

Defining Success

The closing of Jeff and Sally Buben's iconic Southern restaurant, Vidalia, this past December, gave me much to think about. We're all aware that the life span of a restaurant is finite, and eventually, forces beyond the control of even the most dedicated owners, influence tough decisions. Having been friends with Jeff and Sally since the mid-80s when Jeff and I reopened the Occidental together, and then as a neighbor to Vidalia throughout the 90s, with the kitchen door of the original Sam & Harry's just down the alley, (we borrowed product from them so often, there was a path worn into the pavement), I had



a first-hand view of the thoughtfulness and energy that the Buben's put into a tough basement location, creating incredible success for almost 25 years.

Supposedly, I was Jeff's boss at The Occidental.

I say that, because as anyone who has worked with him will tell you, Jeff never understood that concept. No one gets more out of Jeffrey than he asks of himself so the concept of having a boss wasn't ever something he was aware of. I was very fortunate to have worked with him and learned much of what I know today from him. We had lots of fun together, and I am thankful for the relationship we developed and maintained.

California wine country trips, getaways to NYC, and a particularly memorable overnight stay at the Inn at Little Washington that Oliver and Phil Carr treated us to in recognition of the successful re-opening of the Occidental — my wife Karen and I cherish those memories. Like all couples of our age, raising kids, running the businesses and life in general gets in the way sometimes, but Karen and I will always consider Jeff and Sally good friends.

One particular late night conversation with Jeff came to mind earlier this week. The Carrs had asked us to open a second restaurant for them in the McPherson building. McPherson Square was a very tough part of town in the late 80s with lots of illicit activity after the offices emptied out for the night and the weekend. I had assumed that Jeff would oversee the kitchens of both restaurants. Jeff lectured me at great length that a true chef can be chef of only one restaurant. And so we opened McPherson Grill with Jon Lenchner as the chef. It was a critical success, did incredible daytime business, but couldn't overcome its neighborhood at night and on the weekends. Shortly after I left the Oliver Carr Company, Phil Carr sold the lease to Paul Cohn, and Georgia Brown's has thrived there ever since.

I've been thinking about that conversation, especially in thinking about how we define success in our industry today. In my "day job" as a consultant, I frequently speak to young restaurateurs and chefs. Some want to own one restaurant. Others want to expand to five restaurants in five years.

Back in the 70s and 80s, Jeff was absolutely right. The three most celebrated restaurants in the US at the time, Lutèce, Le Français and Le Bec Fin were all driven by their chef/owners, André Soltner, Jean Banchet and Georges Perrier respectively. Even the famous American chefs of the day,

Larry Forgione of An American Place, Barry Wine of The Quilted Giraffe, Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, among many others, were all associated with one restaurant, and more often than not, they'd be seen inside their kitchen during service. There were exceptions, Wolfgang Puck being the most notable, and those exceptions began the trend we see presently. Today, it seems that success is marked by your name on six restaurants, two cookbooks and appearances on a regular rotation on one of the cable stations. But the questions we have to ask ourselves are:

- "Are chef/owners happier than they were 30 years ago?"
- "Is the celebrity status of chefs more important than the quality of food and service in driving restaurant revenue in fine dining these days?"
- "What is the definition of success for a restaurant today?"

My guess is that there is no clear answer. Obviously, there is no happiness in not being able to pay your bills. So much of the satisfaction of being a restaurant owner is in being a financial success. No matter how humble you are, there is also satisfaction in recognition from your peers and the public at-large, which in turn drives business and contributes to being able to pay the bills.

And yet, I wonder if someone of high celebrity status, like Bobby Flay, with all his financial success and far-flung restaurant empire is any happier than Chef Ian Boden at his 26-seat restaurant, The Shack, in Staunton, Va. Maybe, in light of all the talk of the shortage of good people and an excess of restaurants, that's a question we all need to ask ourselves more often this coming year.

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