

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.



One can only wonder how Steve Rosen's life would've turned out had there not been a two-year wait for forestry school. The native Californian wound up heading east to Boston's Newbury College, the first step in an award-winning career as a chef that's seen him win two consecutive Mobil Four Diamond awards while at Rarities in Cambridge and more recently, four consecutive AAA Four Diamond honors as executive chef at Octagon, an acclaimed steakhouse in the Marriott Mystic Resort and Spa in Groton, CT owned by Waterford Group Restaurants.

Named one of Food & Wine Magazine's 10 "Best New Chefs in America" along with John Besh, Marc Vetri, Rocco DiSpirito, Suzanne Goin and others in 1999, he's proven he's worth his salt. The chef-owner of Salts in Cambridge with his wife, Lisa, Rosen was acclaimed for both his hospitality and the flavors on his plates. Most recently, he's teamed up with a local boutique winery, Stonington's Jonathan Edwards Winery, to create private label wines that enhance his steak and seafood offerings.

FSE: How did you decide to become a chef?

ROSEN: I love working with my hands and I love working with my mind. I like to think that it keeps me young at heart. My other choices for a life-long career were to be a writer, forest ranger or carpenter.

FSE: What was it like to be in the group of Best New Chefs (Food & Wine) that you were in 1999? The level of skill and talent in the group is extraordinary and you all have gone on to even greater levels.

ROSEN: That was a very exciting time in my life, most of us were smaller restaurant owners cooking food that was special and from the heart. Some of them have gone to be "mega stars". It's funny to see them now on T.V. or in a magazine and say "I know him or her". I still feel a kinship with all of them, though.

FSE: How do you describe your culinary style and perspective?

ROSEN: My thought process about food is abstract, but when the dust settles and the food is on the plate, it reflects itself as practical and thoughtful. I try to understand all food trends. I like learning who or what is responsible for these trends, and seeing if incorporating any of it into what we do here at Octagon makes any sense. Chefs and cooks these days need to know names like Fernan Adria, Michel Bras and Louis Outhier and Fernand Point. These are chefs who have changed the way we eat, dine and think about food. In a few words I describe my style as global, seasonally driven and flavor conscious.

FSE: What's been the greatest challenge in your career and how did you overcome it?

ROSEN: That's a two-fold question; when I was first starting out 28 years ago there were not enough hours in the day to learn all there was about food and cooking. My goal back then was to understand every type of cuisine and to be able to cook that style of food in an authentic manner. (It's no small feat—it's something I'm still working on). Now it's managing family and parenting time and still getting done everything that needs to get done at home and work.

FSE: What's the "secret" of your success?

ROSEN: I love what I do. (Most days)

FSE: What do you see ahead for yourself in the next 10 years?

ROSEN: Life's a wide open road. I have a lot of ideas. It will be something with food.

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

ROSEN: Stay at home dad maybe or a super hero. (Is there a difference?)

FSE: What's in your refrigerator at home?

ROSEN: Besides the usual, there is X.O. sauce, Vietnamese garlic chili paste, garlic-stuffed olives for that occasional martini, and a bottle of champagne that's been in there for three years or so.

FSE: What kind of food do you like when you go out to eat?

ROSEN: I love sushi, Indian and B.B.Q.

FSE: What do you see as the greatest issues impacting the industry this year?

ROSEN: Without a doubt the rising cost of everything, food and labor being the biggest. That, coupled with the slow down on spending in both the corporate and social sector. We are in for some testing times. It's not something we haven't seen before and it didn't sneak upon us, but that doesn't make it any easier. These coming months are going to test a lot of people's mettle. I feel we are prepared to deal with it in a proactive and positive way so that we are in a good position when the upturn happens.

FSE: Why did you decide to leave Boston and Salts?

ROSEN: For Lisa (my wife) and myself, Salts was a true labor of love. For seven years we owned and operated that restaurant using every ounce of our heart and soul. When Max, our first son, was born in late 2002, it became apparent that our expectations of ourselves and the restaurant were going to have change. It was a hard decision, but one that neither of us regret. We sold Salts to a great couple who have put their own stamp on the spot and it continues to thrive.

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