



Andy Diep Of Seminole Reef Grill: 5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Became a Chef

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Waste is the killer. Too much waste will bring your food costs up tremendously. Be creative and utilize what you have and that makes you sharper. It is a challenge. If you are chef or a manager, food cost is very important.

As *part of our series about the lessons from influential*

‘TasteMakers’, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Master Sushi Chef Andy Diep.

Andy Diep is the Master Sushi Chef at Seminole Reef Grill in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. The restaurant opened in March 2022 and is described as the ultimate seafood experience where Key West casual meets Palm Beach elegance. Andy is a self-taught second-generation chef and owned four restaurants in Iowa and Illinois before relocating to Florida.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Our readers would love to ‘get to know’ you a bit. Can you share with our readers a story about what inspired you to become a restaurateur or chef?

I am a self-taught second-generation chef. My family has been in the restaurant business for a long time. I actually have a bachelor’s degree in industrial design from University of Illinois-Champaign, with a focus on consumer products and design. While in college, I worked weekends at a sushi restaurant and fell in love with the restaurant business. I love meeting people, learning from them, and hearing their stories. The restaurant industry affords me that opportunity each and every day.

Do you have a specific type of food that you focus on? What was it that first drew you to cooking that type of food? Can you share a story about that with us?

I currently focus on sushi, but I know how to cook many types of cuisine. At the sushi bar, I sometimes make 10–12 new items per night by customizing a menu for each patron’s palette, taking pride in focusing

on the texture and flavor profile. It makes my guests feel special. I encourage my patrons to resist the urge of dipping the sushi in soy sauce and enjoying the flavor the way I prepare it.

Can you share the funniest or most interesting story that has happened to you since you became a chef? What was the lesson or take away you took out of that story?

I joke around with people all the time. The other day, a guest came to Seminole Reef Grill and asked if I lived around here and I said I used to live on Jupiter, joking it was the planet.

I played a prank once during the winter in Iowa and cut an entire whole tuna, about 120 lbs. of tuna. I took the tuna head and I put on the seat of my chef friend's car and covered it with a towel. It was really cold, so it wouldn't go bad. We were watching him go to his car and get in, and all of a sudden he ran out of his car and we all laughed. The whole head, eyes and all. The more we know each other in the kitchen, the worse the pranks get.

At my Japanese restaurant Konomi in Iowa, I was making sushi and there was a group of four customers who I knew pretty well. They've been coming for years and they don't know what we have on the menu because they don't look at it. They introduced me to their friend and they said I could make anything for them. Some were familiar items and then I came up with a new roll on the fly and went out to them to check and see how everything was. They asked me what it was and I said, "I don't know." They said goodbye before they left. When I asked how it was, they said, "I don't know," since that was my response to them.

Can you tell us a story about the hard times that you faced when you first started your journey? How did you overcome this obstacle?

I have learned that working in the restaurant industry required many, many long hours and it is exhausting. You don't even have time to sit down and have a normal meal. You are sitting in a corner in the kitchen and trying to eat quickly. You don't see a lot of chefs sitting down and eating a normal meal. I overcame it by hiring a great staff who I trust. It's a release. Delegate tasks.

Seeing customers walk out happy is a pleasure and that is how I define success. Some days it is drill, but at the end of the day, the customer appreciates and enjoys it and leaves very joyful. That is a big push behind overcoming the sweat, long hours, and sacrifice. We've done something to make 100s of people happy. It's very joyful. I love the business. It's a challenge, it's a headache, but when you've done it, you feel proud.

In your experience, what is the key to creating a dish that customers are crazy about?

My favorite thing to do is create a dish catered to a specific customer. If I nailed it by understanding what a customer is looking for by talking to them, I feel so good about myself. Some people want new, exciting, and exotic. Others are very basic. It's difficult to answer this question with one specific dish that customers are crazy about because what I think is amazing, doesn't mean it's amazing to the customer. We all have unique palettes. Being a great chef, you have to understand who is front of you, not what you are capable of. Give the customer a sample to slowly push them if you believe they might like something prepared differently. For example, I encourage my patrons to resist the urge of dipping the sushi in soy sauce and enjoying the flavor the way I prepare it. I can learn from people older than me and younger than me, even kids.

Personally, what is the 'perfect meal for you'?

I like shellfish. I like tuna lot because it's lean and it's clean. Raw tuna, just sashimi, with just a little soy sauce. I eat light and mild. I like white wine, like a pinot grigio, with my tuna. But, when I create for the customer, I can't serve what I like. I need to give them what they like.

I also love steak because I love wine. I have red wine with that. Alpha Omega Georges III Cabernet Sauvignon is one of my favorites. I enjoy having that with filet mignon, cooked medium rare with salt and pepper, and piece of foie gras on top, which is geese liver. I have sauteed string beans and mashed potatoes on the side. That's heaven.

