

# mfn

my foodservice news

## Yappy Happy Hour

*Beating the Summer Heat*

## From the Assembly Line to the Kitchen

## Competitive Edge Behind the Bar

## Bigger Bites Aren't Better



“A CHEF HAS TO BE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL, A LEADER, A QUICK-DECISION MAKER, HE NEEDS TO BE EVERYTHING, NEEDS TO BE AN ANSWER TO EVERY QUESTION.”



# DISHING OUT SUCCESS

By Diana Jones

## THE FOOD INDUSTRY

is filled with workers from diverse backgrounds, from those who have studied from the time they were small children to those like Jeff Meenach, who after trying traditional college and working for Ford Motor Company, came to Sullivan University in Kentucky with new determination. For independently-owned restaurants, it is incredibly important to distinguish one's self through ambiance, food, and the character of people working. It is essential to take a closer look at the hands who make the plates and to invest in their stories as they become a part of the restaurant's own history.

Straight out of high school, Jeff Meenach took a common course and jumped into college only to find that his "success was more prevalent socially than it was in the classroom." With the help of his father, he returned home to find a job at the Ford Kentucky Truck Plant where he worked until he was 28. Jeff was well-compensated for his work without having a college degree and for a young man in his twenties, seemed to have it made. Then, Jeff became leery of what his future held. As he puts

it, "After about six years of power tools, backaches, 10 hour days, the night shift, doing the same process every 54 seconds 470 times a night, I began to wonder if I had chosen the right path." Additionally, it was 2006 and the auto-industry was on shaky ground. Ford was offering educational buyout packages to its employees in lieu of plants and jobs disappearing at an alarming rate. After discussing the matter with his wife and struggling back and forth with the decision, Jeff could no longer ignore his gut instincts and left the plant for culinary school.

Jeff made a pit-stop taking some general college courses before arriving at Sullivan University. There, many of the attending students already have professional kitchen experience, but not formal training. Some are right out of high school, and much like Jeff's first college experience, as students they don't have as clear a vision of their paths. Jeff did not have formal kitchen experience nor did he lack vision. Rather, Jeff had fierce focus and goals. He stated that, "As an adult, being a student is really different. I cared about learning, was older and more responsible, and looked forward to doing homework because I was

learning something that helped me." There were challenges to having so little experience outside of the home, boy scouts, and fast food work. Jeff stated that it was intimidating at times, but while some of the more experienced students thrived in skills classes they lacked the technical knowledge that Jeff was devouring up, accepting anything that he didn't know as a challenge to try harder. He continually grilled his instructors with as many questions as they could possibly have had answers.

Sullivan gave further opportunity for Jeff to excel through programs such as Plus Friday which opened the kitchens from 8-12 on Fridays for students to work on recipes, practice skills, or to just be creative. Leaving no opportunity unexplored, Jeff went regularly and states that "the two or three people that were usually there are the people who have good jobs now and are really going somewhere with their careers." For Jeff, the bare minimum would never be enough. He wanted to be a chef and that meant going above and beyond what was expected of him. "A chef has to be multi-dimensional, a leader, a quick-decision maker, he needs to be everything, needs to be an answer to every question that comes

up.” With his own high expectations, Jeff stepped up to the plate and served up outstanding efforts.

All of his hard work paid off when Jeff won a spot in Louisville, Kentucky’s legendary Jack Fry’s kitchen. An old hang-out of Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack, Jeff states that it just has a “certain mystique about it.” And, Jeff says that his learning is not yet over. “Culinary school’s an introduction, it’s the basics, it’s a survival kit. You are going out and learning more.” So, Jeff takes the foundation that Sullivan University provided him with, applies it, and expands it with the knowledge and experience of the other chefs around him. All come from different backgrounds but all share a common passion for the culinary arts. As Jeff puts it, “It’s a good time to be in the culinary field. 15 to 20 years ago, people thought that the guy in the kitchen was an ex-prisoner or someone who couldn’t

hack it. Culinary arts have become on the forefront of society and is respected as a trade and an art and there is a little bit of celebrity in it. It’s respected and should be even more respected. It’s food, it’s as strong a language as mathematics. If I could go to another country and couldn’t speak their language you could go into the kitchen and cook for them and get along.”

Food is a common language among people. And like any language, it’s not out of reach for anyone to acquire. With great institutions like Sullivan University, people from all backgrounds, and with as many varied goals, have an opportunity to excel. Kitchen staff, aspiring chefs, homemakers—regardless, the industry is open to all. Jeff mentioned the celebrity and reverence that is now often associated with being a chef. Perhaps a stigma of superiority has come to be as well; the idea that only a certain type of person from a certain background

belongs in the kitchen. But as most independent restaurant owners and chefs know, what is necessary is passion and dedication. It’s not a matter of destiny or luck. As Thomas Jefferson once said, “I find that the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have.” For Jeff Meenach, a non-traditional student who graduated from the Sullivan University, it was never a matter of waiting for his life to change. With a passion for food eating away at him and the support of his wife and family, Jeff made a distant dream of working as a chef at Jack Fry’s in Louisville, KY a reality. Those with potential and interest should be encouraged and assisted in attaining their goals. Though seemingly the underdogs, they are most likely to be an incredible asset to any restaurant kitchen they set foot in.

For more information about Sullivan University, please visit the website at [www.sullivan.edu](http://www.sullivan.edu).

“AFTER ABOUT SIX YEARS OF POWER TOOLS, BACKACHES, 10 HOUR DAYS, THE NIGHT SHIFT, DOING THE SAME PROCESS EVERY 54 SECONDS 470 TIMES A NIGHT, I BEGAN TO WONDER IF I HAD CHOSEN THE RIGHT PATH.”

