

The Beach Club's On-going Culinary Adventure

The Problem and the Opportunity

Food has been and will forever be a “core issue” within any private club. Members often judge the success of the Board and General Manager in terms of food related issues---is the food good, is it consistent, is it “value priced,” is it interesting, is it appealing to a wide range of members and is it delivered in a cost effective way. As any manager or Board member will attest, though food “success” is easy to define it is notoriously hard to achieve. The competition from the surrounding communities has increased, members are less willing than ever to subsidize losing food and beverage operations and the expectations of the membership are evolving upward at an accelerating pace.

The Beach Club over the last three years has looked closely at its own food operations, redefined the manager-chef-club relationship and has dramatically increased regular member sales, lowered food and labor costs and created a “food ambiance” that has generated rave comments from the entire membership. Both the Board of Directors and the General Manager are pleased that the old “ho-hums” comments on the food operation have been translated into “yahoos.” Both would be pleased to say that the “culinary love-fest” continues into the twenty-first century.

How they achieved the turnaround they did is an object lesson for other clubs to consider as they investigate their own “culinary culture” for the twenty-first century.

The Right Chef, Manager, Board and Club in the Right Place at the Right Time

The Beach Club was created in 1923 in Santa Monica, California as a casual, family oriented beach and athletic environment. The club historically catered to a very casual beach community on the one hand and to a very formal dining room community on the other. Comments on the grill food were usually good, since the expectations were modest and achievable, but the Dining Room was always a “back water” eating experience---neither memorable nor consistent, simply “there” on the odd occasion when it was needed for the immediate family.

What could the Board and General Manager do to “jump start” the dining room operation, reduce losses and generate a “culinary buzz” amongst the membership?

Gregg Patterson, General Manager of the Beach Club since 1982, figured he needed to look more closely at the guiding principles he would need to use in searching out the perfect chef for the new “push” toward culinary creativity.

- 1. Synergy between the Manager and Chef:** The Chef would need to connect with the manager’s vision of the club and to be energized by the relationship. They would need to have a clear “values alignment” when it came to food operations, team development, hospitality service, the club experience and the Beach Club community. He would need to be able to talk strategically, to reflect intelligently and to articulate effectively on the club experience. He would need to be an interesting personality with a somewhat unconventional view of the world. He would need to be creative and experimental. He would need to be an “energy engine” and not an “energy sinkhole.” In short, someone that the membership and the manager would go out of their way to speak to.
- 2. Ability to Create a “Culinary Culture”:** A culture consists of values, systems, facility, aesthetics, product and people. The right chef would have the ability to create such a culture by melding all of these pieces together into a coherent whole. He would need to have proven his aptitude for doing so by having done it before.

3. **The Chef Would Have to Be Committed to The Manager's Concept of the Hospitality Mission Statement:** Gregg Patterson believes that hospitality professionals at every level need to be committed to the "Hospitality Mission Statement" Chef's have sometimes believed themselves exempt from these principles, much to the chagrin of the management, the staff, the membership and the Board of Directors. The right chef would be in agreement with "The Ethics of Service.":
 - a. That service people are first and foremost in the happiness business.
 - b. That service people give dignity to those they serve and serve with.
 - c. That service people anticipate need before those who need it know it.
 - d. That service people know the technology they need to produce the high quality goods they offer with the least expenditure of time, energy and resources.
 - e. That service people understand the concept of clean---of physical clean and of being "clean and rational" in their thinking.
 - f. That service people are a presence---physically there and mentally involved.
 - g. That service people see problems then do something about it.
4. **The Chef would have to have "Club Sense":** Club sense has to do with the right way of dealing with members, staff and guests within a private club. "Club sense" is different than "hotel sense" or "commercial restaurant sense." Some people quickly understand the distinction while others do not. The right chef would either need it when they arrive or be capable of getting it quickly once at the club.
5. **The Chef would have to be a "Marketeer":** Marketing has to do with finding out what people want, then giving it to them. The right chef would be more than a processor of information given them by others. The right chef would be able to search out wants amongst the membership and then configure their offerings to correspond to those perceptions. He would need to be a "people person."
6. **The Chef would have to have Equity Thinking:** The right chef would treat the food operation at the club like their own restaurant. Having owned and operated their own restaurant in the past would be a plus since having done so would dramatize their understanding of "ownership thinking."
7. **The Chef would have to be able to operate multiple food outlets simultaneously, creatively and with enthusiasm:** The chef would have to have had experience in banquet operations, preferably in hotels, in fine dining restaurants and in casual bistro style operations, to have loved each in their own special way and be willing to service all of them at one and the same time.
8. **The Chef would have to understand the "Cult of the Chef" and use that creatively to his, the manager's and the Board's advantage:** The food channel, increasing sophistication of the dining community and the growing affluence of society have all combined to heighten the status of the chef. The right chef would understand this growing adulation, would have the personality to take advantage of the trend and be willing to get out and about so that the "adoring masses" can touch and feel their hero on a regular basis.
9. **The Chef would have to be a true "Culinary Leader":** Leadership has to do with vision, with a passion for that vision, the ability to generate enthusiasm amongst others for that vision and the talent to execute that vision. The right chef would need to have demonstrated this leadership in the past and to convey their ability to do so in the present.

