

finding your ideal career

Do you see a place in foodservice for your particular talents? Those who have gone before say, go for it. / BY JAN GREENBERG

“If I went through a list of my fellow 1990 Culinary Institute of America graduates, and counted the ones who are still in the kitchen wearing a white hat, that list would be pretty short,” says Ed Doyle, president of RealFood Consulting, a Cambridge, Massachusetts-based hospitality consulting business.

Maureen Dumas, vice president of experiential education and career services at Johnson & Wales University, Providence, Rhode Island, points out that there are many career paths available to people with a culinary background: research and development, nutrition, corporate, sales, and institutions such as hospitals and schools.

“But a large segment is entrepreneurial,” Dumas says. “We are finding that many culinary professionals are shaping their own career paths, developing and opening their own businesses.”

grab that opportunity

Doyle is one of the many chefs who have branched out into careers that, while still food-related, have expanded beyond the boundaries of the kitchen. When he was director of culinary operations for Aura Restaurant at the Seaport Boston Hotel, he received four stars from the *Boston Herald* and coverage in magazines that include *Food & Wine* and *Food Arts*. It was while he was in the process of developing his own establishment, though, that he began to do restaurant consulting.

“I could see that my own restaurant was not going to work, but at the same time, the consulting was going well,” he says. “I thought, ‘What the hell. Let’s see if we can make a run of this.’”

RealFood Consulting offers services that range from concept development/support to administrative, culinary, financial and front-of-house operations. The company’s clients include James Beard Best Chef Northeast award winner Tony Maws, chef/owner, Craigie on Main, Cambridge, and the city’s Sheraton Commander Hotel.

“What we bring is experience, a diverse team and the ability to say, ‘We have seen this before,’” Doyle says. “We do everything from going through financial systems to spending a day watching you work with your team. It’s particularly interesting with chef-owned independent restaurants. Inevitably, there are strong personalities who are successful and competent, but they will open only one or two

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

1) Ed Doyle's RealFood Consulting offers experience and a diverse team to help restaurants and their chefs be successful. 2) Sarah Stitham enjoys sharing her culinary expertise, such as how to bake an award-winning apple pie. 3) Paul Finney prepares roasted pork tenderloin salad with roasted sweet potatoes and grilled onions at October Kitchen. 4) Summer Harvest Salad, with fresh corn, lightly pickled onions and cucumbers, tomatoes and greens, is one of October Kitchen's healthy, home-style menu items. 5) Ed Doyle is one of the many chefs who have branched out into food-related careers beyond the boundaries of the kitchen.



restaurants in their careers, and we open one or two a month. We bring a level of experience and history that allows the chefs to relax and breathe and focus on what is important.”

For Doyle, whose business is now expanding to New York and San Francisco, and for many others, success has been based on the ability to both recognize opportunity and act on it.

use what you know

Sarah Stitham, owner of Revamp professional organizing services, Olivebridge, New York, began her working life as a chef. “From childhood, I loved food,” she says. “And as soon as I was old enough, I worked in restaurants, hanging out in the kitchen and asking, ‘How did you make this? What goes into this?’”

She attended The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, New York, and worked as a sous chef in restaurants in Florida and New York’s Hudson River Valley. Then, a friend recommended her to a celebrity looking for a chef to make a weekend meal at her house.

“And with great trepidation, I accepted,” Stitham says. “This was a dinner party for city people who go out every night of the week. I am the queen of meatloaf, and when I suggested we serve that, she immediately said, yes. And I quickly realized that what people really want is good, homemade, local food.”

Stitham became the client’s personal chef, and through her, met others with weekend houses in the area. She began to outfit their kitchens, buying pots and pans and stocking high-quality ingredients.

The venture soon evolved into a catering business, but after a few years, Stitham decided she needed to step back a bit and decide what to do next. “I thought, ‘What do I know? What can I do? What do I have?’”

She realized that she knew estate owners with beautiful properties, and founded Charmed Places, a portfolio of privately owned river estates catering to New York brides. “I managed and coordinated everything, from finding the location to supervising caterers,” Stitham says. “Basically, I was an event planner.” In 2003, she sold the business.

