

A Good Work Ethic Can Help You Get Through Any Challenge: A Conversation with Chef Tony Haskins

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June 8, 2010



Tony Haskins started his career as many other chefs do, washing dishes. At the age of 14, Haskins could be found in the kitchen of the Officer's Club at the Brunswick Naval, where he eventually worked his way up to preparing some simple dishes on the line. After working in kitchens for a few years after graduating high school, Haskins decided to attend culinary school at the age of 24.

"The difference between working in a nice kitchen and a not so nice kitchen is a degree," he said.

Haskins moved to Rhode Island in the early 1980s to attend Johnson & Wales, where he received his

Associates Degree in Culinary Arts, and later earned his Bachelor's Degree in Restaurant Management, before finally earning his Master's in Hospitality Administration in 1994.

"I am most proud of my Master's degree because it took a long time to get there," he said. "It wasn't easy. It's like you're sacrificing now for your future."

After receiving his Bachelor's Degree, Haskins started working in fine dining restaurants in Rhode Island, before spending six years at the Rhode Island Country Club, finally ending up at the Rhode Island Convention Center eleven years ago.

For him, the biggest change from fine dining and the country club to the convention center was the volume of food that the kitchen needed to put out for events.

"It took a few years to start getting things straight," he said. "It's not something you can think through, you have to experience it. But, I don't get nervous anymore."

Not only is the size of the events something that sets the Rhode Island Convention Center apart from other venues he's worked at, but according to Haskins, every event they do is different, with a majority of clients creating their own custom menus. He attributes this to the rise in popularity of food shows on television.

"With all the different food shows and networks, people are becoming a lot more sophisticated about food," he said. "We have a great facility here, we can do any cuisine or dish that the client asks for. We show them the menu and it gives them a good idea of what we can do and we go from there"

Though the size of the events and creating custom menus for each client can be a challenge, Haskins wouldn't want it any other way.

"It's a lot of fun," he said. "This is like a dream job. The challenge is all part of it."

Sometimes the challenge involves jumping back on the line to explain something to his staff, or even washing dishes, but for Haskins, it's all part of the job.

"I jump in when there is a weakness in the support system," he said. "I have a great work ethic from growing up in Maine."

Along with his work ethic, Haskins' ability to focus on the moment is something that sets him apart.

"Right now I'm living in the moment," he said. "I just want to take care of this week and next week. I just want to do the best job I can do here."

When he's not in the kitchen, Haskins spends his spare time doing metal work, and many of his pieces are used at the convention center for events, like sushi display stands and grills that are used in the dining rooms for action stations. These unique presentations help set the Rhode Island Convention Center apart and keep its clients coming back year after year. Even when the economy took a downward turn, Haskins didn't lose too much business.

"We felt a small slow down, but everything was booked a year in advance and by the time it started to turn around, we had very few cancellations," he said.

Though Haskins and his crew are headed into their slow down for the season, he looks forward to when things start up again full swing in September.

"I'll work 24/7 if I have to," he said. "We all do what we have to do."

