

Chef Spotlight
Mike Tracy
Boston Convention & Exposition Center

From Boston to China, Mike Tracy Makes a Difference in the Kitchen



Most people would balk at the idea of working for three weeks in a country where they don't speak the language. But not Mike Tracy, executive chef for Aramark at the Boston Convention & Exposition Center (BCEC), who spent 21 days in Beijing, China in 2006 as the guest chef at the U.S. Embassy through Aramark's chef exchange program.

"I was very lucky that I had an interpreter with me every minute of the day," the Boston-area native said.

Spending time overseas helped Tracy learn about Chinese culture and perceptions of Americans.

"They lump us all in together as 'westerners,'" he said. "They would ask me for a 'western specialty' and would want goose liver. I had to explain it's more of a European standard than American."

Instead of delicacies like pate, Tracy taught his fellow chefs how to cook American standards, such as fried calamari, pulled pork and pizza – which they cut into small pieces and ate with chopsticks.

As much as he enjoyed his time in China, Tracy noticed a huge difference in cooking style between himself and his fellow chefs.

"They don't have much of a concept of slow cooking," he said. "The way they do everything is a thousand miles an hour in 'jet-fueled' wok stations."

As the executive chef of the BCEC since April 2005, you would think Tracy was 'jet-fueled' to keep up with the variety of conferences he hosts and his staff of almost 100.

"It's teaching and training and trying to get everybody thinking along the same lines to ensure proper teamwork that is my challenge day to day," the 16-year industry veteran said.

He faces this challenge by having a very hands on approach and spending a lot of time interacting with his staff.

"I spend a ton of time on the floor with groups of staff working together," he said.

Having to manage such a large staff isn't Tracy's only challenge in the kitchen. The variety of conferences and the changing needs of their attendees are another issue he faces day to day.

"The biggest trend I've seen this year is attendees or guests asking for foods that are all-natural, organic, locally grown, environmentally friendly or fair trade," he said. "Our guests are focusing more on the stories and procedures behind the food, than on the actual food."

Tracy has come a long way from selling ice cream and hot dogs at Fenway Park in the early 1990s to the top of Amarak's food chain, and he credits Martha Stewart as someone who inspired him to work so hard.

"I admire her strength, endurance and upbeat attitude," he said.

Tracy joined the Aramark organization in 2000 at Coors Field in Colorado and after spending some time there, moved back to Boston and spent some time at the Hynes Convention Center before moving over to the top position at the BCEC, where he says it is less about personal accomplishments, than about teamwork.

"I always give credit to the people that helped me take the BCEC culinary crew from twelve people and a kitchen manager to adding two more managers, four supervisors and 93 hourly employees within two years," he said. "We are a full scale, high quality, high volume food production team."

In an ongoing effort to build a team within the BCEC, Tracy and his staff will be hosting a six week cooking course this spring for any of the convention center's 250 employees. Staying away from more technical aspects of cooking, Tracy wants to help his nonculinary co-workers learn some trade secrets.

"There are things that are very basic to the industry that people out of the industry might not be aware of," he said.

Aside from preparing to impart his kitchen wisdom to others, Tracy looks forward to the variety of events the BCEC will host this year and the unique menus he will create.

"I really enjoy not having boundaries," he said. "People shouldn't be afraid to mix trends, varieties, or concepts they find in different cultures."

