

FOODSERVICE EAST PRESENTS

SECRETS OF **SUCCESS**

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An ongoing series of interviews with chefs, restaurateurs and foodservice operators, Secrets of Success looks at the paths taken to professional recognition and acclaim.



Robert Mancuso

Executive Chef, The Country Club, Chestnut Hill, MA
By Foodservice East

Like many chefs, Robert Mancuso, one of only 66 Master Certified Chefs in the world, grew up influenced by his Italian and German grandparents from whom he learned “the simple pleasures of homemade pasta and pizzelle cookies prepared in an iron pizzelle maker on the stovetop, and the joys of homemade pickled vegetables, jams and preserves. “I believe these influences ignited my passions for cooking.”

FOODSERVICE EAST SECRETS OF SUCCESS

FSE: Where did you grow up? At what age did you start cooking?

MANCUSO: I grew up in a suburb of Reading, PA, called West Wyomissing and started cooking as part of a co-op program through high school at age 16. But I remember cooking at home long before that.

FSE: What role has the American Culinary Federation played in your professional development?

MANCUSO: The American Culinary Federation played such an important role in my professional growth by giving me, as well as many young culinarians, the opportunity to network through local, regional and national meetings. I was also fortunate to become a member of 1996 ACF Culinary Team USA. This allowed me to pursue my culinary interest on the highest level. While on Team USA, we traveled abroad to study and compete; this was a huge advantage for me as a young cook.

FSE: If you could give aspiring chefs one piece of advice, what would it be?

MANCUSO: Don't be afraid to fail. You might be driven by a fear of failure as much as a desire for success. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default. No one ever sets out to fail. But being afraid to fail means you'll be afraid to try.

FSE: What's most rewarding about your job?

MANCUSO: Working with some very talented cooks and supporting them in their endeavors. I take a lot of pride in seeing my cooks succeed and grow professionally. I might even say I live vicariously through them. You may think it would be the other way around, but they inspire me to create the best working environment possible. I believe this gives them the same opportunities I had when I was aspiring to become a chef.

FSE: You are one of 66 Certified Master Chefs in the U.S., something you aspired to for a long time. In addition you've won 13 gold medals in various national and international competitions, have been in the Intereenationale Kochkunst Ausstellung International Culinary Competition and are a member of Les Toques Blanches. Of all these achievements and honors which one has been the biggest thrill?

MANCUSO: I'm certain they were all at the top of the thrill meter when I was actively pursuing them, although the most recent achievement, becoming a Certified Master Chef has been the biggest thrill! I had always believed by achieving the designation of CMC I would be reaching the pinnacle of my craft, but now I'm realizing it's just a stepping stone to the next goal.

FSE: What is your 'secret' of success?

MANCUSO: Here are three secrets that I believe lead to success. The first is recognizing the benefits of achieving your goals. Setting and achieving goals is not something to take lightly, once you set a goal you better be prepared to achieve it! Create a plan that will lead you there, no matter how important or how insignificant the goal may seem.

Achieving goals will ultimately boost your confidence and knowingly strengthen your abilities.

The second is continuing your education. Many chefs will find themselves involved in different aspects of our industry, but one thing I am certain of is that any successful executive or professional has not ignored his or her right to grow academically. Education is the key factor that leads to success, as you fill the void for knowledge you are ultimately succeeding.

Learn the true meaning of the word respect. Respect is a manifestation of a personal quality or ability – a sense of worth. As culinarians and representatives of our profession, we are all in privileged positions. Be courteous and exercise your right to respect; not just the person sitting next to you but reach out and touch the world around you. Acknowledge that you have the ability and the authority to make the right choices.

FSE: Has country club foodservice changed over the years, and if so, in what ways?

MANCUSO: That is a difficult question to answer because most clubs have different missions for their culinary programs. I think the easiest way to answer the question is that the consumers overall expectation has changed over the years, and the level of quality in respect to food products, management, sanitation and food safety has changed. As you set your sights on raising the level of education, the end result will always be very positive.

FSE: Do you cook at home, and if so, what's in your refrigerator?

MANCUSO: I'm a chef, which means I'm not home much. My wife always has people say to her, "Oh you're married to a chef, you must eat well at home". She replies, "He's never home."

But when I am, we split the responsibilities. We always prepare a nice Sunday dinner, either roast chicken or fresh pasta with a slow cooked tomato sauce full of sausage, pork shoulder or meatballs. Believe it or not, there is not much in the refrigerator because we eat fresh ingredients, but I am a condiment freak—the doors are loaded with pickled goodies!

FSE: What do you like to eat when you go out?

MANCUSO: We switch it up ... Indian, Mexican, Vietnamese or Thai. We have our favorite spots. If we get a babysitter and have a good night out on the town, we definitely go high-end. We do like to be wined and dined occasionally.

FSE: What food trends do you find most interesting today as a chef?

MANCUSO: I love what Nathan Myhrvold is doing in his series Modernist Cuisine, although I'm not sure if what he is doing is trendy or a beginning to something bigger. I embrace international trends, when the tapas thing hit America, I think it sparked a desire for small plates, which was a long time coming.