

Three Key Ingredients TO RESTAURANT SUCCESS

By Wil Brawley

Recently I interviewed twenty successful independent restaurant owners from all over the U.S., including Phil Roberts of Parasole Restaurant Group in Minneapolis, Chris Sommers of Pi Pizzeria in St. Louis and Joe Johnston of Joe's Real BBQ, Joe's Farm Grill and Liberty Market in Gilbert, Ariz.

I talked to them because I wanted to learn more about what they had done to become successful. And while their opinions varied on many topics (e.g., starting with only used equipment vs. buying new and state-of-the-art equipment; do no traditional marketing vs. use billboards), the following three themes emerged consistently from all of the interviews.

1. Your staff comes first.

Time after time, interviewees told me about other owners they knew who didn't treat their staff members well. These owners used a heavy top-down management style. They didn't get to know their staff. They had big egos and didn't listen to staff members' ideas. They didn't offer cool benefits. They didn't host fun staff parties. They weren't transparent with the staff. They didn't communicate with the staff and make them feel like part of a common goal. Naturally, these habits resulted in negative experiences for everyone involved.

A common thread throughout the interviews was that staff should come first, even before customers and investors. The staff is the front line and, as such, they are critical to your success. If you can get them to buy into what you're doing and you lead by example and not decree, they'll likely go out of their way to help make you successful. Otherwise, they may just go out of their way to make sure you fail. In sum, treat your staff extremely well and make sure they know how much you appreciate them.

(Side note: I highly recommend the book "How to Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie. Though it was written in 1937, it contains timeless wisdom on how to build people's trust and friendship in both business and personal relationships.)

2. Be ready to work when everybody else is playing.

Many people attempt to start restaurants because the business seems glamorous and looks like fun. And it is. But it won't be fun for long if you aren't willing to put in the long hours and you aren't prepared to work while your friends who don't own restaurants are having fun.

Don't expect that you can hire people to manage every aspect of your business and avoid having to work sixty, seventy, eighty hours per week. You may be able to do that years down the road once you've established your restaurant and made all the right tweaks and worked side-by-side for years with people who can run things for you. But not at first, not in the first few years.

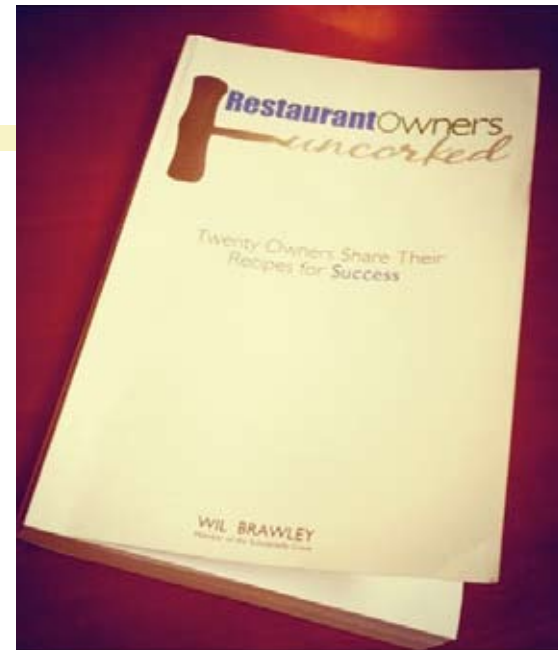
Plan to be ready to mop the dish-room floor at 3:00 a.m. on New Year's Day because your dishwasher just quit. If you go into business with that mindset, you're prepared to do what it takes to succeed.

3. Treat your partnership like a marriage.

Failed partnerships lead to failed restaurants all the time. The owners I spoke with told countless stories about failed partnership experiences they'd had themselves or knew about through acquaintances. It's common for people to go into partnerships with friends and wind up destroying the friendship and losing the business.

If you plan to have a partner, think very carefully about the relationship. Do you share common business philosophies? Does your potential partner have strengths where you have weaknesses and vice versa? Have you worked with this person before and seen how he or she responds in stressful situations (because you will have plenty of them)? Do you share common goals for the business? Will you be the majority owner who has the final say on important decisions, and, if so, will your partner be O.K. with that arrangement?

Even if you believe you've found the perfect partner, be ready to constantly work at the relationship just as you would a marriage.



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Overall, there is no single recipe for restaurant success just as there is no single recipe for making a great pizza. However, just as you need a few common ingredients to build a pizza, you need a few common ingredients to build a successful restaurant business. Practice them and you'll set yourself up for a great chance to succeed.

Wil Brawley is a partner at Schedulefly (www.schedulefly.com), which provides restaurants with a web-based staff scheduling and communication application. His recent interviews with restaurateurs across the country appear in his book, "Restaurant Owners Uncorked: Twenty Owners Share Their Recipes for Success," available through Amazon.com.