

The Restaurant Business

An Interview with Todd English, Chairman and Master Chef, English Hospitality Group

EDITORS' NOTE Todd English began his cooking career at the young age of 15 when he first entered the doors of a professional kitchen. At 20, he attended the Culinary Institute of America and graduated in 1982 with honors. He continued to hone his craft with Jean Jacques Rachou at New York's La Cote Basque and then relocated to Italy where he apprenticed at the well-established Dal Pescatore in Canneto sull'Oglio and Paracucchi in



Todd English

Locanda dell'Angelo. It was in Italy that English, drawing from his Italian heritage, developed his unique style and approach to cooking. He returned to the United States at 25 and was asked to be the Executive Chef of the award-winning Northern Italian restaurant Michela's in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He served there as an executive chef for three years, garnering high praise from both the press and the public. In the spring of 1991, English caught the culinary world's eye when the James Beard Foundation named him their National Rising Star Chef. He followed through on that promise, as the James Beard Foundation subsequently named him Best Chef in the Northeast in 1994. Nation's Restaurant News named English one of their Top 50 Tastemakers in 1999. In 2001, he was awarded Bon Appetit's Restaurateur of the Year award and was named one of People Magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People. He has also been named to the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who in Food and Beverage in America and is the Las Vegas Food & Wine 2022 Chef of the Year. The four-time James Beard Award-winner has established one of the best-known restaurant brands in the world, publishing critically acclaimed cookbooks and producing and hosting his own EMMY Award-nominated PBS TV show Food Trip. His multimillion-dollar hospitality empire, English Hospitality Group (ehgusa.com), recently revealed The English Hotel in the Las Vegas Arts District, which includes his world-class restaurant, The Pepper Club. This latest venture adds to his worldwide restaurant empire, including the Bahamas with Olives, The Beast by Todd English in Las Vegas, Todd English Pub in Birmingham, Figs in Boston and Charlestown, BlueZoo in Orlando, Tuscany in Connecticut, and MXDC

in Washington, DC. English is also joining forces with luxury car brand Bentley to open a resident-only private restaurant in the brand-new Bentley Residences in Miami, Florida. In addition, English created a new cannabis-infused food line with LastLeaf, and is currently developing new restaurants in cities across the globe.

When did you know that your passion was to be a chef?

I started cooking when I was 15 years old. I remember telling my high school counselor that I really enjoyed cooking and wanted to take a cooking class, so they sent me to a home economics class. We opened up a box of cake mix and made a cake. I went back to my counselor and said that this was not what I wanted to do. I had grown up with a bunch of Italians and we had a garden with fresh tomatoes and vegetables – I had never seen a cake out of a box.

I was also very involved in sports when I was young and went to college on a scholarship for baseball and soccer. I was injured and needed to take time off from sports to recover, and I moved back to Atlanta where I had grown up. I took a job as a cook at a steak restaurant since this was what I knew how to do, and the chef at the restaurant took a liking to me and mentored me. He was kind enough to call someone he knew at the Culinary Institute of America where it was very difficult to get accepted to attend, and I was able to go to the school. This was how my career began and I have never looked back.

What have been the keys to your ability to stay relevant over so many decades?

I have a constant fear of losing touch and becoming a dinosaur. I have a drive to continuously learn and improve. For example, I spent today at an organic farm as I am looking to create a mushroom restaurant and a mushroom village. One thing about this industry is that you are surrounded by young talent who see things differently from how you do, and this keeps me creative and excited about the future. I learn so much from these young people. There is nothing I enjoy more than spending time in the kitchen with the next generation of leading chefs.

As you have grown the number of restaurants and locations in your portfolio, has it been difficult to let go of being involved in every aspect of the business?

Letting go is always difficult. Technology helps since I can be in contact with my team whenever needed, so if we are working on daily specials at a restaurant, I am able to look at the dishes and give my suggestions. My focus is on working closely with our younger chefs and teaching them from my many years of experience in the business. There is a skill in cooking that I remember learning from watching and cooking with my grandmother, and that is an amazing sense of timing. Timing is the ability to understand when it is perfect and ready to serve – it is hard to explain, but if you cook you get a sense of the importance of timing and how critical timing is to the process.

How do you balance your love of being in the kitchen and cooking with the need to devote your time to running the business?

It is called the restaurant business, and I enjoy the challenge of creating things that are successful. I enjoy being creative, whether that is creating a new business concept or creating a new dish. I am working on creating new concepts around vegetables and plant-based offerings, since food is our medicine, and health is our wealth. I believe that there are still better ways to process food and as the world becomes eight billion people or ten billion people, how are we going to address food needs and food insecurity? We need to figure out better ways to get food to people – we still throw away 70 percent of our food. This is a very important focus for me.

What are your thoughts on the growth of cooking competitions on television and the concept of celebrity chefs?

The cooking competitions on television have provided a great way to get people interested and excited about restaurants and chefs, which is positive for the industry. These shows have shown people what it takes to be a chef and the level of intensity and dedication needed to be successful in the profession.

In regard to celebrity chefs, when I look at any celebrity that I have obtained in the profession, for me it is about using this celebrity to help raise money and be charitable to support

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Todd English in the kitchen

worthy causes and give back to the communities we serve. When you attend a charity auction and have a dinner cooked by a celebrity chef being offered, it helps raise needed funds for important causes, and being able to do this is what excites me the most about having achieved some celebrity for my work.

When you open a new restaurant, do you know if it is going to work or are you at times surprised?

I am surprised all the time. There are times when a restaurant takes off above your wildest expectations, and there are times when it may not catch on and you need to evaluate what went wrong. You can't win them all, but fortunately for me it has been an amazing journey.

This is a business where you are constantly focused on what you can do better as opposed to what you have done well – it is about continuous improvement. There are so many different elements that take place in the kitchen that contribute to the final product, and it takes a deep attention to detail and great focus to be successful. When it all comes together and the magic happens, there is nothing better.

With all the success you have achieved, it has not always been a smooth ride. How important has it been to be resilient throughout your career?

There have been ebbs and flows. I think playing sports growing up had a major impact on me, since in baseball if you strikeout three times in a game it is about going back to the drawing board and evaluating what you did wrong to get better – this takes resilience. The mental toughness that I developed over the years has been extremely valuable since this can be a very humbling business, and just when you think everything is going perfect, something happens. You need to be able to bounce back and be resilient to build a long career in this profession.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in a career as a chef?

It is different for different people. You need to look at your ability and decide the best path – for some people, that is going to culinary school, while for others, it may be going straight to work in a kitchen. The keys to being successful in this business are hard work, commitment, and passion. You need to enjoy continuous learning and motivate yourself to be better every day. ●