

Chef Spotlight
Tom Connaughton
Sheraton Braintree

At Sheraton Braintree, Tom Connaughton Brings City Flair to the Suburbs



At Sheraton Braintree, Executive Chef Tom Connaughton is trying to bring a touch of downtown flair to the suburbs. As he celebrates one year in the position this month, he has successfully changed the banquet and restaurant menus at the hotel, as well as the way banquets are displayed.

“I’m trying to get away from traditional dishes and do something a little more modern,” he said. “Downtown it seems that smaller is better and it’s more appealing on the eye.”

To have a more appealing look, Connaughton has eliminated the traditional glass mirrored displays and 10 foot long buffet tables and replaced them with modern displays and six-foot tables.

His new menus, which he rolled out three months ago, reflect his cooking philosophy that you don’t have to dress something up to extremes for it to be delicious.

“I like simple, good tasting, well seasoned food,” he said. “I don’t go crazy. As long as it tastes good and looks good, I’m happy with that.”

He also tries to take inspiration for his dishes from those around him and after working in quite a few properties in the Boston area, he has a lot of experiences to draw from.

“I like tasting different peoples’ foods,” he said. “In this industry there are so many people you work with. You always learn each place you go.”

Though he was excited to have earned his first executive chef position, he met a little resistance from his unionized staff when he started to change the menus. Fortunately, they soon came around to his modern approach and are now happy to be learning new techniques.

“I have a pretty good staff here,” he said. “A lot of them have been here a very long time. It’s not easy [to change]. They’re starting to appreciate what they’re learning.”

One trend that he says is becoming more common, even in the suburbs, is the need for organic and locally grown items. In his experience, people are willing to pay extra for organic items, since they are getting used to paying more for organic when they cook at home.

“It’s expensive, but if that’s what the public wants that’s what you do,” he said. “They know what it costs so they’re willing to pay the extra money.”

Connaughton started out at Sheraton Newton when it was owned by Boston-area developer Thomas Flatley. Flatley knew Connaughton’s father and gave the Newbury College graduate his

first hotel kitchen opportunity. Next, Connaughton moved on to Sheraton Norwood, a Starwoods property, later spending time at Sheraton Boston as restaurant chef and banquet chef before landing at his current position in Braintree.

After spending the last decade with Starwoods at various Sheraton properties in the Boston area, he can see himself with the company for quite some time into the future.

“To leave would be like starting over,” he said. “As long as they’re around, I’ll probably be around.”

He admits that since he’s achieved his goal of an executive chef position, he hasn’t thought much about what’s next for him, but would eventually like to move back to a bigger property in the city, and maybe even get out of the kitchen some day.

“It wasn’t easy getting here. It took many years of hard work. Finally all that paid off,” he said. “I think what would be next for me would be to become an executive chef at a larger property and really challenge myself. Long term, I’d like to be a Director of Food and Beverage when I get a little older and want to spend less time in the kitchen.”

A laid-back guy at home, Connaughton describes himself as “serious” in the kitchen, but has tried to model his management style after that of Sheraton Boston Executive Chef Kurt Steinberg.

“He’s a very talented chef but he’s very laid back,” Connaughton said. “I’m trying to bring some of what I learned from him here and do the same thing.”

Connaughton hopes that he can inspire future generations as his mentors have inspired him. He often gets asked by his alma mater to give demonstrations, but is waiting for the schedule to work with his.

“I would tell [the students] that it’s a great field,” he said. “If you put in the time and put in the effort it really pays off. With a good attitude and work ethic, you can be very successful.”

