



From Mikey the dishwasher to executive: Mike Morgan

by Donna Evans-Deyermond

Only a select few would find working at the kitchen sink the inspiration for becoming an executive chef. Mike Morgan is one of those. "My grandmother did own a family restaurant," Morgan says. So it was sort of in the genes. Or maybe Morgan felt obligated to uphold the family tradition after his grandmother named one of her menu items, "Mikey's Basket," after him. Whatever the reason, Morgan found his destiny at the age of fourteen, washing dishes at the East Aurora Country Club.

When he graduated from high school Morgan headed for Alfred State College, where he went through the three-year Culinary School program, returning to Orchard Park Country Club to work as a prep cook. "The chef there liked me and gave me every possibility to learn the business inside and out. With the golf outings, regular restaurant service, and events, it was a great place to get experience," Morgan says. "I liked it there, but

eventually I hit a ceiling. There was no place to move up, so I had to move on."

Morgan's next stop was the Finger Lakes. "I worked in a restaurant at the end of Seneca Lake, which I'm not even sure is still there. I loved the wineries and the area, but it was seasonal. After Labor Day it was too slow for me. So I went back to the Country Club, then to Romanello's for awhile."

Comfortable with the classics

David's Grille, in Morgan's hometown of Orchard Park (4247 North Buffalo Road), had opened and was looking for a prep cook and he stepped into the job. This time he didn't encounter that ceiling: two cooks left, allowing him to move up into the position of executive chef. "I have complete freedom: I do the menu, hiring, ordering, scheduling. I particularly love planning the specials," Morgan says. "I base them on what's available and fresh. Fall is the best time because the local produce is so good."

DAVID'S GRILLE FAVORITES

Appetizer: Scallops wrapped in smoked bacon and served over harvest ravioli.
Entree: Sesame crusted tuna served with an Asian noodle stir fry or lobster crab cakes with sweet chili sauce.

Dessert: Red velvet, strawberry pistachio, or chocolate mousse cakes, which Morgan describes as "unreal!"

The chef says the key to success at David's Grille has been putting new twists on the classics and doing things other restaurants don't think of. "The guys in the kitchen have really gotten into it," Morgan says. "I couldn't do it without them. We have a great team." The busiest time of the day, he says, is during service, but the *best* time of the day is prepping. "We have a lot of fun. We all have season tickets to the Bills and that's a great common bond."

A family affair

David's Grille is owned by Hart Hotels, which Morgan says offers its employees a lot of opportunity. "With this company I'm not afraid to take chance,"

es," the twenty-eight-year-old says. Last summer, Morgan and his wife got married in the new Hart Hotel on Seneca Lake close to Watkins Glen. She manages the bar across the street from David's so they have the same hours, an essential ingredient to a chef's marriage. The couple recently bought a house and are spending their spare time remodeling it.

Morgan reads every food magazine he can get his hands on, including *Gourmet* and *Bon Appetit*, and saves them all—hundreds of them—much to his wife's dismay. "I figure maybe one day I'll be teaching and I'll have all of this material to fall back on."

Donna Evans-Deyermond is a writer and PR consultant whose son worked as a dishwasher while in high school. Seth described the experience as "working in a swamp." He is now studying to be an automotive technician, hopes to one day write about cars—and leaves the cooking to his mother.

