

My American Dream

GREAT SUCCESS
AGAINST THE
ODDS

CEO AND RESTAURATEUR Cameron Mitchell

AT 16, CAMERON MITCHELL WAS A RUNAWAY living in a run-down apartment in Columbus, Ohio. But a job as a restaurant dishwasher turned his life around—and inspired an empire. Now, as CEO of Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, he runs 48 upscale eateries like Hudson 29 and Ocean Prime in 18 cities, with more than \$250 million in yearly revenue. “Once I fell in love with the restaurant business,” says Mitchell, 52, “you couldn’t outwork me.”

A Rocky Start

Mitchell says his behavior began to spiral downward at age 9 after his parents split. By middle school he was drinking alcohol and doing drugs; by high school he’d moved on to dealing. When his mom told him she’d called child services, he ran away, moving into a one-bedroom apartment with other teens, going days without eating. After contemplating suicide on his 16th birthday, Mitchell says, “I called my mom and went back home with the clothes on my back.”

A New Beginning

Determined to turn his life around, Mitchell went back to high school and began working nights as a dishwasher at a local steak house. “I loved the pandemonium,” he says. “Clear as a bell, I knew the restaurant business was where I wanted to be the rest of my life.”

Drive to Succeed

Despite his newfound incentive to work, poor grades initially kept him out of the Culinary Institute

of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. He began working double shifts to pay for community college, and ultimately graduated from the culinary school in 1986; he began working as a sous-chef soon afterward.

Taking a Chance

In 1992 Mitchell wrote down what his dream restaurant company would look like—corporate culture, dining experience and customer service—and began looking for investors. In 1993 he opened his first eatery, Cameron’s, in Columbus. “When you find your passion,” he says, “work doesn’t seem like work.”

Winning Philosophy

Though president of a multi-million-dollar restaurant empire, Mitchell says profit isn’t his No. 1 goal. “It’s to maintain our culture and values,” insists the married father of three. “Guest service runs through the depth of my heart. That’s success.”

—CATHERINE KAST

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1970s
TROUBLED YOUTH
“I was from a broken family. I never felt like I fit in,” he says. “As much as I was a bad kid, there was always a good kid underneath.”



←
1980s
GROWING PASSION
“I love taking care of people,” says Mitchell (cooking Easter dinner at his mother’s house). “It’s who I am.”

→
1994
TEAM BUILDING
“I never could’ve gotten anywhere without great staff,” says Mitchell (at his first restaurant in Columbus with wife Molly, center, and colleagues).



“I believe in genuine hospitality,” says Mitchell (at his N.Y.C. hot spot Ocean Prime). “It’s how you treat someone in your home.... It has to come from the heart.”

Photograph by IKE EDEANI

GROOMER: CASEY GREEN/LAURA MERCER/ARTISTS BY TIMOTHY PRIANO, FROM TOP: COURTESY: CAMERON MITCHELL(S)

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