restaurant where I can come into my own.

FSE: How did you come up with the new vegan and vegetarian meals at OM and what has been the response?

KLEIN: Harvard Square is full of vegetarian and vegans who enjoy upscale food and wine. As a smart business person, you must take into consideration what your markets are. We had such a demand for vegan and vegetarian food that I made a point of making it a well thought out and developed part of our restaurant. In New York, I was used to having an occasional vegetarian come in for dinner, probably because there were so many amazing vegetarian restaurant options available. In Harvard Square it was a big eye-opening wake up call. I was getting so many requests for vegetarian options a night that I had to work interesting options into the OM menu. At first it was a challenge, but now I look forward to thinking about what the next vegetarian entrée option is going to be for the next menu change. I will admit, cooking for vegans can be difficult, but since we started our vegan wine dinners I have done so much research on vegan recipes that it is becoming easier...next challenge is macrobiotic.

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