

Limited Service Doesn't Mean Limited Taste: A Conversation with Ralph Younger

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Many chefs who have achieved the highest position in their field say that cooking is in their blood and from a young age, they knew they needed to be in the kitchen. For Ralph Younger, the story is a little different. He grew up in the kitchen, helping out with his mother's catering business, but didn't foresee himself taking over the chef duties at first.

"I went and got my business degree and I wanted to take the catering company to another level," he said. "Then I went down to Florida and went to Le Cordon Bleu culinary school and fell in love again with food."

After graduating from culinary school, Younger got an early Christmas present in 2006 when the Courtyard Marriott in Providence, RI called to offer him the Food & Beverage Manager position just three days before Christmas. In his four years with the limited service hotel, he's gotten to see both sides of the economic downturn.

"We were very busy then, we had a lot of banquets and a lot of social functions," he said of when he first started. "Companies entertaining clients or employees has really stopped, but our corporate [business] has kind of maintained."

The fact that the Courtyard is a limited service hotel that is still in downtown Providence and all of the attractions are easily accessible has helped them retain business, Younger thinks.

"That's our niche, we kind of can go in there at a lower price because it's a lower price structure for us and pick up a lot more business," he said. "It kind of helps us and that's how we get a lot of repeat business and new business."

Aside from offering a lower price point than many of his competitors, Younger thinks that Marriott's recent re-branding of the Courtyard properties may also help them hold on to business. In 2007, the hotel upgraded its public spaces into more of an open concept with a \$3 million renovation.

"People just think of Courtyards as 'off the highway' kind of hotels," he said. "They're reinventing the spaces and making them more attractive."

Though they may offer banquets at a lower price point than the area's full service hotels, Younger says they are not immune to trends and food fads. He points to changing appetites and the average person's increased knowledge of food as reasons why. In addition to increasing requests for gluten free food and miniature versions of desserts and appetizers, guests are really putting an emphasis on presentation.

"Now it's more or less a whole scene you have to create within the room," he said. "A lot of people are moving more into themes. You're always looking to do something no one else has done."

Younger works hard to create a unique experience for his guests, regardless of the size or budget of their event, and with a variety of clients, including area colleges and businesses, he has steady business almost year-round.

"It keeps the job interesting," he said. "You never know who's coming through the door."

And, as if he wasn't busy enough with his duties at the hotel, Younger also owns Simply Black & White Catering, where he caters at home parties and does cooking demonstrations for groups of up to 60 people. His side business grew out of his mother's catering company and he says his passion for the industry is what keeps him motivated to do that and his full time job.

"I love it," he said. "For this industry you really have to have the passion to please and entertain. I go into a home and transform the space, layout a buffet and do demos for the guests."

Younger credits his mentor Leroy Reynolds of Bluefin Catering, where he did his externship in Miami, as giving him the motivation to get involved in different aspects of the industry.

"He's done it all," he said. "That's how I learned to do the managerial side, as well as cooking."

Before he takes his catering company to the next level, Younger says he'd like to get experience in a full service hotel, which he's never done, to continue to improve his managerial skills and learn even more aspects of the business. With a new baby at home, many would be thinking about scaling back, but Younger is motivated to keep moving forward and progressing to the next level.

"There's such a legacy of food in my family, that's what keeps me inspired," he said.