She says, “Life took a turn when I realized that people really love food, but so few know how to cook or outfit their kitchens. I cannot tell you how many people tell me they don’t know how to cook. They spend money eating out. They are overweight. I help them set up a kitchen. What I love is teaching people what I know.”

develop an edge

When public relations professional Helen Baldus graduated from college, she planned to become a chef. She worked at restaurants in Philadelphia, then moved to San Francisco, where she staged at just-opened Jardinière. She told Richard Reddington, chef de cuisine, that she wanted to cook. “And he said, ‘I don’t have any jobs, but if you

want to, come, and you can work for free,’” Baldus says. Within a month, owner Traci Des Jardins offered Baldus a full-time position in garde manger.

“After a few years, I pretty much realized that I was not made for that kind of high-intensity life,” says Baldus. “If you don’t drive on adrenalin and are not particularly competitive, there is really no place for you in the restaurant business.”

She took time off, and decided not to go back to cooking. “But food was what I cared about,” she says. She entered the food studies program at New York University, knowing it would open some doors, but not sure which ones. Then, a friend who worked in food public relations introduced her to Jennifer Baum, who was just opening Bullfrog + Baum, a hospitality marketing agency in New York. Baldus started as a summer intern and stayed for nine years before moving to Watershed Communications, based in Portland, Oregon. Today, she oversees the company’s New York office as media relations director.

“My food and cooking background gives me an edge,” Baldus says. “I know how to talk to chefs. I can do a recipe and look at a menu and understand the concept behind it in a way that people without my background can’t.”

find a mission

After graduating from Johnson & Wales University, Providence, Paul Finney was a chef at several Hartford, Connecticut, restaurants, including Restaurant Bricco, where he met his wife Alison. “I got a little burned out on the restaurant business,” says Finney. “It was 80 hours a week, all nights and all holidays and weekends.”

In 2000, the Finneys opened October Kitchen, a personalized chef service in Manchester, Connecticut. They decided to gear a portion of their service to seniors who needed a little extra help and appreciated home-style, healthy meals. Finney’s mission was to make sure that his senior customers could stay in their homes as long as possible.

“I saw with my grandmother how important good nutrition is for the elderly,” he says. “When she was by herself, her refrigerator was practically empty. She wouldn’t eat and she wouldn’t shop. But when I cooked for her, she cleaned her plate.”

October Kitchen offers a range of services, from regular home delivery to a retail store where customers can purchase a meal to be reheated at home.

“Now we have about a thousand senior clients,” Finney says, “and our business continues to grow.”

go with your passion

Erik Blauberg, former executive chef at 21 Club, New York, is founder of EB WorldWide Hospitality Consulting, based in the city. “This was a natural,” he says. “I’ve been breathing the restaurant industry my entire life and working in restaurants since I



was 12 years old. At 21 Club, a lot of my job consisted of turning around the restaurant. I had to come up with new ideas to make the business grow, implement new menus, and was responsible for hiring the right people and learning the fundamentals of working in a union environment.”

Blauberger recently developed Culinary Passport, bespoke culinary tours where participants visit farms and producers, sample ingredients and dine at world-class restaurants. “Being a chef, I was always interested in the origins of different ingredients and loved traveling around the world to see where these ingredients came from, as well as meeting their producers,” he says. “I built

relationships with these producers and farmers, and Culinary Passport was designed to share these once-in-a-lifetime experiences with others who have a passion for food and travel.”

For culinary professionals thinking about alternate careers and transitioning, Blauberger offers this advice: “If you have an idea you are passionate about, you have to believe in yourself and have perseverance. Something may not take off the way you want it to, and you might run into a few obstacles along the way, but you shouldn’t give up. Instead, go at it again, maybe with a different approach, and keep trying.” ■

Above left, Erik Blauberger gathers truffles on one of his Culinary Passport tours, and right, visits a market.

JAN GREENBERG, AUTHOR OF HUDSON VALLEY HARVEST (COUNTRYMAN PRESS, 2003), IS BASED IN RHINEBECK, NEW YORK.

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