

## Staying Creative with Smaller Staff, Smaller Events: A Conversation with Chris Masco

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With Boston having had one of the snowiest Januaries on record, hotels across the city are feeling the pain from the storm cancelling events and Executive Chef Chris Masco says that the Westin Copley Place is no exception to last minute, weather-related cancellations or changes.

“If [the groups] are in house they will hit the restaurants, but with us being attached to the mall, there’s plenty of other options,” he said. “Another issue is deliveries – it always takes the first big storm to remind you to be prepared earlier.”

Having worked at hotels in Florida and Utah before coming to Boston in October 2006, Masco is no stranger to dealing with weather-related issues. However, he hardly sees that as one of the biggest challenges he faces. For him, the

challenge is in being creative with less staff than kitchens had twenty years ago.

“Garde manger and pastry chefs are starting to drop off a bit,” he said. “It’s great to have [someone in these positions], but it makes the executive chef stronger when you lose it. It makes you get creative with menus.”

Getting creative with menus is what Masco has focused on in his four and a half years at the Copley location. Aside from creating banquet menus that focus on the Westin’s dedication to superfoods, in the last year and a half, he has created an entire menu of sustainable dishes at the hotel’s restaurant, Turner Fisheries. He started by focusing on the restaurant’s signature seafood, then worked his way through the chicken and beef and will eventually be converting the front of house.

“To me, it was getting boring,” he said of the traditional non-sustainable seafood menu. “It’s gotten a great reception so far.”

For 2011, along with continuing the sustainable menu at Turner’s, Masco and his staff will focus more on wedding business than they have in the past. With 75,000 square feet of meeting space, the Westin Copley Place has been the hotel of choice for large

pharmaceutical conferences, but not for brides. Though the weddings are smaller than that of neighboring hotel Fairmont Copley Plaza, the business at the Westin has been growing.

“Ever year we’re growing,” he said. “We’re up 300% on weddings. This year we have one hundred or so [booked]. We do some at Turner’s.”

The space at Turner’s lends itself to smaller parties, which is a trend that Masco is seeing in all his events. Even large pharmaceutical groups have cut back their spending based on state mandates for how much they can spend on events.

“A lot of people are scaling back on what they’re serving to their guests, which makes the hotels look bad,” he said. “Meeting planners have a vision – they are not thinking of what the client wants.”

Along with cutting back on events, another big change that Masco says he’s seen in the industry is that it’s becoming harder to find staff who are willing to work their way through the ranks of the kitchen.

“When they graduate, they think they can be running the kitchen,” he said. “It’s a hard road up. When I worked for Hyatt, they would send you to Austin to see if you could survive then you would get a bigger hotel.”

As he comes up on his 10 year anniversary with Starwoods later this year, Masco knows that there are few larger hotels he could move to within the brand, and considers making the switch to an F&B Director position but isn’t sure he could move out of the kitchen permanently.

“I like being a chef because it’s different behind the scenes,” he said. “People are a lot more willing to learn. I like seeing young kids come up and watching them learn and grow. There’s always something new in the kitchen. Food can change easier.”

