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The Culture Club

Cameron Mitchell has an unwavering commitment to his restaurant group's culture, starting with values that prioritize the people in his company.

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56



44



38

CAMERON MITCHELL HAS AN UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO HIS COMPANY'S CULTURE AND VALUES.

CONTENTS

38 Entrepreneurial Ethics and Culture

BY CONNIE GENTRY

Cameron Mitchell shares his unconventional business philosophies.

44 Refined Dining to Redefine Malls

BY KEVIN HARDY

The founders of California Pizza Kitchen launch two new concepts.

50 A Heart for Hospitality

BY ALIA AKKAM

Garrett Harker's restaurant group says empathy for guests creates a positive dining experience.

56 Taste Sensations

BY KRISTINE HANSEN

The sensory appeal of food is intensified by sound, art, and setting.

CHEFS & INGREDIENTS

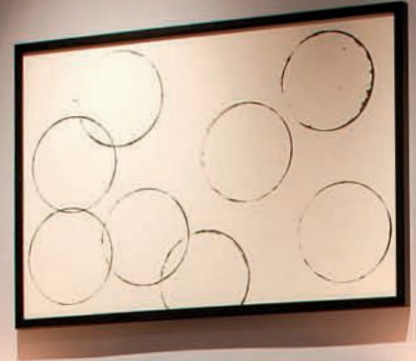
19 Aspirational and Approachable

Flavor enhancers introduce over-the-top innovation without intimidating diners.

LIQUID INTELLIGENCE

27 Bring Your Own Wine

Why restaurant operators allow—sometimes encourage—BYOB.



A Heart for Hospitality

BY ALIA AKKAM

Garrett Harker's restaurant empire is built around the simple philosophy that empathy for guests is what creates a positive restaurant experience.



CHEAP BEER, SEAMY CLUBS, AND OF COURSE BASEBALL:

A dozen years ago these were the draws to Boston's Kenmore Square, in the shadow of Fenway Park. So, when restaurateur Garrett Harker—the one-time general manager of No. 9 Park who opened B&G Oysters and the Butcher Shop with Chef Barbara Lynch—decided to strike out on his own, settling in such a rough-around-the-edges neighborhood was an ambitious move. It was also a game-changing play that birthed a restaurant empire.

A glamorous setting—high ceilings, petite red lamps, banquettes—combined with comforting dishes like a baked rigatoni that still graces the menu made Eastern Standard a convivial, all-day dining destination—almost from the moment it opened in May 2005. The sophisticated brasserie, inside the Hotel Commonwealth, also flaunted a roster of well-made classic cocktails like the Americano, reflecting an elevated shift in drinking culture that would fast dominate the country.

Soon, Island Creek Oyster Bar (there's now a location

SAM GREY

BOSTON LEGACY



MARK ANDREW DELEY

EASTERN STANDARD HAS BEEN AN ALL-DAY DINING DESTINATION SINCE IT OPENED IN 2005.



MELISSA OSTROW

THE PATIO AT BRANCH LINE IS A FAVORITE OUTDOOR-DINING SPOT IN WATERTOWN.



MELISSA OSTROW

THE HAWTHORNE'S SHERRY COBBLER COCKTAIL HAS AROMATIC GARNISHES OF CITRUS AND CINNAMON.

in Burlington, Vermont, too) and cocktail boîte The Hawthorne opened in the hotel, followed by oyster-and-beer haven Row 34 in on-the-rise Fort Point (as well as Portsmouth, New Hampshire), and Branch Line, a rotisserie in Watertown. Additional concepts, like Les Sablons in Harvard Square, are in the works for the ever-curious Harker.

Although he is an astute businessman, at the root of Harker's culinary triumphs is something profoundly human: the seemingly simple but hard-to-pull-off art of engaging hospitality. The James Beard Award nominee for Outstanding Restaurateur trusts his staff and delegates, nurturing collaboration, progression, and, ultimately, empowerment.

Consider how Eastern Standard opening bar manager Jackson Cannon is now bar director for the group and partner at The Hawthorne, while Eastern Standard general manager Andrew Holden is a Row 34 partner. An expansive education platform is one such way of fostering this organic development.

"While we've seen growth in the number of restaurants, my focus has always been on staff education and guest experience. Success in this industry can be fleeting, so it's crucial to have a clear-cut vision and knowledge that what you're doing can lead to it, but never stop striving and challenging yourself," Harker explains.

Witness the career progression of Molly Hopper Sandrof, who first started working at Eastern Standard as a host and today is the group's director of people and staff development.

"Garrett encourages personal confidence in service, so that our staff can make-of-the-moment decisions. That's where our education and training come in. He understands that people come from so many different realms in the restaurant industry and learn differently," she explains. "Some respond better to a hands-on bartending class, others to traditional notecards."

A refreshing mix of interactive elements and old-fashioned book learning make up the educational program, which is fueled by both a dedication to communication among employees and customers and a pristine attention to details.

