



Vegetable-Driven

An Interview with
Shaun Hergatt, Executive Chef and Partner, Juni

EDITORS' NOTE At 17, Shaun Hergatt pursued a four-year apprenticeship at Crystal Twig, a fine-dining restaurant in Cairns where he was trained in classic French cooking. At the age of 23, he became Chef de Cuisine of The Dining Room at The Ritz-Carlton, Sydney, where he quickly earned international accolades including an AHA "Best Young Chef" award in 2000. That same year, Hergatt moved to the United States and joined Atelier at The Ritz-Carlton, Central Park in New York City as Chef de Cuisine. Five years later, he moved south to become the Executive Chef at The Setai in Miami. In 2009, he returned to New York to open his eponymous restaurant, SHO Shaun Hergatt in the Financial District. Chef Hergatt's talent brought unparalleled acclaim to the neighborhood's culinary landscape and he was recognized as "Best New Chef" by New York magazine. The restaurant received two Michelin stars, a 29 out of 30 Zagat rating across the board, and "Best New Restaurant" accolades from Esquire and New York magazine. Hergatt now serves as Executive Chef and Partner of Juni restaurant in Hotel Chandler, a Triumph Hotel.

RESTAURANT BRIEF Juni (juninyc.com), is a 50-seat boutique restaurant in Hotel Chandler, a Triumph Hotels property on East 31st Street in Manhattan. It offers an evolving menu showcasing the bounty of the seasons and ingredients when they are at their freshest and finest. Each element of the unique dining experience is Chef Shaun's creation, from the restaurant design and tablescape to the composition and presentation of his distinctive dishes.

What was your vision for Juni and have things gone as you had hoped?

The idea behind the concept was micro-seasons and vegetables in the local community and the national market, which I came to after spending a lot of time in the U.S., and learning the growth patterns and about the farmers. I respect vegetables because I've been working with them for so long, so the focus is on the two-month period in the year when everything is spawned and grows, and we have beautiful blossoms. "Juni" is the Latin word for June, and the two months before and after that month are when everything is ripe and ready.

Having the knowledge of a decade within the city was a big asset. After I developed that program and started putting ideas together, we remained true to what Juni was about in terms of being a vegetable-driven restaurant.

However, Juni will never stay in one position from month to month. Over the past two years, it has evolved into something much bigger than the idea of a small fine-dining restaurant where guests can pick and choose their tasting menu.

Any restaurant I've owned has always evolved but this one is at its peak right now because it's about our service style, which is different; it's about our food style, which offers a definite wow factor because there is nothing like this in the U.S. — there is a philosophy and originality behind each dish. Right now, we're using foragers in Maine and they are picking certain products, items that only grow in Maine, whereas before they were picking from Vermont, and before that, they were picking near New York City.

Also, we look at the micro-seasons for something that only grows for a month and a half and put it on the menu, highlight it as a starter, and once it's gone, we change the menu.

We've changed around 200 dishes over the past two years because of the understanding behind the weather patterns, growth patterns, and the micro-seasons I've studied. Now, we're forming an evolutionary menu that is changing all the time; it's keeping our clients interested in what is happening because they can eat here every month and have dishes they haven't been seen before

at a level that supersedes the last time they were here. I've also hired some really good staff and I have a very strong team, but it's because I'm still in the kitchen every day for lunch and dinner. I'm very focused on making it a powerhouse restaurant that is going to live forever in New York City.

We could not do something like this with a 150-seat restaurant; in a location that size, the chef isn't in the kitchen and there isn't someone dedicated to making sure that everything is programmed.

We're successful because we have stayed true to the concepts but at the same time, we're evolving on a monthly basis into something larger. The refinement of the product has grown to where, when I walk into the dining room after being away a bit, I feel we're nearly there. Then we discover



Shaun Hergatt at work in his kitchen (left); one of his elegant creations (below); the Juni dining room (above)

something new and it makes this restaurant even more exciting.

How critical has it been to maintain your consistent team for the success of the restaurant?

Consistency is everything. The reason people stay with me is that I work with them on a personal basis. It's important to speak to people face to face in a respectful manner. We have to give them a goal, show them how to get there, give them the right tools, and mentor them when they have a challenge.

Great leadership is based on the number of people who want to follow someone based on what that person is saying. A great leader has to follow through on what he's saying, and he must be

honest about his downfalls.

We don't have hidden agendas. We have open discussion and approach a problem thoughtfully. These are the family values I bring to the table because of the way I treat people.

How hard is it to expand when you want to be in the kitchen?

I have other things planned already and they're working right now. We have to spend more time in our lives to touch our clients, but we have to be systematic about it and make sure we always produce quality. I'm not going to have 28 restaurants. What we sell

is what people get. It's all about sustaining the quality level so clients trust they can have a great meal regardless of price point.

What is Juni's relationship with Hotel Chandler and how has the restaurant set the bar for the growth of the culinary program in Triumph Hotels?

I'm extremely pleased to see Juni grow as a restaurant in Hotel Chandler. Setting the bar for quality is always a progressive and focused effort, in which all parties must be aligned. The synergy between Triumph Hotels and myself has been a very successful relationship. This is how I believe we can proceed to the next level of growth both within Juni and for future projects between Triumph Hotels and the "Shaun Hergatt" brand. ●

