

## Offering Value Will Bring Guests Back for More: A Conversation with Richard Beckel

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Ever since the economic downturn in late 2008, diners have been looking for more value in the food they choose when eating out and they tend to save fine dining for special occasions only. This is exactly what Executive Chef Richard Beckel and the American Tap Room have tried to take advantage of in creating a menu filled with twists on old favorites.

“We define it as more of a causal gourmet restaurant – comfort food with an upscale spin,” he said. “We wanted to do something along the lines of a gastro pub.”

Gastro pubs have gained popularity over the last few years, as upscale comfort food has become hugely popular, but according to Beckel, gastro pubs can be a bit off-putting to diners with their paragraph-long descriptions of each dish.

“We wanted to come up with a taproom that made it easy for the consumer to purchase but gave them more bang for their buck,” he said of the restaurant that he has been with for three years.

A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Beckel has worked in fine dining restaurants and hotels in Manhattan and Washington, DC, as well as studied in France at three different three-star Michelin rated restaurants. In his current position, he oversees the menus and kitchen operations at the American Tap Room’s two locations in Virginia and Maryland, with a third location being planned. He attributes the success of the restaurant to the perceived value that his customers are getting.

“The perception of value is what’s driving the restaurant industry right now,” he said. “The value driven concepts are what are going to be successful.”

In order to provide value to his customers, Beckel uses a lot of local, fresh ingredients to create his dishes. He notes that in recent years, the trend to more molecular gastronomy has driven chefs away from putting out pure, flavorful dishes.

“An item as made by nature itself is as perfect as it needs to be,” he said. “At the end of the day the closer to farm to table it gets, the better. We make the best effort to put the best quality products on the table that we can.”

According to Beckel, one of the biggest differences between working in hotels and restaurants is the ability of restaurants to set trends and move more quickly than hotel banquet facilities.

“Restaurants have to adjust to the marketplace a lot faster,” he said. “Restaurants usually set the trends that hotels follow. Restaurants have to be savvier and adjust more often.”

Though there are some big differences between the two, they share a common challenge in finding and keeping properly trained staff. Beckel notes that many applicants will claim to have skills that they don’t have when put into a kitchen situation. With 150 staff between his two locations, Beckel says his philosophy is “hire slowly, fire fast.”

Along with industry influences like Michel Richard and Daniel Boulud, Beckel lists the band Rush as one of his biggest inspirations in his career. He points to the precision, discipline and creativity of each member of the band as aspects he wants to replicate in his own work.

“I would rather not be famous but be respected for the ability I have to do my job,” he said.

Rather than look too far into the future, Beckel’s biggest goal is to continue to make the American Tap Room a success.

“My immediate goal is to make my customers happy every day,” he said. “If I continue to look at new ideas and products and continue to educate myself then the rest will come.”

