

## Customer Service is the Key to Success in the Industry: A Conversation with Serge Wechseler

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Having grown up in Belgium cooking for his family of thirteen people, Serge Wechseler has known from a young age what it means to serve large groups and to have to be able to please everyone with his cuisine.

“All of what we do is for the customer,” he said of his banquet operation at the Crowne Plaza in Warwick, RI. “Our goal is to satisfy the customer. When you work at a hotel, you have to please everybody.”

According to Wechseler, part of pleasing the customer is staying consistent, which he has been doing for the last 12 years at the Crowne Plaza. Helping him stay consistent is the fact that a lot of his staff has been

with him for the majority of his time at the hotel. This consistency has helped him maintain a steady business over his time at the hotel.

“We have a good team,” he said. “We all get the job done. We are very consistent with what we do. A lot of places are inconsistent, getting a new chef every few years. We have the right location and the right food. We are one of the busiest places in Rhode Island.”

With the current state of the economy, Wechseler understands it is now more important than ever to turn out good food that appeals to a wide range of people. Unlike when he started in the business 39 years ago, people don't go to hotels to eat at the restaurant as often as they used to. The Crowne Plaza has had to change its fine dining restaurant into a more casual atmosphere to react to the changing times.

“You are a little more accommodating [in this economy] because you need the business,” Wechseler said. “Whatever [customers] want, we try to provide it for them.”

Closing the fine dining room was a tough decision for Wechseler, who had his first job in the United States at the Four Seasons in Chicago in their fine dining room. For him, coming to the United States was a big culture shock, moving from a European culture of working only eight hours a day to a “get the job done” attitude in America. Though he misses the fine dining experience he had working at a number of properties including the Stonehedge Inn in Tyngsboro, MA, he acknowledges that working in that type of environment can take its toll. “I wish I could be more creative than I am now,” he said. “But sometimes you have to settle for a better life. I don't work every night and I don't work 18 hours a day anymore.”

For Wechseler, the key to putting out good food, whether in a fine dining room or for banquets, is planning and organization. Each day, he arrives at the hotel around 6 a.m. and unlike many other executive chefs who are bogged down by paperwork, he works on the line everyday until 1 p.m. Along with overseeing his staff, his main responsibility is creating the sauces to be used throughout the day. It is the organizational skills that help him keep his kitchen running efficiently even as he has had to manage with a smaller staff, having not replaced some people who left last fall.

“I start with the basics in anything I do,” he said. “If you start with bad products, you cannot cook anything that's good. It's the same with planning. If you're not organized then you can't achieve your goals.”

For Wechseler, having a staff that respects him and has learned from him is one of his greatest accomplishments.

“It is most important that you do something so that people remember you,” he said. “I just want to be the guy that you learned something from.”

Wechseler talks about still opening his own restaurant someday, but isn't sure if he's willing to go back to working 18 hour days. He admits that while many young chefs want their egos fed, he never wanted to be a star and as he gets older he realizes it is more about the customer.

“When you're young you want to satisfy your ego,” he said. “Now I just want to satisfy the customer. I am more at the service of the people than at the service of my ego and dreams.”

Even after all his years in the industry, Wechseler is still enjoying himself and is still happy to come to work every morning.

“What's good about this business is that every day is different, every day is a challenge,” he said.

