



CULINARY EXPERT Q & A

Executive Chef

Robert Olinger / *Wesley Woods*



What or who inspired you to become a chef?

I studied architecture for six years but ultimately decided not to pursue it. My best friend's brother, who had been in the industry for a few years, was heading to culinary school and asked me to join him. I initially refused, saying, "No way, man. I know nothing about cooking." He replied, "You're not doing anything with your life right now. You should go. Plus, think about it—you'll always have a job." Ironically, he dropped out halfway through culinary school and became a preacher.

So, how long have you been in the industry now?

Twenty years.

If you could learn under any renowned chef, who would it be?

Grant Achatz.

Can you share a memorable experience from your culinary journey?

Where do I begin? I have so many memories I could share thousands. One that stands out the most is my first experience at an omelet station. I was about five months into culinary school, working for the Omnia Hotel. The Oakland Raiders had reserved the ballroom for a team breakfast the day before their game against the Steelers.

I had never used a butane burner before. I had one lit and then went to switch out the empty can on the burner next to it. Suddenly, it ignited and literally burned off my eyebrows. I told the group of players in front of me "it's all part of the package". Later, the chef came over to me asked if I was ok and said, "Glad you don't have facial hair yet" and then walked away.

What are some essential skills every chef should have?

Intuition, patience, a pivot mindset, embracing imperfect perfection, thick skin, and knowing you're the outsider. High pain tolerance, recognizing that everything is a safety risk, camaraderie. And above all, remembering that teamwork makes the dream work!

How do you stay up to date with current trends?

Instagram, Netflix, and group discussions.

How do you balance creativity with the practicality of running a kitchen?

Understanding both the audience and the staff. Ingredients and technique are only as good as the person behind the knife. We can encourage creativity but must stick to the boundaries of what is feasible and efficient.

For us home cooks, what's a useful tip or trick that you can share?

Always have a fire extinguisher and a first-aid kit readily available. Don't be afraid to try something new and different. Just make sure its edible.

What's your favorite local restaurant?

Stories on High.