

BUSINESS, B4



AREA FOUR CHEF TALKS RESTAURANTS SUCCESS

RESTAURANT Q&A

Area Four chef shares keys to success

By Marc Filippino

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Area Four Chef Michael Leviton tells anyone who wants to get into the restaurant business they better be sure they want it badly enough, and they should be tough as nails when it comes to criticism.

"You have to have rhinoceros-thick skin," said Leviton, who owns and operates Area Four in Kendall Square. "Every customer comes in is a critic on every plate that comes out. At the end of the day, it's all riding on you."

Along with Area Four, Leviton owns Lumiere in Newton and A4 Pizza in Somerville. But word of his successful restaurant career has spread well beyond Massachusetts' borders. This year, Leviton was nominated for the 2014 Best Northeast Chef category of The James Beard Foundation Awards.

Leviton spoke with the Chronicle about the changes in restaurants across the country and about his personal success.

Q: How did you get into cooking in the first place?

A: When I was growing up my mom wrote a low-cholesterol kosher cookbook. At a pretty early age I was exposed to cooking that manipulates flavor and texture. Though I cook different than my mom that was part of the inspiration.

When I was a teenager I worked at a few delis, but knew I didn't want to do that when I was older.

When I took time off from college, the only thing I had to fall back on were restaurants. I started off as a prep cook, then line cook and worked my way up.

At one restaurant, La Boca in Middletown, Connecticut, when I was 19, a kitchen was left in our hands. Just me and another girl, who was 20 at the time, and we didn't screw it up too badly.

Later on I went to San Francisco and fell into top-quality restaurants right away and I was fortunate to have gone from top-notch chef to top-notch chef.

Q: As someone who's worked both on the East and West coasts, what are some of the major differences between restaurant scenes?

A: I haven't worked on the West Coast since 1996 so I can't tell you with great certainty any more. When I was there, in Northern California, you're dealing with this near-perfect growing climate, where you have these great long seasons and you have a food culture that is in many ways second to none. Food is like religion there.

Because of the caliber of ingredients there and the attention to quality, you have a cuisine at its heart. You're getting a great



Chef Michael Leviton owns Area Four in Kendall Square, as well as Lumiere in Newton and A4 Pizza in Somerville. COURTESY PHOTO / JILL GOLDMAN

product and trying not to screw it up.

It's certainly getting better since I've been back in Boston, but it sort of started out in California.

Now, I think, in some ways because of the cooking talent pool, you can go to any major city and get a really great meal. That wasn't the case 20-25 years ago.

Q: What was the inspiration for the restaurants you've opened and operated in Massachusetts?

A: For Lumiere, when I started I envisioned having this Bistro out in the suburbs. I grew up in Newton so I knew the demographics and people. I really wanted to provide a bistro for people outside the city.

In areas like New York and Paris, better restaurants were moving out of the downtown and moving to where people lived. All of

those things were the model for what I wanted to do at Lumiere.

At Area Four, I wanted to do something more primal and simple and more everyday. More that you can go everyday and role up your sleeves with no coat and tie. It's just nice, simple food out of a wood-burning oven.

It was a response to the molecular gastronomy restaurants at the time. They were doing some weird things to get it or some other science experiment.

We started as a restaurant program with a pizza joint and turned out being a pizza joint with a restaurant program. It's a really neighborhood place — just pizza and beer. You can't go wrong with that.

Q: What's it like to be nominated for a James Beard Award?

A: It's a very nice



The inside of Area Four in Kendall Square. COURTESY PHOTO / MELISSA OSTROW

recognition that you're doing a pretty okay job. For 364 days a year it doesn't really enter into my consciousness, but for one day it scares me sh**less.

It's an honor to make the long list, short list and eventually get the nomination. I imagine it would be nice to win one day.

Q: How do you go about managing three very different restaurants?

A: It's hard to be in three places at once. I drive around a lot and have a fabulous team. For many years at Lumiere I was on the line every night, with a second and third place it's hard to do that.

It's learning to let go a little bit and learning to trust your team. You can't cook everything and need to realize what your new job role will be.

Q: What would you tell someone who is interested

in entering the industry?

A: Go get a real job (laughing). You absolutely have to love it. It's such hard work. Some days it's frustrating. You have to understand what it involves.

The best two pieces of advice I got about entering the industry is that you have to have rhinoceros-thick skin. Every customer that comes in is a critic on every plate that comes out. At the end of the day, it's all riding on you. I was also told get there before everybody and leave after everybody and keep your head down the whole time. It's all about hard work.

Area Four is located at 500 Technology Square, Cambridge. Chef Michael Leviton's other locations include A4 Pizza at 445 Somerville Ave. in Somerville and Lumiere at 1293 Washington St., Newton.