

Organization and Talent Are Keys to A Successful Career in the Kitchen: A Conversation with Denise Meicke

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Many chefs who have made it to the top of the culinary ladder and earned the title of Executive Chef have taken a similar path: grow up working in the kitchen, go to culinary school, and work hard to get to the top. Denise Meicke has certainly worked hard to get to where she is, but hasn't taken the most traditional path.

"I just kind of fell into it," the Executive Chef for Sodexo at Providence College said.

She was working the overnight shift supervising the food production for a "roach coach" and enough of her customers told her she had a talent for

the culinary that she decided to pursue a degree. At first, she focused on hotel and restaurant management, and worked for a few years as a hotel front desk manager. But in her late 20s, she decided to go back to school to focus on the food. She eventually earned an internship at the Ritz Carlton in Phoenix, which she says opened a lot of doors for her.

Raised in New Jersey, Meicke missed the ocean after a few years in the desert of Arizona. She decided to move to Cape Cod, and was fortunate to land a position at the Chatham Bars Inn through a connection she made at her Ritz Carlton internship. After starting off as seasonal help, she eventually earned a full time position at Chatham Bars Inn, before moving to the Ocean Edge Resort and later the Sheraton Hyannis, where she earned her first Executive Chef position. Unfortunately, after three years at the Sheraton, the hotel was sold and Meicke found herself out of work for a year before coming to Providence College in February of this year, where she oversees all on-campus dining.

"I never thought I would find myself in this kind of position," she said. "I always wanted to be a surgeon. I had no desire for cooking."

And, this week, Meicke will really start to realize what she's gotten herself into. Having started her position in the second semester last year, she has yet to experience the rush of fall semester dining. After having the summer to organize and plan, Meicke will be serving 30,000 meals a week, but she isn't too worried about it.

"I'm a great organizer," she said. "That's why I think I'm successful at this level."

Though her organizational skills may have helped her to get to this level, Meicke clearly has a talent for cooking, after a late entry into the industry it has only taken her a dozen years to attain the Executive Chef position, which in an industry dominated by men, is quite an accomplishment, though she won't admit it.

"I must have something because I keep getting promoted," she said. "I'm finally starting to believe what I'm hearing."

However, Meicke doesn't want her gender to make a difference in the kitchen, though she admits it is strange that there are fewer females in Executive Chef positions, especially with culinary school enrollments being pretty evenly split.

"If you personally don't make the difference, then you won't be treated differently," she said. "In my own democratic and quiet way, I demand to be treated fairly."

She makes sure she treats her staff fairly, but doesn't allow them to take advantage of her. She says that she used to be very shy growing up, but becoming a chef has brought her out of her shell.

"This has definitely developed a different personality for me," she said. "When you're directing 50 people, you can't be shy."

Her introverted nature isn't the only challenge that Meicke has to overcome in the kitchen. Though many schools put a focus on student dining, there usually isn't a huge budget to create healthy, balanced menus. Fortunately for Meicke, Sodexo creates corporate menus for its locations, which she can adjust to fit her students' tastes.

"It's a fine line of keeping everyone happy," she said.

One way she'll be keeping both Sodexo and her students happy this year is by focusing on using more local ingredients. The students have also asked for healthier versions of food and more vegan options.

"It's a big sports school so they want healthier options," she said.

As for keeping herself happy, Meicke has recently started taking online classes in international business, hoping to someday create an opportunity for herself with Sodexo in Europe.

"You've got to make stuff happen for yourself," she said. "You never know what you'll say 'yes' to eventually. I'm always looking for the next adventure."

