

Years of Experience at A Great Location: A Conversation with James Lauser

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Not many chefs can say that four years on a submarine helped them to hone their craft and rise to the top of the industry, but for Executive Chef James Lauser, traveling the Pacific with the Navy after high school exposed him to a variety of cultures and cuisines further instilling a love of cooking that had been in him since childhood when he cooked for his family to help his busy parents.

Lauser is currently the Executive Chef at the Hilton Wilmington Christiana, where he has been off an on for the last 14 years. He and many of his staff members have been at the hotel for years, which seems to be a rare occurrence in the industry.

“This happens to be one of the best places in Delaware to be,” he said of the hotel’s location in the Brandywine Valley. The area is known for its country estates and the hotel takes that into consideration with its theme.

“The hotel is kind of like a country club,” Lauser said. “The theme of the hotel is like a country estate, it’s very rustic.”

Lauser believes that this ambiance and the experience of himself and his staff are the reason why the hotel has done well in the recent economic troubles.

“The corporate business is starting to come back,” he said. “We’ve held pretty strong in the other markets.”

Like many other executive chefs, Lauser is responsible for much more than just food preparation. A typical day for him includes doing all the ordering, overseeing food production, supervising his kitchen staff of 20 and 40 front of house staff members. He also does all the ice carving for the hotel’s various events. He learned ice carving through trial and error years ago when someone who had been doing it for him at the Sheraton Dover left the hotel.

“You’ve got to have patience,” he said of the precise art. “I do a template or a drawing first. I used to do it freehand, but I’m a perfectionist.”

In addition to doing the carvings for the hotel’s brunches and weddings, Lauser does demonstrations all over the area. When he was competing in ACF competitions, ice carving was one of his areas of expertise – he has won over 20 medals in both ice carving and hot food competitions. These days, he is still involved in the ACF as the Vice President of the First State Chef’s Association which helps him stay current with trends, like small plates.

“We do a lot more appetizers nowadays,” he said. “People eat two appetizers instead of one entrée.”

Though he appreciates his staff has been in the business so long, sometimes they are not always up to speed on the trends, which is why it’s important for him to stay involved in the ACF.

“They have a lot of experience,” he said. “But most people don’t stay current. I need to stay on top of them.”

Having worked his way to the top of the culinary ladder at the age of 27, Lauser has accomplished a lot in his 20 year career as an executive chef.

“I was pretty young when I became Executive Chef,” he said. “I just hung in there and figured my way through it.”