Once the principles were clearly established in his mind, Patterson needed to find the right chef.

Luck is about preparation meeting opportunity. Luck occurred at the Beach Club when Gregg's and Chef Whitney Werner's lifetime of preparation and reflection met the Beach Club Opportunity.

Chef Whitney actually grew up at the Beach Club as a son of a member. The Beach Club and all that it represented were an integral part of his character. He understood club sense from both a global and a Beach Club perspective.

His passion for food developed young and he decided to get the best education he could by attending the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park and by working around the world in as many different culinary settings as he could. The CIA gave him the operating fundamentals that he would need and stimulated his curiosity about food, food operations, the hospitality experience and the world of business. His education then lead him to Hawaii, the Orient and Europe to flesh out his book knowledge with “trench experience” in hotels and restaurants throughout the world.

Having spent years honing his skills and developing his vision, Chef Whitney decided to return to his first love, Southern California, and open his own restaurant amongst the community he knew as a child. The restaurant, which was in the fashionable part of Santa Monica known as “Montana Avenue,” became a bistro of choice for the community in general and the Beach Club members in particular.

More than five years of owner-operator pressures, though, finally got to him and “quality of life” became a serious issue for him and his new fiance. He sold the restaurant and hung his shingle out as a restaurant consultant serving start up operations throughout the Southwest.

Patterson was searching for the right Chef. He knew what he wanted but didn’t know where to find it. Having known Whitney for almost fifteen years as a member, and having a tremendous respect for him as a professional, Patterson gave him a call to discuss chef possibilities. It didn’t take long before both realized that the Beach Club opportunity was the perfect opportunity for each.

Reconfiguring the Package and the Product

So how could Patterson attract such as Chef as Whitney, keep him “buzzed” about the club for years and develop an “equity mentality” in a private club setting?

The time had arrived for some radical departures, a time to “hang it all out” and go for what one might consider “culinary broke.” So he decided to offer up the following and see if he could hook Chef Whitney for the foreseeable future:

- a. A different compensation package:** Patterson decided to offer a lower guaranteed salary than area clubs and restaurants but add several “kickers” to inspire performance: a bonus to hit a target cost of sales number, a bonus to hit a target labor cost number, and a bonus for each dollar of regular member sales above a baseline year (the previous, under the previous chef who had been at the club for eleven years when he was released in favor of “the new vision”.....) adjusted for inflation. Doing so would ensure efficient production, would emphasize that reputations were based on member usage of the dining facilities and would ensure that one of these “goods” was not sacrificed to achieve the other---that member sales weren’t increased because food was all but given away and that costs weren’t achieved by sacrificing a broad pattern of member usage.
- b. A different set of personalized benefits:** Every organization has “generic benefits” given to all employees: health insurance, holiday pay and the like. But the best organizations always make sure that they personalize benefits to the unique personalities of the people they review. What would give Chef Whitney “the buzz?” Patterson offered access to the dining room for his preferred guests and, in lieu of additional salary, would provide a food and beverage credit to pay for it. Whitney was given access to The Beach Club University, a “university within the club” run by the General Manager for the upwardly mobile members of the management and employee team. He was given direct access to the General Manager, the Board of Directors, Finance Committee, House Committee, Wine Committee and Strategic Planning Committee both through personal introductions to the Chairmen and by an open invitation to attend all of their meetings thereby having input into the ultimate fate of his “culinary culture.”

