

Follow Your Passion for a Successful Career: A Conversation with Susan Delbert

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Many chefs spent their youth in the kitchen, working their way up the ladder to the executive chef position, knowing from a young age that being in the kitchen was in their blood. For Susan Delbert, the journey to the top of the culinary ladder was a bit different.

Delbert started her professional life as a trial attorney in Alaska for both the Attorney General and the District Attorney, later moving to San Francisco before finally ending up in Washington, D.C. to work at a start up law firm practicing tax law. However, the firm struggled without an anchor client and Delbert needed a secondary source of income, so she asked for a waitress job at popular restaurant Clyde's of Chevy Chase, being told she'd make a better hostess, before being promoted to maitre d' two weeks after she started.

"It was great. I just walked around and talked to people," she said. "I met the corporate chef, Melissa Ballinger, who asked if I wanted to do something on the cooking side and gave me my first set of whites."

With that, Delbert was sent to the Old Ebbitt Grill as a sous chef, helping prep for parties and she realized her passion for cooking was too great to be just a second job. She gave her notice at the law firm and applied to culinary schools, eventually ending up at the Culinary Institute of America.

"I could work in a kitchen and learn, but I decided that I would do what any good student does and go back to school," she said. "I packed up my house and spent a few years just going to school. I really loved it."

After graduating in 2001 at the top of her class, Delbert decided to stay in New York and look for work. She was offered a job at the soon-to-be-opened Ritz Carlton Battery Park and was scheduled to start in mid-September, but after the September 11 attacks, construction on the hotel came to a halt and Delbert was left without a job.

"I decided to come back to Washington and get my life together," she said.

Landing back in Washington, Delbert started a string of jobs at a la carte restaurants, before eventually ending up at the National Press Club in late 2009. At the club, she is responsible for the two restaurants on site, one of which is open to the public, as well as the banquets which are the core of the business.

"It has been one of the greatest gigs of all time," she said. "The pace is a little bit different, but I am loving the change. It's just a different challenge. Even after nine months, I feel like I haven't had a huge effect on the banquet menu, but clients like consistency. I will at some point, but haven't yet."

So far during Delbert's tenure at the club, she's been focused on the restaurant menus. With both restaurants and banquets, Delbert is working toward creating the freshest, most seasonal menus possible.

"The way I cook is outrageously seasonal, not just vegetables but also proteins," she said. "Rather than putting on something that's out of season or endangered, I'd rather have something that's seasonal. Not only does it make sense from a flavor standpoint, but it's also the challenge of working with the best ingredients."

Delbert says that most of her suppliers have stepped up to the task of providing the types of ingredients she requires for seasonal and fresh menus. When she was in culinary school, she was chosen to participate in an Italian cooking intensive, where she learned to appreciate cooking with flavors that are in season and fresh at the market.

"More and more purveyors are offering better quality ingredients because chefs are demanding them," she said. "We pretty much make everything from scratch. In the ten years or so that I've been cooking, there is much less emphasis on frozen."

Along with creating menus that are fresh and seasonal, during her time at the club, Delbert has adjusted to working in a union kitchen and the unique challenges that come along with that. Instead of traditional staffing challenges, like high turnover, Delbert has to gain the trust of staffers that have been working at the club for over ten years.

"They are starting to come to trust me," she said. "The prior chef had been there for fifteen years, but they've been pretty receptive to most [of the changes]."

Delbert says the biggest challenge she's faced so far is getting the word out about the restaurant at the club that is open to the public, The Fourth Estate. Though they have had events with celebrity chefs, like Spike Mendelsohn of Top Chef, and other events in conjunction with the Washington Post, the restaurant doesn't draw the crowd that it should considering the location and Delbert's menu.

"It's so frustrating to me to have this gorgeous restaurant that more people don't know about," she said. "I want to fill every seat in the restaurant for lunch or dinner. I would feel like I had accomplished something that no one before me had ever accomplished."

Along with promoting The Fourth Estate to the public, Delbert wants to be able to update the banquet menus at the club, as well as teach her staff and help them continually learn new techniques.

"I would like to teach my cooks to cook something they've never cooked before and have them do it well," she said. "I want to keep them endlessly fascinated."