

Values and Culture

**An Interview with Cameron Mitchell,
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants**

EDITORS' NOTE Like the histories of most entrepreneurial companies, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants (cameronmitchell.com) begins in a very humble place: Cameron Mitchell's mother's dining room table. It was there that Mitchell mapped out his career goals that would eventually set the course for his restaurant industry career. After a time at the now defunct 55 Restaurant Group in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio, Mitchell was ready to go out on his own and pursue his dream of running his own restaurant company. While remaining independent and privately-held, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants has grown to more than 37 venues and 15 different concepts with locations in 12 states. In addition to Cameron's, the concepts are: Cap City Fine Diner & Bar; The Guild House; Hudson 29 Kitchen + Drink; M; Martini Modern Italian; Marcella's; Ocean Prime, with 16 current locations; Molly Woo's Asian Bistro; The Pearl Restaurant; The Barn at Rocky Fork Creek; The Avenue Steak Tavern; and, Harvey & Ed's. Opening this year are Del Mar Coastal Kitchen, Lincoln Social Rooftop, Budd Dairy Food Hall, The Pearl in Bridge Park and an Ocean Prime location in Chicago. In addition to these restaurant ventures, Cameron Mitchell Premier Events is the premier caterer in Columbus, Ohio. In 2018, Cameron Mitchell Restaurants celebrated its 25th year of restaurant excellence.

Will you discuss your vision for creating Cameron Mitchell Restaurants and how the business has evolved?

I left my job at the 55 Group, where I oversaw the operations for six restaurants, to start my own company. I spent the first three or four weeks writing out our company culture and values. I wanted to create a company that was values-driven and values-based, and that was going to be around long after I was gone.

In the very early days, I wanted to build a multi-concept restaurant company in Columbus and didn't have any thoughts of expanding outside of Columbus. However, over the first seven years, from 1993 to 2000, we had built 10 restaurants in Columbus, so it was a natural progression for us to start to think about expanding into other markets.

We started looking at concepts for our out-of-town expansion, and Mitchell's Fish Market was born out of that. We ended

up also building 22 steakhouses and selling those to Ruth's Chris in 2008. We sold Mitchell's Fish Market to Ruth's and we couldn't use the name Mitchell's anymore. We had to change the name of our Mitchell's Ocean Club to Ocean Prime, and that became a growth vehicle for us on a national stage and across the country.

That multi-concept origin of our company still stands today, and we continue to develop new concepts. We have a new one called the Del Mar opening up in a few months, which is a California cuisine concept. We have two other concepts, a Hudson 29 brand and our Cap City Diner brand, that we plan to open in other locations.

The company today is still based on the values and culture that we established in the beginning, but we have grown over the years and gotten better through practice.

How important has it been to build a culture that provides your people with growth opportunities in order to retain talent?

It's incredibly important. Eighty percent of our management talent has been promoted from the hourly ranks and virtually everyone in the upper echelon of the company, outside of a few specialized people, were developed from within the company.

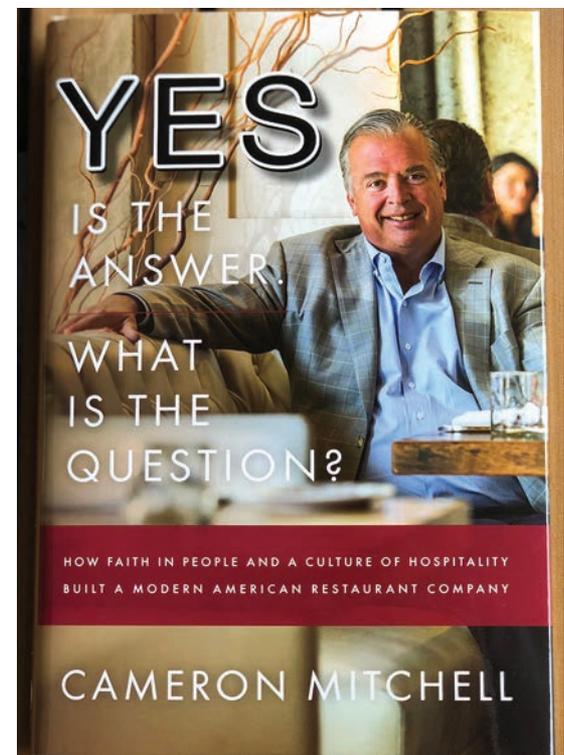
I want those who have spent years working hard with us to reap the rewards of that work. When we sold the Fish Market business in 2008 for \$92 million, I gave 5 percent of the proceeds to our management teams. I then spent another \$400,000 on parties and gifts.

We're also closed seven major holidays, plus Super Bowl Sunday, so that is eight extra days off that people get. It's important for people to spend time with their families. One of my rules is for our people to make more of their kids' games than they miss. I believe family life and work life are intertwined. People can't be successful at work if they're not successful at home and vice versa.

You recently completed a book, *Yes Is the Answer, What Is the Question*. What motivated you to write the book and what do you hope to convey with it?

I had wanted to write a book for five years. I get many requests to speak and I was asked to write a book. With our 25th anniversary coming up, the timing seemed right.

I wrote the book as a legacy project – each new manager will get a copy. It memorializes



the story of how I started and my history. I also wrote it for our people, to help push the brand and company forward.

Additionally, it was written for the many people out there who I could help out. I wanted to provide inspiration for others.

What are the keys to long-term success in the restaurant business and how challenging is it to stand the test of time?

It is very challenging. It's cool to say we opened a restaurant 25 years ago and it's still going strong today, let alone building 90 other restaurants.

One of our five core values is to be better today than we were yesterday, and to be better tomorrow than we are today.

That is ingrained thoroughly in everything we do and it prevents us from giving in to the status quo.

Is cultural fit as important as expertise when you evaluate talent?

Cultural fit is more important. If they don't buy into the culture, they won't be successful within our organization.

I am often asked where we get such great people and how we deliver such great hospitality and service. The answer to both questions is the same – we treat people extremely well.

When we hire into the organization, I look at it as a triangular relationship. Our associates come first – they are who we have a direct relationship with. We take care of our people and they take care of our guests and our guests take care of our company.

Treating people with dignity and respect is one of our core values. Our associates truly come first.

Have you always had the entrepreneurial spirit and do you plan on slowing down?

Hopefully, we are going to announce a new venture in the hotel business shortly, and our goal is to start a hotel company. It's new and completely different, and I hope we never lose our entrepreneurial drive in this company, whether I'm here or not.

I will still be looking for new opportunities, but I just won't be doing all the heavy lifting. ●