

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.



Thomas John, an acclaimed high-end restaurant executive chef known for his Indian-French fusion cuisine at Boston's Mantra in the downtown "Ladder District," took many by surprise when he joined Au Bon Pain in August of 2004. From his culinary beginnings in New Delhi where he launched a fast-paced career in major hotel restaurants across India and Europe, he shifted gears to explore new opportunities for creativity that also presented a more family-friendly lifestyle.

FSE: What's been the biggest challenge since coming aboard at Au Bon Pain?

JOHN: When I joined, ABP was already in the process of reinventing itself and freshening up the concept. I guess I accelerated the process.

FSE: You've made major additions to the menu, removed trans fats, improved the availability of nutrition/allergy information - what's next?

JOHN: Au Bon Pain today is different from what people knew of it in the 90's. We have caught up with a warm and sophisticated design, a menu that fits today's lifestyle with bolder flavors, fresher foods and healthier options.

It is essential for a brand to keep changing with the times and inject enthusiasm through menu innovation. Thus, it is ever evolving.

FSE: What was the impetus for the new Harvest Rice Bowls?

JOHN: These are flavorful proteins and sauces over Brown or Jasmine rice, topped with a salad. They are a great addition to our lunch menu and our guests seem to like them. How much more comforting can you get than fresh, tasty and flavorful food in a bowl?

We have three varieties – Mayan chicken, Cajun shrimp and teriyaki steak, all priced from \$6.49 to \$6.79.

FSE: What do you consider the “secret” of your success?

JOHN: It has been good so far. It is important to keep your ears close to the ground. Our guests tell us what they want or do not want.

Our nutritional advisory board shapes our nutritional parameters. My partner in crime, Corporate Chef Jens Retlev, lets me know if I am too adventurous.

FSE: How is the new suburban program going? Will there be more and if so, can you say where?

JOHN: We are happy with the design and the menu. It works. Next one will be in Connecticut this winter in Blue Back Square, a lifestyle center in West Hartford.

FSE: How do sales at the suburban stores compare with urban units?

JOHN: The economics of the suburban store works. Sales are comparable to the urban locations.

FSE: Will there be more non-sandwich items like the rice bowls?

JOHN: The bowls are going to evolve into lot of interesting entrees. There is another concept I am working on based on small plates. So stay tuned...

FSE: What new beverages will you be introducing for the colder weather?

JOHN: We have pumpkin latte for the holidays and will roll out peppermint latte this winter.

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