- c. A Named Restaurant Complex within the club itself:** Hotels have long invited “name restaurants” to be sub-contractors within the hotel itself. Without going so far as to hand over the operation to the Chef, Patterson decided to progressively identify the Chef with the club and the membership with the Chef by, first, creating a unique Bistro called Whitney’s in an unused part of the club, then, if successful, naming the main dining room then bar complex as Whitney’s as well. The idea--to create an ownership relationship between the restaurant complex and the chef himself and by so doing create an “equity mentality” where none traditionally existed. Of all the decisions made, this was probably the most radical given the history of clubs, the possibility for failure within the restaurant and the uncertainty of Chef Whitney and his culinary vision.

The ideas were radical as befit both Patterson’s and Chef Werner’s personalities. Whitney accepted and with both reputations on the line, the adventure began.

Delivery and Results

The “adventure” is three years old now and has been enormously successful. Regular business---that is, the number of covers served--- is up over 60%, bar sales (which grow synergistically with food sales) are up dramatically and members rave over the operation. The kitchen team has been strengthened and turnover is all but non-existent. Three Whitney’s now exist offering bistro dining to a wide spectrum of the member community more nights per week than ever before. Function business is up significantly and premium prices can now be charged for the menus which are offered. The Chef is now the “full time in house consultant” to the Grill operation, thereby giving diners contemporary and innovative specials while enhancing the already well received “old standbys” which have made the Grill the unique casual environment that it has always been. He roams from table to table during dinner, ooh’ing and aah’ing members and their guests. He serves hors d’oeuvres himself, often mans a buffet station, gives cooking demonstrations and holds “jam sessions” in the kitchen (he is, after all, a lead guitarist!) for aspiring musicians amongst the members. And there’s more---he has worked with the Athletic Committee to create a “Beat the Chef” surf competition, has worked with the Youth Committee to create unique cooking opportunities for the Kids Only Klubhouse program and has worked with the House Committee to develop wine hors d’oeuvre and dinner events that target the elusive under 35 crowd and the “empty nesters” between 45 and 55. Whitney remains happy, enthused and creative, his numbers are right on, his compensation is growing and his sense of ownership is amplified each day. What better way to “own your own restaurant,” create your own “chef cult” and to create a great life for yourself in the process?

All of which means that the members, Board of Directors, the Finance Committee, the House Committee and the General Manager are pleased with the “great experiment.” Participating in a “culinary culture” that spreads joy and happiness is enough to make the decision makers within this, and any other club, very happy.

And to top it all off, Gregg Patterson, who is an ordained minister and the “officiant of choice” for many of the members and their children, performed the marriage ceremony for Whitney and his lovely wife Moon almost a year ago in the wedding chapel at The Beach Club!

Will It Work Anywhere Else?

The Beach Club is unique private club since it is an old line club that is both casual and experimental. The Board of Directors has always had a warm relationship with the General Manager and has supported many of his “unusual directions” over the years. The manager himself is unusual given his undergraduate degree in British imperial history, his Masters Degree from the Hotel School at Cornell University, his eccentricities, his special relationship with the members, his enthusiasm for experimentation and his passion for the club community. Chef Whitney is unique given his lifelong relationship with clubs, his public relations personality, his technical expertise, his world wide exposure to food operations, his food service consulting business and his ownership of his own restaurant in an area frequented by Beach Club members. The synergies created by these players is evident and may well be unique.

Or is it?

Boards and Managers everywhere need to look at what the Beach Club did, ask themselves if any of it could be done at their club with the managers they have, and determine what strategic and tactical principles they should be following in their own food operations. If nothing else, they should ponder the larger issues represented in the Beach Club's success and affirm, deny or modify those to their own ends.

Either way, the club "food adventure" will be endlessly entertaining for Board, Managers and Chefs for as long as the concept of the private club exists. Enjoy the journey!