

# Pushing the Envelope

An Interview with Charlie Trotter, Charlie Trotter's

**EDITORS' NOTE** Charlie Trotter opened Charlie Trotter's (Chicago) in 1987. Midway through his college tenure at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Trotter took a job as a waiter. Upon returning to college, he began cooking and doing small catering parties. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science, he traveled around the U.S. and Europe to dine at the finest restaurants. He returned to the States and began catering parties for friends of his family. After just over a year, he opened Charlie Trotter's with his father, Bob Trotter, as his partner. Trotter is completely self-taught – his first cooking job was at a restaurant in the North Shore area of Chicago called Sinclair's. He has established the Charlie Trotter Culinary Education Foundation, which since its inception in 1999 has raised over \$1,000,000 to award to individuals seeking careers in the culinary arts. Trotter is the author of 14 cookbooks, three management books, and is the host of the nationally aired, award-winning PBS cooking series, The Kitchen Sessions with Charlie Trotter. In 2005, he was awarded the Humanitarian of the Year award by the International Association of Culinary Professionals.



Charlie Trotter

**RESTAURANT BRIEF** Regarded as one of the finest restaurants in the world, Charlie Trotter's ([www.charlietrotters.com](http://www.charlietrotters.com)) is a Mobil Five Star restaurant that has won 10 James Beard Foundation awards, including 'Outstanding Restaurant' (2000) and 'Outstanding Chef' (1999). It has been voted one of the 'World's 50 Best Restaurants' by Restaurant Magazine since 2004. Chef Trotter also owns and operates Trotter's To Go, a gourmet retail shop in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago, and also produces a line of organic based food products. Future restaurant plans include a signature restaurant at One Madison Park in New York City. In addition, customers flying United Airlines First and United Business to Europe and on their transcontinental flights or United First to Asia can select cuisine specially created by Chef Trotter.

**In terms of the strength of the Charlie Trotter name and the impact it has had within the industry, what has made it so successful in the market?**



Charlie Trotter's rabbit loin and leg (above) and chocolate and carrot dessert (left)

We have been around for a long time, as far as independent restaurants go, and have been unrelenting in trying to pursue a single goal: to refine and redefine what we stand for as a restaurant. Making sure the service, ambiance, cuisine, and wine/beverage program are all delivered flawlessly, add up to something greater than the sum of the parts.

It's also about never growing complacent. I have long ascribed to the idea that if it ain't broke, break it. So we continue to find ways to push the envelope.

**At a time when brands have had success opening up many locations, both in the U.S. and internationally, you haven't gone that route. Has it been tempting and why haven't you focused on growing the brand location wise?**

We have explored other restaurant opportunities. We had a five-year contract in Los Cabos, Mexico with the One & Only company and that was fantastic. Part of it involved running the signature restaurant, as well as running the in-room dining, the casual poolside food, and special functions on the beach like weddings, as well as developing the wine program. We had a team there and it was great.

We also do Business Class and First Class food for international United Airlines flights, and we recently signed on to do premium food offerings for Holland America with menu items that change every few months.

There are different ways to express yourself rather than opening additional restaurants. As an entrepreneur, I am willing to consider opening additional restaurants, but I have enjoyed running this restaurant.

**Have you been happy with how the Trotter's To Go product has impacted the neighborhood of Lincoln Park and can you talk about the food products you've developed?**

We refer to Trotter's To Go as our little sister. While it's not meant to be this high-end gourmet boutique, it's meant to espouse the same philosophies that exist at the restaurant in that we use mainly organic product and everything is made from scratch every day.

Trotter's To Go has been open 11 years now, but about a year and a half into it, it turned into an accidental catering business, because

people would ask us to prepare things for parties and it evolved into bringing in service staff and doing sit-down dinners a la Charlie Trotter.

So it's the takeout version of a simplified everyday home-cooking version of what exists at the restaurant, but it also has a catering element. We don't do 5,000-people functions, but we do weddings for 200 people, formal sit-down multi-course dinners for 18 people, and all things in between.

**You've also published a number of books. Is that a process you enjoy and what are you trying to accomplish with the books?**

We have published 15 books and that has been my way to expand versus opening restaurant after restaurant, because I look at books like cutting an album – a book represents a point of view in time about what was happening with the cuisine.

And in some cases, the books are meant for restaurateurs or chefs; in other cases, the books have been more simplified from an everyday home-cooking standpoint.

We've also written leadership books. Our number one goal is to create a culture of leadership. When I meet with the team formally or just day-to-day, I emphasize that you are going to learn about cooking and technique, but most importantly, you will learn to be a leader of yourself. Whatever my standards are for you, your own standards for yourself have to be even higher. You're not working for Charlie Trotter or the dining room leader – you're working for yourself.

**As the business has grown, is it challenging to find the time to be in the kitchen?**

During the day, I'm in a suit, dealing with phone calls and things outside the restaurant. By 5 PM, I'm in my chef whites, in the kitchen, overseeing service, adjusting dishes, and expediting and orchestrating – like the role of a conductor.

I also do a lot of public speaking to Fortune 500 companies and CEO retreats. It started 20 years ago when someone called me to bring in a speaker from an unrelated field and it seemed like good advertising. For a year, I did it once a month or so and never once charged a nickel. A year into it, someone asked my fee and then offered to pay me. I went out in the beginning to tout this business, but people are taken by it because they're hearing from someone in a different sector. Speaking keeps me sharp in terms of defining what we do and causing me to think further. ●