

Diversifying Business and Training Staff Will Help You Survive the Economic Downturn: A Conversation with Joseph Occhipinti

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By: Erin Flaherty



Like many chefs, Boston Café and Catering's Joseph Occhipinti started working in the kitchen at a very young age. Coming from an Italian family, food was always a very big part of Occhipinti's life. However, becoming an executive chef never crossed his mind as a career choice.

"I didn't go to culinary school. I got my degree in hotel and restaurant management," he said. "I didn't know I was going to be a chef. I wanted to get into management."

After graduation, Occhipinti found it difficult to get a management job and instead took a job in the kitchen at Gazelles Restaurant in Quincy, Mass., working alongside certified master chef Bank Szernyl.

It was Szernyl who eventually set Occhipinti on his path as a caterer with a recommendation to The Catered Affair, a renowned Boston-area catering company.

"It was a great experience with a lot of high profile events," he said. "I had this uncontrollable energy. Catering is always different all the time. It's a very exciting, very high energy business."

It was that uncontrollable energy that brought Occhipinti back to the catering world after spending some time working in restaurants and private clubs after leaving The Catered Affair in the mid-90s. He joined the staff at Boston Café and Catering in July 2008 and hit the ground running. A typical day for Occhipinti involves working closely with his staff on training his staff of 20 and making sure they have the skills to take the business up a notch.

"The company has never taken such a change in their culinary direction," he said. "The culinary program has really blossomed. The culinary staff is up to par to bring the company to the next level."

For Occhipinti, that next level involves expanding the focus from corporate business to include more special events. At a time when many companies are cutting back, Boston Café and Catering has just hired two new sales staff members to focus on bringing in the high end events. Between focusing on new opportunities and his steady corporate business, Occhipinti has a positive outlook on the trying economic times we are facing.

"The real challenge these days is getting the business through the doors," he said. "[During the holidays] we were lucky enough to keep everybody busy. Last year was a great year for us."

Occhipinti is also optimistic about the direction he sees the culinary world going in. Over his time in the industry, he has seen many changes, but thinks that the development of television channels and shows dedicated to food have been one of the most positive.

"There is more of a pool of chefs and culinary people," he said. "There are a lot more creative people in the industry than there ever have been. There are so many new and different things people are doing with food."

A self-proclaimed cookbook fanatic, Occhipinti loves to do research and see what other chefs are coming up with. Among his collection of cookbooks, are those written by Todd English, Jasper White, Emeril Lagasse and Julia Child.

"There are only so many ideas you can come up with without research," he said.

Along with the celebrity chefs who line his bookshelves, Occhipinti has also found himself inspired by his past boss, Holly Safford of The Catered Affair.

"I have so many fond memories for working for The Catered Affair," he said. "[Holly Safford] is the mastermind behind the success of the company."

