

## Getting Back to Basics to Improve Service: A Conversation with Gilberto Contreras

December 7, 2010  
By: Erin Flaherty



When he was young Gilberto Contreras' mother told him he would be a chef one day, as he often took breakfast orders from his family and whipped up delicious creations in the kitchen. After dropping out of high school to support his new wife and baby, he was given the opportunity to take part in a six-month culinary program that set him on the path to becoming the current Executive Chef at the Sheraton National in Arlington, Virginia. Now, if he recognizes talent in his team, he encourages it.

"After having to drop out of high school, to be where I'm at right now, I feel pretty good," he said. "All you've got to do is apply yourself and learn some things. If I see some potential [in a staff member], I'm like 'come on!'"

Having worked his way up through the ranks of hotel kitchens since the early 1990s, Contreras took over at Sheraton National in March and has been earning the respect of his team with his hands-on style and back to basics approach to food.

"I'm teaching these guys to go back to basics and plan ahead," he said. "I'm more of a cook's chef because I came from there."

After growing up in the cold winters of Chicago, Contreras was ready for some warm weather and moved to Florida, where he started out working the line at the Sawgrass Marriott Resort, eventually working his way up to Executive Chef over a ten year period.

"I learned everything from working my way up through every position," he said. It was at Sawgrass that he also met his mentor Tony Pels, who passed away in 2008.

"He really taught me the passion," he said. "I was just going through the motions. Anyone that's passionate about their job, I respect."

Since taking over at Sheraton National earlier this year, Contreras is slowly earning the respect of his staff by teaching them new skills and rewarding their performance. With holiday parties up from last year and 52 weddings in 2010, it is important to Contreras to

improve the quality of food that the hotel provides its guests to keep them coming back and to do so, he makes sure his staff is praised for the job they do. Aside from the hotel's employee of the month program, he started a "Team Player of the Month" for his department of 29, which includes an extra paid day off for the winner.

"I didn't know it was going to take off the way it did, but they love it," he said. "They love to get recognized for the work that they do."

With a location right next to the Pentagon, the Sheraton National relies on government parties and conferences for much of its business, but also has a large social business. Overall, the hotel's business is up from last year, which Contreras is happy about. With over 25,000 square feet of space, it's not unusual for there to be four or five events going on at the same time. Contreras welcomes the hectic pace, after his last position as the Executive Chef & B for both the Crowne Plaza Hotel and Holiday Inn Historic District in Alexandria, VA, which were much smaller venues.

"It's been a big adjustment, but all I have to do is just concentrate on the food," he said, unlike his previous position where he also oversaw front of the house responsibilities as well.

With almost 20 years in the industry, mainly in hotels, Contreras has seen a lot of changes with one of the biggest being the food cost. Many hotels are demanding food costs under 25%, as opposed to the 31% it was two decades ago. Though this can be a challenge, Contreras is teaching his staff that with planning and passion, you don't have to rely on processed foods to meet cost requirements.

"Some of the parties I have say that the food has improved over last year," he said. "If you just cook your stuff and love what you're doing then you're going to put a good product out there."

