

Continually Learning and Treating Staff Fairly Are Keys to Success in the Kitchen: A Conversation with Alice Hippe

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By: Erin Flaherty



After working in hotels for the first two-thirds of her 22 years in the industry, Alice Hippe is glad she's made the switch to corporate services, spending the last five years working at the Pentagon and National Geographic before taking on her latest position as Executive Chef at the National Academy of Sciences last November.

"I will not go back to hotels," she said. "But, I will tell anybody coming into the industry to work at hotels because you learn so much."

As the first female to graduate out of the Texas Chefs Culinary Apprenticeship Program, Hippe faced many challenges in her early years in the industry. Among the lessons that Hippe learned during her time in hotels in Texas and the Gulf Coast was that she was going to work extra hard to prove herself in

the late-1980s kitchens that were dominated by European men.

"I had to work twice as hard as the men to prove myself," she said. "It was a tremendous learning experience. [They would] just play games and see if you could take it."

Fortunately, after a few years, Hippe took a position in New Orleans at a hotel where the general manager was happy to have a female chef. She was the first female Executive Chef at a New Orleans hotel. However, those first experiences taught her an important lesson in managing a staff.

"I vowed I would never treat anyone as I had been treated," she said.

When cooking for a captive audience, different ideas are the key in keeping the customer satisfied. For the dining room, there is a corporate cycle menu, but Hippe gets to put her own touch on the catering menu. Hippe thinks that having an audience of doctors and scientists presents an interesting challenge because they are more attuned to what's good for them. There has been a big push for creating a more "green" approach to dining, both from Sodexo and the customers. During her time at National Geographic, the building went 90% green and the National Academy of Sciences is heading in that direction.

"We try to be as green as possible by getting local stuff in and showing it to our customers," Hippe said. "I have the experience to know that being [100% green] is just not possible [in foodservice]."

Going green is not the only challenge that Hippe faces from her diners. Since she feeds the same people every day, they aren't afraid to make demands or tell her what they want, even at the last minute.

"I can't say no, but I can say 'This is what I can provide for you,'" she said. "We're here to service them. We listen to them and try to adapt to what they're looking for."

Though the customers can occasionally be demanding, Hippe hopes to create a closer relationship with them, as she did at National Geographic.

"I'd like to get more engaged with the customers through cooking classes," she said.

Aside from growing her relationship with the customers, Hippe also wants to focus on continuing to train her staff as she enters her second year at the National Academy of Sciences.

"I enjoy teaching my cooks and learning from them as well," she said. "I want to bring everyone up to the level where I'd like us to be. I want different presentations and different ideas."

Though she is mostly focused on the near future, Hippe also looks further down the road and sees herself possibly teaching at a culinary school in the next five to seven years. She'd also like to pursue her hobbies out of the kitchen, including photography.

"If I can make a little money teaching and a little money in photography, I'd be a happy camper," she said. "I just want to make a decent living and enjoy my job."

