

FOOD

**Mushrooms**

Varieties to bolster any menu,  
page 12

FOOD PEOPLE

**Latinos**

It's all about family,  
page 38

MONEY & SENSE

**Restaurant Vets**

Reinvent to stay  
relevant, page 47

PLUS

**Talk Shop**

Tips on great service,  
page 42

# FOOD FANATICS™

Sharing the Love of Food—Inspiring Business Success

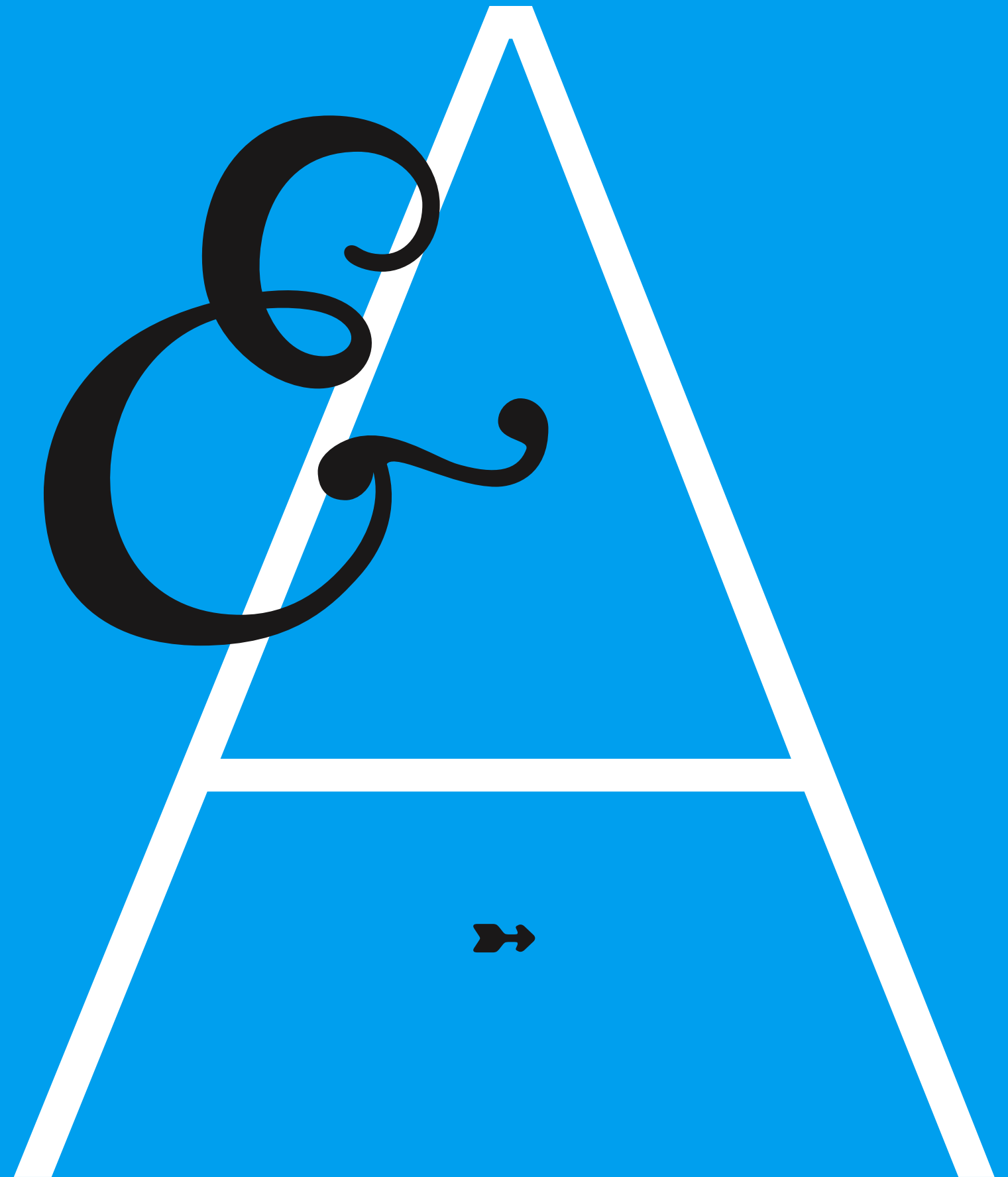
## LIFE OF PIE

This dessert has  
a story to tell PAGE 7

# GREAT *Service*

OPERATORS SHARE IN THEIR OWN WORDS WHAT IT TAKES TO IMPRESS DINERS

Compiled by Carly Fisher and Laura Yee





COMMENDABLE, CONSISTENT SERVICE IS THE ULTIMATE GOAL FOR THE CONSUMMATE CHEF AND RESTAURATEUR. EVERYONE HAS THEIR PROVEN METHODS, MANY ROOTED IN OLD-SCHOOL APPROACHES THAT WORK AS WELL TODAY AS THEY DID 25 YEARS AGO. FIVE OPERATORS IN THEIR OWN WORDS REVEAL THAT THE SIMPLEST METHODS CAN BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE IN THE NEVER-ENDING PURSUIT OF GREAT SERVICE.



#### Match Service with the Concept

“At Niche, while not stuffy by any means, we have a more formal service. Soups are poured at the table. An item roasted for two will be brought to the table, then taken back to the kitchen to be carved and plated.

But at our more casual restaurants, we don’t do that. Everything is price based, in my opinion. If you’re paying for quality service, then you should definitely be getting quality service. A lot of that adds to the mystique of a fine dining restaurant and the luxury of that experience.

