

# The Delicate Balance Between Meeting Your Customers' Expectations and Remaining Profitable: A Discussion With Joe Elliott

January 6, 2009  
By: Erin Flaherty



Though Joe Elliott has only been in his current position for just over eight months, you might say he was born to be in the kitchen.

“My mother did wedding cakes and I was always helping her out when I was six or seven years old,” the Westin Providence Executive Chef said.

At 16, the Pittsburgh native got his first official restaurant job. He was hired as a dishwasher, but on his first day one of the cooks quit, so he got to step up to the line, which was where he originally wanted to be. After attending culinary school at the

Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts, Elliott got his first job at the Nemacolin Woodlands resort working for Mick Wagner, one of the originators of “new spa” cuisine. It was here that he developed an appreciation for simple food, especially using local ingredients.

“[The food] was set up to work with your mind, body and soul,” he said. “Everything was grown or raised within 10 to 20 miles of the resort.”

After moving across the country with stops in Virginia, Ohio and Arizona, Elliott found himself landing in Providence just less than a year ago. He’s still getting used to the area and is trying to bring more of the region into the hotel’s cuisine.

“You have to come up with a niche to compete,” he said of Providence’s bustling restaurant scene.

Aside from the competition in Providence, Elliott also finds himself contending with the economy, though it is less of a concern for him than for other hotel chefs, as the Westin is the largest hotel in the city.

“November and December business dropped a lot,” he said. “But even when we’re slow we’re busier than other hotels in Rhode Island.”

But the drop in business does have an effect on the bottom line, even for such a large property. The pressure to stay on budget is not only because of the economy, but also a shift in how hotel restaurants are viewed by hotel owners.

“The most challenging part of it right now is the way the economy is, trying to keep a high quality product within budget guidelines,” Elliott said. “[Hotels] changed the F&B operation to be profitable – where it used to be a break even amenity to the hotel.”

There is a delicate balance between meeting your customers’ expectations and remaining a profitable operation which many chefs, like Elliott, find themselves playing with on a daily basis. Elliott has come up with a few ways to stay within budget while not sacrificing quality, including using pre-made items and putting items on both the restaurant and banquet menus, which is important when he’s serving over 11,000 people a week between the two.

“To be more cost effective, you have to bring in some products pre-made,” he said. “What’s great is now you can’t tell the difference in some items.”

Another way that Elliott makes sure his operation is within budget is to make sure everyone on his staff is cross-trained in all aspects of the kitchen. The Westin is a union property, so since he can’t be hands on all the time, he spends a lot of time training his staff.

“I love the training,” he said. “I’ve worked under some great chefs and hopefully I’ve had the opportunity to help young chefs move on in their careers.”

Along with training future generations, Elliott is hoping to bring his passion for food to the hotel and the city. In today’s busy world, he knows people are looking for good food they can identify with.

“I try to cook simple but elegant food,” he said. “People ‘eat’ now where twenty years ago, they ‘dined’.”

