Life as a Restaurant Owner — An Inside Look at the Ingredients to Success

Many people believe that opening a restaurant is as simple as putting on an apron and heading into the kitchen, but every successful restaurant owner knows this couldn’t be further from the truth. Behind every profitable eatery is a restaurant owner with a solid business strategy.

Tony Sturniolo, a Business instructor at South University, Online Programs says the first step towards opening a restaurant is creating a business plan. “They need to write down what they want to do, how they will get their funding, what customers they want, identify the risks, etc.,” Sturniolo says. “The business plan is the necessary first step to avoid disaster.”

Sturniolo says it’s important to consider the wants and needs of the customers when creating a business strategy for opening a restaurant. “For a restaurant to succeed, the owner should first determine who the restaurant customers will be and then find out, possibly by a survey, if they would want the food the restaurant will serve,” Sturniolo says. “You could have the best recipes in the world, but if customers don’t want the food the restaurant will not be a success. Just because you like the food you cook, it doesn’t mean customers will.”

Sturniolo says one of the most common reasons restaurants fail is because they don’t know what customers in their market want or need.

For example, planning to open a vegetarian restaurant in New York City might be a viable business, [but] opening one in Mexican Hat, Utah, would probably fail,” Sturniolo says.

Choosing a good location for the restaurant is also critical. If multiple restaurants have failed in a certain location, Sturniolo advises anyone thinking about opening a restaurant to think twice about choosing that spot.

Once the restaurant is up and running, quality service, cleanliness, value, and, of course, good food are ingredients for success.

Running The Lady & Sons Restaurant

When they are not making countless television appearances and hosting a show of their own, Jamie Deen and his brother Bobby are in Savannah, Georgia, running The Lady & Sons restaurant with celebrity chef mom Paula Deen.

Jamie Deen says there’s no such thing as a typical day in his life as a restaurant owner.

“On any given day, we could be at the restaurant checking in on the day-to-day stuff, on the phone with an interview, or traveling to do a live show or appearance,” says Deen, who is also an author, and stars on the Food Network’s Road Tasted, with his brother Bobby. “Just last week, we were both in Miami for the South Beach Wine and Food Festival, which was such a blast.”

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Deen credits his mother for guiding himself and his brother into the restaurant industry.

“Honestly, the restaurant kind of chose us,” he says. “It was what Mama was doing and she pulled us along, and we just stuck with it. Now we couldn’t be happier, though. Restaurant work is hard, don’t get us wrong, but it’s some of the most rewarding work out there.”

When in the planning stages of opening The Lady & Sons, the Deens knew that location would be a major factor in their. Deen says they strategically chose the downtown district of Savannah for the location of The Lady & Sons, because it’s a highly visible area.
“We knew that we wanted to be in the downtown district of Savannah,” he says. “We moved down there at a time when the area was going through this really great new growth of new businesses and lots of tourists, which is really important when you own a restaurant. But, a lot of what happened was just luck and determination.”

Deen says an ongoing challenge faced by restaurant owners is trying to make sure every aspect of the business is running smoothly at all times.

“The number one goal in a restaurant is making sure the people are always happy,” he says. “It’s a real balancing act between making sure that your staff is happy, your food is the best it can be, and giving your guests a full belly and a big smile.”

Although being a restaurant owner is challenging, Deen enjoys the job. His favorite part about his work is spending time with his mother and brother.

“We’re in this together as a family,” he says. “That’s definitely the most rewarding part.”

Behind-the-Scenes at The Greenhouse Tavern

Chef Jonathon Sawyer, co-owner of The Greenhouse Tavern and Noodlecat, both in the downtown Cleveland, Ohio, chose the area to open his restaurants, as the location offers access to a wide variety of people.

“We felt that downtown gave us a great opportunity to make an impression on a multitude of different walks of life,” says Sawyer. “Sports fans, foodies, office people, etc. It all happens downtown.”

Sawyer, who recently competed on Iron Chef America, says his typical day as a restaurant owner and chef starts off by having breakfast with his family, and helping his wife send the kids off to school.

He then bikes down to his restaurants and makes sure everything is ready for the lunch crowd at Noodlecat, and then heads over to The Greenhouse Tavern to work with his brand manager for a few hours before dinner service begins.

“These ‘typical’ days are becoming few and far between due to travel and special events, and as we prepare to open our third restaurant,” Sawyer says. “Typically I spend about 100 days a year on the road.”

Sawyer says the frequent travel and long hours are one of the most difficult aspects of being a restaurant owner, as it can be challenging to balance home life with restaurant life.

Although the restaurant industry can be demanding, Sawyer says the most rewarding thing about being a restaurant owner is seeing the positive effect his restaurants have on the community.

“I do feel like we’re changing the world one customer at a time and I love the idea of having a positive impact on downtown Cleveland and the local agronomy,” Sawyer says.

Doing their part to make the city a better place to live in is one of the main reasons that motivated Sawyer and his partners to open their socially conscious restaurants.

“For us it’s very important that we leave this world in better shape than it was left for us by our parents and grandparents, and running a green restaurant is great way to do so,” Sawyer says. “We support local farmers. We compost. We fought the city to get a recycling bin behind our restaurant. And we’re able to share this with every person that dines at the restaurant.”