There’s been a transition in restaurants these days to a lot more mid-range restaurants run by great chefs and restaurateurs at really affordable price points. They have the quality of fine dining restaurants, but with a different style of service—more fast-paced, casual service, which is fitting. You don’t go out to a restaurant where you’re going to get a pizza and \$12 bowl of pasta and necessarily expect them to come finish things tableside.

Nor do I think that would be cost sustainable. Having the front waiter, back waiter experience is a very expensive proposition. We’re in a time when labor is a lot more. But in a fine dining restaurant where you’re charging upward of \$100 per person just for food, I think it’s more appropriate to have that personal touch and connection with the guest.”

#### Gerard Craft, chef-owner

Niche, Pastaria, Brasserie and Taste in St. Louis, Mo.

Age: 33

Backstory: Bistro Toujours in Park City, Utah; Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles

#### Hospitality by the Book

“We rewrote our hiring process and focused our GMs on better selection, specifically hospitality-oriented people. We went back to a two-interview process, reference checks, a restaurant tour and gave our managers specific questions to ask the candidate. We also made a hard rule: If the candidate doesn’t smile, we don’t hire them. Our turnover a year later is below 50 percent (it was 85 percent). Less turnover and better new hires lead to consistency and better service for the guests.

We also developed a 12-page guide (developed by servers and managers) about hospitality. You can’t really measure hospitality, but the guide’s main focus was to equate hospitality with making guests feel at home—tying together the restaurant experience along with how you prepare meals at home for family and friends. Then we spoke to every employee about hospitality, the guide and dining in the restaurant. The results were positive: a 25-percent reduction in guest complaints.”

#### Bart Fricks, chief operating officer

Calhoun’s, Chesapeake’s and other concepts (totaling 17 locations) under Knoxville-based Copper Cellar Restaurants, Knoxville, Tenn.

Age: 46

Backstory: Vice president of operations for Ruby Tuesday for 18 years, including a period when the Maryville, Tenn.-based chain was opening more than 100 units a year



#### Role Play to Get It Right

“A great server doesn’t just understand the progression of the meal, but has the desire to make someone happy. Part of it is the constant messaging—these are the things that are going to make your customer happy.

We try to do a decent amount of role playing at pre-meal every day to try to envision situations and different ways to deal with them. It’s quite embarrassing in pre-meal to have someone “spiel the table”—when you greet the table and talk about specials—if they’re awkward and there are lots of pauses. If you’re embarrassed in front of your co-workers, while it’s a bit of a harsh method, it really forces you to get it right. At the end of the day, they have to go to a table with confidence and the desire to please customers. And if they don’t do that, we all end up with egg on our faces.”

#### Michael Leviton, chef-owner

Lumière, Area Four and soon-to-open A4 Pizza in Greater Boston

Age: 47

Backstory: Seven-time James Beard Award nominee; worked with Joyce Goldstein at Square One in San Francisco, Daniel Boulud at Le Cirque and Eric Ripert at Le Bernardin in New York

“

If my waiter says to the customer, ‘Did you enjoy everything?’ it means they haven’t been paying attention to the table in the first place. If they didn’t enjoy the meal, you better find out why.

—José Gutierrez of River Oaks

”

#### A Face Says 1,000 Words

“When I started working with French cuisine, there were many [employees] who were very good, many who were average. Today is no exception. There are so many who are incredible, and some who just plain shouldn’t be in the industry.

[Servers] are our ambassadors. If the food is great but the service is terrible, [customers] won’t come back. For example, I train my waiters to watch the expression of customers when they put the plate in front of them. If they don’t have an expression, then you have to wait until they take the first bite. That first bite tells you everything about the customer that you need to know. When you take a bite, your face is going to say whether you like it or not.

If my waiter says to the customer, “Did you enjoy everything?” it means they haven’t been paying attention to the table in the first place. If they didn’t enjoy the meal, you better find out why. The waiters need to constantly be on the lookout for the facial expression of the customer.”

#### José Gutierrez, chef-owner

River Oaks, Memphis, Tenn.

Age: 55

Backstory: Trained with Paul Bocuse; worked at Restaurant de France at the former Meridien Hotel in Houston; Chez Philippe at The Peabody hotel and Encore Restaurant and Bar in Memphis



#### Show Off Your Food

“I say, bring back the ‘cart’ as a service element. The cart can be whatever is seasonal and whatever the team loves at the moment. This allows diners to see what is being served, learn about it and watch the action. Gary Danko (in San Francisco) has an amazing cheese cart.

I have always wanted to do a tomato cart—push the cart around and show diners as you slice the heirloom and garnish with whatever they like. We don’t have a cart because space is an issue at a neighborhood restaurant like Campo (100 seats). We do, however, show the food to our guests. We sell heirloom tomatoes like that on the menu now (garnishes include sea salt, extra-virgin olive oil, balsamic and more). We sell about 250 pounds of heirlooms a week (during the season).

Our staff is trained on menu and farms extensively because we want them to be an extension of the kitchen.

In the winter, we carve Bistecca Fiorentina or dry-aged porterhouses for two people. We display truffles to shave on risotto or other special additions to a dish.”

#### Mark Estee, chef-owner

Campo in Reno, Nev. and Mammoth Lakes, Calif.; Burger Mel in Truckee, Calif. and Reno, Nev.

Age: 41

Backstory: Campo named one of Esquire’s Best New Restaurants of 2012; 2013 James Beard Award Semifinalist; Best Chef: West; Hyatt Hotels