French blue cheese with Dolce Wine, a dessert wine, is another of my favorite pairings.

Where does your inspiration for creating come from? Is there something that you turn to for a daily creativity boost?

One of my strategies to improve my cooking is I step out from the kitchen to clean tables because I get to see the plates. I observe how well people eat and how they eat. For example, if someone orders a steak and their plate is neat and clean after the meal, it means the steak was prepared perfectly. If the plate is messy, they were struggling to cut it. I also like to see if they liked the food. I welcome both positive and negative feedback because it helps me improve. You have to receive negative feedback in order to flip it to positive. If it is all positive, there is no room for growth.

And, as I stated before, I ask my diners questions about the flavors and textures they personally like and then I get creative by customizing sushi rolls for them. I enjoy going off script and not sticking to the menu. By being challenged with creating 10–12 new items each night, it keeps me motivated and stimulated. My job never gets mundane.

I also make sushi very different than everybody else around. I joke with my customers and staff, that being different is great, as long as you are good, because you are the only place people can get sushi prepared the way we prepare it.

There is a couple I served sushi to and they said how good it was and how they enjoyed it. I told them I am taking a big risk here by serving something different than a lot of sushi places in town. I don't want to be in the same circle as everyone else. I can, but I don't want to. I like to take the chance and that risk. If I fail, I know what I did. Luckily, the owner of Seminole Reef Grill has given me that opportunity and freedom to do so. He could tell me to make the food everyone has accepted around here. I just moved here. I don't know what everyone else serves. I only know what I know how to do.

Are you working on any new or exciting projects now? What impact do you think this will have?

I still own a new-concept ramen restaurant in Iowa called Ramen Belly, where I bring the techniques from high-end fine dining to a casual setting. I hope to bring the same concept to Palm Beach County. I have been eating ramen around here and it's all a very similar flavor profile. It lacks innovation and creativity. Ramen Belly will be different.

What advice would you give to other chefs or restaurateurs to thrive and avoid burnout?

I don't compete with one restaurant. I compete with the entire community, even fast-food restaurants. In Palm Beach Gardens, every night thousands of people go out to eat. Where are they going? They are scattered all over. Seminole Reef Grill is sharing just a percentage of it.

If you come to work worried about what you are doing today, you are behind. You have to be planning for tomorrow. If you come in prepared, you are ready to rock and roll and get in your zone. If you are unprepared, that is when you are stressed. The busier you get, the more focused you get.

Thank you for all that. Now we are ready for the main question of the interview. What are your "5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me When I First Started as a Chef" and why? Please share a story or an example for each.

1. My parents told me the restaurant business is hard. My dad used to have a Chinese takeout restaurant. When I was a little kid in Vietnam, my family had a stand outside of people's homes to sell food. I came from a poor family, which is why I am very respectful to everybody.

2. Prepare yourself for long hours. You will miss out on a lot of fun time because you are in the kitchen.

3. It is hot in the kitchen from the heat and smoke. You walk out and you smell like food at the end of the night.

4. Waste is the killer. Too much waste will bring your food costs up tremendously. Be creative and utilize what you have and that makes you sharper. It is a challenge. If you are chef or a manager, food cost is very important.

5. Managing hours is dependent on how the business is doing. Understand that the staff is looking for hours and if you can't give them hours, they will go work elsewhere because they need to support their families. You can't think only of your number. You have to think about them and their families. If you are a good manager, you understand that. You have to figure out how to do that properly. Who is loyal to you during busy season? I care about my staff, I really cared, even when I was the owner. I treat everyone of them equally. I help in bussing tables and doing dishes if they are falling behind because I don't want them burning out. We are part of a team. I won't sit back and watch people struggle.

6. Bonus Tip: There is a big difference being the sushi chef only and not owning Seminole Reef Grill. I have worked for myself for so long as a business owner, that working for someone else is a release. There is less responsibility. But at the same time, there are certain things I like to do, but I can't because there are restrictions and limits since I am not the owner.

What's the one dish people have to try if they visit your establishment?

Pascal Georget is the executive chef at Seminole Reef Grill. The Swordfish au Poivre is our chef's signature. It is peppered, pan seared, and finished in a brandy cream sauce. It's served with the vegetable of the day and rosemary potatoes.

You are a person of enormous influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

Build a bridge and connect with the customer, so when they come in, they feel welcome and they feel like we care. Put yourself in their shoes. If you go into a place where people care about your food, it makes you feel special.

Thank you so much for these insights. This was very inspirational!

<https://medium.com/authority-magazine/andy-diep-of-seminole-reef-grill-5-things-i-wish-someone-told-me-before-i-became-a-chef-e75d054f8689>