"Empathy is at the core of any positive restaurant experience," Harker says. "An important aspect of social intelligence, empathy charges us to feel what guests are feeling and anticipate their needs."

"It's a powerful tool in creating a service experience that looks effortless, when in fact every detail is thoughtfully and carefully executed," he continues. "It's a philosophy that's emphasized throughout all of our restaurants' staff education and our overall culture."

Creativity is at the heart of training programs, with Hopper



GARRETT HARKER SAYS HIS FOCUS HAS BEEN ON STAFF EDUCATION, GUEST EXPERIENCE, AND MAINTAINING A CLEAR-CUT VISION.

KRISTIN TEIG

BOSTON LEGACY

Sandrof pointing out the necessity of intertwining business and play: “If you get too heavy-handed, it’s not so effective.” This means scavenger hunts and playing Jeopardy! are just as integral as studying maps and absorbing cocktail history.

Research projects bring staff members together on teams, where for a set amount of time they, as Hopper Sandrof describes, “cross-pollinate their skills on untraditional topics.” For example, a recent assignment had them delving into the city of Providence, exploring its cultural icons and neighborhoods. Those who choose to pursue fitting side projects, say, the Court of Master Sommeliers, are invited to forge tasting groups and study plans with the counsel of the wine director. The restaurant group, adds Hopper Sandrof, will then foot the bill of the test, because “it motivates them, inspires career longevity, and rewards them for work they put in independently.”

Cannon, a champion of craft cocktails well before they were in vogue, has witnessed numerous transformations at the bar since making his debut at Eastern Standard. Yet “the fundamentals of developing guest relations through a sincere desire to meet another person’s needs will never change.” Millennials, Cannon explains, “sometimes lack patience but have a wholesome desire to make an impact,” and he notes this demographic yearns for advancement. An alluringly well-rounded education is one way of satiating such enthusiasm.

One high-achieving millennial is assistant bar director Jared Sadoian, who oversees the beverage programs at all of Harker’s restaurants, and who first got a glimpse of the industry as an Eastern Standard barback while still a senior at MIT. (Sadoian, 28, is also featured as one of the industry’s rising stars in the March issue of *FSR*.) Money, Sadoian says, only goes so far as an incentive for maintaining high-quality employees. Today’s proliferation of establishments showcasing cocktails “puts a drag on our talent pool.”

It’s harder to find good people, so to retain them he reinforces the pricelessness of an unconventional and unparalleled training program, one that he created and implemented. Successful beverage education, he says, encompasses far more than memorizing the recipes of a menu’s drinks and regurgitating rote scripts. “We’re looking for employees to communicate and engage through the finer details and stories of spirits that go beyond the names of cocktails,” he says.

At the Hawthorne, where drinks include the Chartreuse Swizzle and Lagavulin Julep, staff members are expected to make good use of the elaborately detailed library of 1,000 cocktails accessed via Evernote.

They also read together, what they cheekily call a book club, examining such spirits- and industry-focused titles as Chantal Martineau’s *How the Gringos Stole Tequila*, Danny Meyer’s *Setting the Table*, and Robert Simonson’s *A Proper Drink*. “We take a chapter and sit down on Thursdays or Fridays and share insights and experiences reflective of our restaurants and others,” Sadoian says. “It gets these guys talking about things they didn’t think were more than a means to an end, creating long-term value.”

Blind, regular tastings are, of course, also essential, “sometimes with things we carry, and sometimes with things we normally don’t,” he says, adding that the latter are excellent points of reference. “Every time we explore, some bartender who has pounded maybe 1,000 shots of Jameson in a lifetime but never thought about it critically before now then realizes why it tastes the way it does. When they try a different Irish whiskey, that tasting will have informed their experience with the new one.”

Kicking off the year, January is a designated education month, featuring seminars on topics like aging spirits and good posture. It’s also

a chance for employees to slide into different realms and expand their worldview.

Folks inundated with beer at Row 34 refresh their palates with mezcal tastings, just as those at Eastern Standard are enlightened through oyster discussions. Such a strong arsenal of wisdom only buoys staff, heightening the restaurants’ brand of hospitality.

“We have been on an arc at times in the last decade where product knowledge and the pursuit of technical bartending ability has eclipsed the hospitality conversation,” recalls Cannon, but getting to know their guests has always remained a priority.

“This element,” he continues, “is what connects all of our restaurants and bars culturally: the belief that the pursuit of knowledge is only meaningful when it’s paired with the intention to recognize guests’ expectations and meet or exceed them.”

It’s a commanding ethos that Harker has shaped from day one of Eastern Standard, convincing patrons there was a worthwhile reward in venturing to and eating in a gritty slice of Boston.

“Of course the food has to be good, but it’s secondary,” he says. “People need to feel special and cared for. Our success is a credit to the efforts of the amazing team—from dishwashers to servers to management—that we’ve cultivated. It’s hard to imagine where we’d be without all of them.” ■

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—Garrett Harker