

Creating Restaurant-Style Events: A Conversation with Christopher Van Ness

May 11, 2011

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Having grown up knowing he was going to be a chef, Christopher Van Ness wasted no time making his way to the top of the kitchen food chain. He has made his way around the country learning a variety of cuisines, before eventually ending up in the suburbs of Philadelphia on the “Main Line”.

After spending some time at Carmine’s Creole Café, Van Ness went to work for the Finley family at their restaurant The Paddock at Devon for a short time, before ending up moving to their upscale banquet facility, The Crystal Tea Room, eight months ago.

“When I got here, the kitchen wasn’t as good as I would have it,” Van Ness said. “I transformed the whole kitchen and made all the food fresh.”

Van Ness brings a more restaurant-like flavor to the events at The Crystal Tea Room, since that’s where the majority of his previous experience comes from. Working with corporate and social clients for larger events is a new challenge for him, but one that he embraces.

“There is a standard menu, but I don’t really follow menus too much,” he said. “For tastings, [the client] will pick a starch and a protein and I’ll create something unique. If they like it then that’s how we’ll make it for [their event].”

Despite the fact that business is starting to pick up, Van Ness keeps his staff small with just a sous chef and two lead cooks, and tries to keep his hand in everything that goes out of the kitchen.

“Being from the Main Line, the focus is on the chef so that’s how I was trained,” he said. “Here in catering, I’m more part of a team. I’d rather do it all myself so that if there was an issue they can come right to me.”

Aside from improving the quality of food at The Crystal Tea Room, Van Ness has also tried to improve relations between the front of house and back of house staff. In his mind, both groups are trying to put out great events and shouldn’t be divided.

“Before I got here, there was a line on the ground between the two,” he said. “I got rid of all the people who didn’t want to be part of the ‘family’, the people who didn’t want to move forward in a better direction.”

Though he says that he’d like to get back into restaurants at some point, Van Ness knows he is in a good position right now and enjoys putting out more restaurant-style events.

“The owners that I work for here are great and I enjoy working for them,” he said. “I make a difference here.”

