

Dual Role Lets Chef Create Unique Events in a Unique Space: A Conversation with Jesse Wolkiewicz

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While many chefs would prefer to stay in the kitchen, Executive Chef Jesse Wolkiewicz enjoys working closely with the brides planning weddings at The College Club of Boston – he can even tell them where to look for the best dresses, flowers and DJs.

In his dual role as Executive Chef/Event Manager, Wolkiewicz literally works on each event from start to finish. With only a part-time assistant in the kitchen, Wolkiewicz is very hands on, often putting in 18 hour days when he has a big event. He works closely with each couple to create the perfect wedding for them.

“It’s definitely a full-time type of thing,” he said. “But I

wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Wolkiewicz got his start in the kitchen early, like many chefs, cooking for his family when he was just 7 years old which is when he says he “started to love food.” By the time he was 11, he was working in restaurants and was running the kitchen on the weekends by his 14th birthday. After taking culinary arts classes in high school, he decided to major in English & Communications at Fitchburg State College. In order to pay his tuition, he worked as a function chef at the school.

Wolkiewicz left Fitchburg State after three years, when his future wife, Robin, graduated. He decided to stay in the culinary field and worked as the chef at In A Pig’s Eye restaurant in his hometown of Salem, MA for nine years. After leaving In A Pig’s Eye, for a position at Northeastern University’s Churchill Hall, he got to experience managing both the front and back of the house. Northeastern then transferred him to the Henderson House in Weston to oversee functions at the historic mansion. He later worked at Tufts as Director of Catering, before taking a sales consultant position at Boston Café and Catering. However, he missed being in the kitchen and got back into cooking when he took his current position. He has been at The College Club for five years and enjoys being able to work on the culinary and event planning aspects of each event.

“This is the ultimate job,” he said. “This is where I hope to stay.”

Adding to the personal touch that Wolkiewicz lends to each event is the fact that he doesn’t have a set menu. He works with each of his clients to create and design a menu based on their event theme and their personal tastes, all while staying within their budget which he thinks has helped him as the economy has gone down.

“People are downsizing and are looking for someone who will work with them,” he said. “I like to create a very fun, intimate, different affair [for each client]. Every event has to be a little bit different.”

Creating unique and intimate events isn’t hard to do, given The College Club’s setting in a Victorian brownstone, in Boston’s historic Back Bay area. The club recently underwent renovations to restore and redecorate the space, focusing on the main event rooms, which have a 100 person capacity.

The club was founded in 1890 as a place for college-educated women to gather and further their educations through social events. Today, the club has just under 300 members and in addition to weddings and corporate events Wolkiewicz oversees a few member events each month, including a cocktail reception where he tries out his new recipes.

“I call my style ‘confusion cuisine,’” he said. “I just create dishes. I use the members as taste-testers.”

The members have also helped Wolkiewicz learn about cooking for various food allergies during his time at the club.

“A few members have celiac disease,” he said. “So I’ve had to learn a little more about [gluten free foods].”

Aside from learning to cook for different food allergies, Wolkiewicz’s only other challenge at the club is filling the winter months. He does about 20 to 25 weddings a year, not including corporate events, but the winter is typically the slowest season. However, word of mouth from his clients helps him bring in business.

“Keeping people coming back is my biggest thing,” he said. “I never turn down any business. It’s really about keeping a client happy. The biggest thrill I get is when people walk out and say [their event] was fabulous.”

For the future, Wolkiewicz sees himself staying at The College Club, maybe eventually opening up a catering business when he is “semi-retired”.

“I want to be able to continue to do both parts of the job,” he said. “I never want to lose the personal touch.”

