

## Make Every Meal Special: A Conversation with Duane Keller

August 5, 2011  
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Many chefs say that they were born into the foodservice industry, but Duane Keller was born into a hockey family. His father played in the NHL back in the days of the Original Six and a contract with the AHL's Hershey Bears landed the family in Pennsylvania, where Duane discovered his passion for food.

His family lived next door to the Pellegrini family, who owned Alfred's Victorian, a historic Victorian house that was converted into a restaurant the locals went to for special occasions. When Keller was 13, he started in the kitchen as a dishwasher, but quickly discovered a talent and passion for cooking.

"I absolutely loved the business immediately," Keller said. "The chef that was there taught me everything. I caught on really fast. By the end of five years, I was working the line."

After graduating high school, Keller moved back to Canada and ended up playing hockey in Calgary and also working under renowned chef Gerald

Ehler. With Ehler, Keller refined his experience and worked the World Expo in Vancouver in 1986, serving dignitaries such as Queen Elizabeth.

But even now, as Executive Chef at the Mason Inn and Conference Center in Fairfax, VA, Keller strives to make every meal a special one for his guests and tries to impart his years of wisdom onto his staff.

"I love working with people and food," he said. "Teaching is really important to me and sharing and celebrating accomplishments together, not only with the staff, but also with our guests. I want to give them a great memorable experience."

Keller has spent the last 15 years in the Washington, D.C. metro area, after spending 10 years in Florida opening restaurant concepts in Fort Lauderdale and Sarasota. He moved to

Baltimore to continue opening restaurants, but as the economy faltered, his plans changed but he stayed in the area.

"I really like it because there's four seasons," he said. "I stress seasonality in the menus. I just buy what we need for the day. It provides high quality to the guests and teaches the staff the value of food."

Known in the area for revitalizing restaurants, Keller has been at the Mason Inn for four months, and hopes to continue to improve its menus and publicize the fact that the on-property restaurant, Boxwoods, is open to the public.

"We're just starting the marketing," he said. "We have a huge opportunity and we're just trying to let people know that we're here. The Mason Inn is a great place; we do a lot of catering and weddings. A lot of people don't know it's a hotel or restaurant that's open to the public."

If anyone can help increase business at Boxwoods and the Mason Inn, Keller seems to be the man for the job. With experience opening Moon Bay Coastal Cuisine restaurant at the Gaylord National and revitalizing the Potomac Landing Restaurant, Keller brings a lot of experience to the Mason Inn.

"My style is pretty straightforward so it works in banquets," he said. "Food quality is what guests are expecting so we try to do our best for everybody."

Keller learned from one of his mentors, Jim Moore, that if you teach people well, you can have great success.

"We worked together for five years at Potomac Landing," he said. "Jim provided all the tools for everyone to succeed. It is interesting how you can get results when you give the team what they need."

