

Restaurant Brain Trust's Recipe for Success

So you want to start a restaurant in a new market? Or grow a restaurant chain? Or use your skills as a great chef to open your own restaurant? So many issues, so many questions! Where do you go for advice? The Restaurant Brain Trust!

Restaurant Brain Trust is an effort by the DC restaurant community to help restaurateurs and their staffs with advice, information, and networking opportunities. The Trust held its inaugural event — a panel discussion called “Recipe for Success” — on March 7 at Matchbox (1901 14th St, NW). A lively crowd listened intently as three experienced restaurateurs talked of their experiences opening restaurants, including the good, the bad, and the in between!

The panel included ...

Peter D’Amelio, president & CEO of Matchbox Food Group, Amy Brandwein, chef/owner of Centrolina Mercato E Osteria, and Jack Sosnowski, president & CEO of Nobel Chef Hospitality. Bethany Kazaba, cofounder and principal of Neighborhood Retail Group and one of five founding members of Restaurant Brain Trust, moderated the event, asking each panelist several common questions. What were the biggest obstacles? What would you tell others trying to expand into a new market? What lessons would you share?

Several themes emerged ...

Amy Brandwein (nominated by JBF for a 2017 Mid-Atlantic Best Chef award) said the biggest obstacle for her in starting Centrolina was funding. “Getting people to invest when you are a first-time operator was a tremendous struggle,” she said. “People knew me as a chef but not a businessperson.” She said it was very difficult as a woman to negotiate with contractors and construction companies. “I had to re-bid to stay on budget. I had to learn to say no.”

Jack Sosnowski opened six successful Rare Steakhouse & Tavern restaurants in Wisconsin and is opening soon in DC. “I’m crazy ambitious,” he says. “I love seeing a concept come together after seeing it in your head.” That said, Jack noted that the biggest obstacle is “people problems. You have to get the right team that can help you grow.” He also said that if you set an opening date, you have to open “even if there are contractors still in the room! You can’t let the public down.”

Peter D’Amelio also noted the importance of knowing your “public.” He hired outside consultants to evaluate menus and conducted guest surveys to



Event panelists (l-r): Peter D’Amelio, president and CEO of Matchbox Food Group; Amy Brandwein, chef/owner of Centrolina; Jack Sosnowski, president and CEO of Nobel Chef Hospitality; and Bethany Kazaba, cofounder and principal of Neighborhood Retail Group



Founding members of Restaurant Brain Trust (l-r): Jody Ruth, Redstones; Bethany Kazaba, Neighborhood Retail Group; Michael Sternberg, Sternberg Hospitality; Trish McHugh, BDO; and Elaine Chon-Baker, Mokja Ventures



improve performance. “Data is not fun or sexy,” he says. But it led him to a more “disciplined financial approach” that he has used across a spectrum of restaurants including The Cheesecake Factory, Great American Restaurants, Coopers Hawk, and now Matchbox.

Staying true to you, staff pay, and emphasis on quality ...

All three experts emphasized the need to stay authentic. In Peter’s case, as the number of restaurants goes up, he said, “You encounter a different culture that is just not you anymore. You must share your vision with all staff so everyone pulls together.” Jack agreed, saying he is in constant touch with employees with whom he maintains an open door policy. “It’s important to have trust between you with constant communication,” he noted. Amy said as a chef/operator, there is no “duplication of concepts. You must reflect your own style of cooking” that brought customers to dine with you in the first place.

Another common theme was staff pay. Both Peter and Jack said pay must

be competitive and include bonuses. Amy agreed that it’s hard to find and keep good people. “There is a lack of human capital in DC. Most parents want their kids to be lawyers or doctors here!” All three panelists said social media can be a big help to success. Peter’s take was, “Connect with your audience by reading all of those millions of comments on social media and take the time to do something about them. Quality is the number one goal. Social media can help you get there.”

The Restaurant Brain Trust plans more events like this in the future so stay tuned. The Trust’s founding members are Elaine Chon-Baker, Mokja Ventures; Bethany Kazaba, Neighborhood Retail Group; Trish McHugh, BDO; Jody Ruth, Redstones; and Michael Sternberg, Sternberg Hospitality. A Restaurant Brain Trust website is under development. With questions or comments in the meantime, please check out BDO’s Restaurant Practice’s page: www.bdo.com/industries/restaurants/overview. Comments may also be sent to Trish McHugh, the greater DC contact, at tmchugh@bdo.com.

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