

Johan Engman: “The restaurant industry needs a movement towards less alcohol, drugs and harassment”

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I had the pleasure of interviewing Johan Engman, founder & owner of Rise & Shine Restaurant Group in San Diego, CA. Engman has dominated the breakfast market in San Diego, opening 10 breakfast/brunch themed restaurants in the last 10 years, with expansion into Orange County happening in the next several months. He also owns a Mexican eatery in San Diego, and will be opening a handful of additional concepts over the next year.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! What inspired you to become a chef?

I never went to college and started working as a dishwasher when I was 17. When I was 25, I gave myself 2.5 years to either open my own restaurant or change careers. At 27 I opened my first restaurant.

What has your journey been like since first stepping foot in a kitchen?

I've never worked on the line, but spent countless hours in the kitchen. The further the journey goes the more my appreciation and respect for our hard-working kitchen staff grows.

Do you have a specialty? If so, what drew you to that type of food?

I love to travel, and as such, have had the privilege of experiencing many different cultures and cuisines. One of my specialties is to take a traditional dish from another cuisine/culture and put my breakfast spin on it.

Can you share the funniest or most interesting story that happened to you since you became a chef?

In the early days at my first restaurant, Fig Tree Cafe, I vividly recall one particular instance that is funny now (not so much then). It around October or November and it started raining and we quickly realized that we had a leak in the roof. Our lease was a bit funky and it was our responsibility to fix it (normally the landlords). We didn't have the money to re-do or even properly repair the roof, so we went to Home Depot and bought a tarp. We bought what turned out to be a very thin, plastic tarp... fast forward a week after it had been sunny for some time and now the plastic tarp had dried out, cracked and blown into our neighbor's yard. We spent hours raking and practically vacuuming up the plastic tarp bits from our neighbor's property.

What is your definition of success?

I consider success as having a balanced life, in addition to providing jobs, a good work environment and culture for my employees, and enjoying time with my fiancé Yasmin.

What failures have you had along the way? How have they led you to success?

Three months after opening my first restaurant I was out of money and seemingly left with no choice but to close the restaurant. After digging deep, I decided to simply not accept that as an option and got several odd hour jobs to keep the doors open. This has led to my success by knowing the importance of watching all expenses among many other things.

Are you working on any new or exciting projects now?

Yes! I'm very excited about EGGiES, a fast casual breakfast sandwich concept with a fun and quirky design. The footprint of EGGiES will be tiny, housed in a 20 ft. x 8 ft. shipping container, which will be converted into a very functional "mini-restaurant."

What advice do you have for aspiring chefs?

Do it because you love it, not because you want to get rich, famous and on TV. This industry is a grind, and you truly need to love it.

What is the key to creating the perfect dish?

I'd say the two most important components to creating the perfect dish come down to enhancing dishes with unique flavor combinations, as well as infusing them with chef-driven creativity.

It is said that food is a common ground that brings people together. As someone who makes food for a living, what does this saying mean to you?

It means everything, and I believe that wholeheartedly. While traveling through foreign countries where I often ran into language barriers, food always seemed to be the "language" that we all spoke and what brought us together at the end of the day.

What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Became a Chef” and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)

1) Things cost more than what you'd imagine, and there is waste to consider (which is costly). Meaning, on paper it's easy to budget for a restaurant and even say to one self “there's no way it can possibly cost more than this.” Then reality happens, which is basically that things go wrong, people don't show up, someone makes a mistake and you have to throw away a batch of something and you have more waste than you expected.

2) Always hire good attorneys, not the cheapest ones, the best ones. It will save you at some point. The contracts, leases and agreements that you sign over time are immensely important. Imagine this hypothetical scenario: You open your first restaurant and you're so excited to get started, you have some money (probably not enough) and you decide to go with your buddy's friend who was going to be an attorney but ended up not but now said he'd “help you out” and only charge you \$75 per hour as opposed to the highly recommended attorney that charges \$350 per hour. You decided to go with the guy who's “helping you out”. Years later when there's a conflict or issue with the landlord you now hire the \$350/hr attorney and he says “who the hell reviewed this lease” and you tell him. His response will be “there's not much I can do because you signed a terrible lease.” That scenario could cost a restaurant owner tens of thousands of dollars and endless money in missed opportunities.

3) Spend extra time and effort on setting up systems to ensure consistency. Having proper recipes, scheduling, training programs/systems among many other things are incredibly important. Yes, it takes more time, effort and costs some money up front but getting started on the right track from the beginning as opposed to saying “I'll get there later one day” —it's harder to change later.

4) Make accounting and keeping records a focus early on in your career as opposed to something that you focus on down the line. I waited too long for this and it was a mess to untangle. It's very valuable to be able to look back at your early days and see what the numbers looked like then (numbers as in labor, food vs beverage sales, etc).

5) Have a solid employee handbook early in that spells out the restaurant's policies, vision, etc.

Having a solid employee handbook that spells out the restaurant's policies etc protects you as a business owner—you simply refer to the written policy should there be an issue or uncertainty.

You are a person of great 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.

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Some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to cook for and why?

Richard Branson, because I admire his accomplishments, but more importantly, what he and his companies stand for, and what they do to better the world.

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