



Service and Design

An Interview with Michael Schulson,
 Founder and Chief Executive Officer,
 Schulson Collective



Michael Schulson at work in the kitchen (left);
 Giuseppe & Sons restaurant in Philadelphia (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Michael Schulson is the chef and restaurateur behind the Schulson Collective (michaelschulson.com) restaurant group. His imagination and vision have made him one of Philadelphia's most successful hospitality professionals. Schulson is the owner of day-to-night destination Double Knot; the expansive Independence Beer Garden; Sampan and the adjacent Graffiti Bar; and serves as chef-partner



Michael Schulson

at Izakaya at Borgata Hotel, Casino & Spa in Atlantic City. Schulson Collective's portfolio also includes the new-American spot, Harp & Crown, in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, Monkital, and cocktail lounge, Nokku, at The Diplomat Beach Resort in Hollywood, Florida. Most recently, the notable Philadelphia restaurant Osteria was added to Schulson Collective as well as DK Sushi, the fine-casual sushi concept located at the University of Pennsylvania. Today, Schulson teams with his wife, Nina, in their efforts to expand the business. Schulson graduated from the Culinary Institute of America and worked his way up the culinary chain of command in such acclaimed restaurants as New York's Peacock Alley at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, David Burke's Park Avenue Café, and Philadelphia's Le Bec-Fin and Susanna Foo. Most recently, Schulson Collective opened Giuseppe & Sons, the Center City collaboration with the Termini family, located next to Harp & Crown. It mimics the operation of Double Knot, with a cafe upstairs and a more refined restaurant below street level. Schulson also recently opened Alpen Rose, a steak boutique on 13th Street and will soon be opening Via Locusta, targeting the Rittenhouse neighborhood of Philadelphia with a concept that celebrates old-world Italian roots, lifestyle, food and decor. Schulson has starred in two original series, TLC's Ultimate Cake Off and Style Network's Pantry Raid, and has also appeared as a guest on TODAY, The View, The Rachael Ray Show and FOX News. He has been featured in a wide range of publications including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today and Men's Fitness.

Will you discuss your vision for creating Schulson Collective?

Twenty years ago, people would say, "we're going out for dinner and a movie." Today, life has transformed into just going out for dinner, which has transitioned into a form of entertainment. As I looked at this, I questioned what I needed to do to create entertainment when someone goes out to dinner. I decided this involves service and design, so when an individual or a group walk into one of our venues, they feel they have been

transported to a place where they will have a unique experience.

That is the avenue we have always looked at and what our business model is about.

With much of the dining experience today focused on providing entertainment, is there still an appreciation for the quality of the food offering at your restaurants?

If one goes to a restaurant with no ambiance, the service has to be great and the food needs to be spectacular because it's all about the food.

If we create an ambiance where people walk in and find that the place is amazing and say that they can't wait to bring their friend or partner back, we're already starting on a different plane. If we can also nail the service and the food, it becomes a unique experience that people will talk about and this creates a buzz around it.

As a Philadelphia-based company, will growth come from taking Schulson's existing concepts to other markets or will you create new concepts in Philadelphia?

The first goal was to grow a great team in Philadelphia and that required that we build enough restaurants in the market to support a CFO, COO, Director of Operations, Director of Restaurants and facilities directors. Now that we have the infrastructure, we can grow outside of Philadelphia.

We are now in Atlanta City at the Borgata and in Florida at The Diplomat Beach Resort. We are also looking in New York and in D.C.

Is brand awareness and building brand recognition for Schulson Collective important or is it more about the individual restaurant brands?

We try to give each restaurant its own brand identity. However, we love it when someone walks out after an amazing meal and asks if we have any other restaurants so we can mention the Schulson Collective. Our only other Schulson Collective branding is on our to-go bag.

How important is it to have a culture that is innovative and constantly evolving?

If we're not growing, we're failing. To me, every single day we need to figure out a way to do something unique. We have a list of core values that we live by. We live it, breathe it and talk about it continually. It looks to foster ownership thinking – think, act and complete tasks like an owner. We consistently teach, train, engage and work to amaze and delight coworkers and other guests. We foster teamwork, which involves relationships, growth and development. We also inculcate people to be hands-on and feel that no job is beneath them, to be present and engaged and, most importantly, to practice respect and kindness.

You also developed Schulson Catering. Will you highlight this offering?

The catering was a huge opportunity that came to us because people were constantly going to the restaurants for catering events and asking us if we could cater off premise.

We now have the ability to offer food from our restaurants at other venues through catering.

Are you still able to practice your passion of being a chef given the growth of the company and all of your other responsibilities?

It has been beneficial to do so because, in the end, everyone sees me as a chef who has been in restaurants his entire life. When I walk into the restaurant and know what is going on, I gain respect.

I am involved with the food in the kitchen and we do tastings in the restaurant. I will sometimes cook with the team, which helps build camaraderie. Everyone loves to see someone who has all these employees actually in there every day with them.

In the end, I love cooking, but I also love business. It drives me daily. I love looking at numbers and planning for growth.

My business partners are successful businesspeople, be it in sports franchises or trucking companies or apartment complexes. Their expectations of the P&Ls, monthly summaries and reports I send them has pushed me to be a better businessperson. I love that part. ●