

# Front & Back of the House

## Chef Burwell Helps Fuel Slow Evolution of Spiedini Italian Ristorante

By Gael Hees

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Photo credit: Spiedini Italian Ristorante

Chef Gustav Mauler created a classic Italian eatery when he opened Spiedini Italian Ristorante at the Resort at Summerlin. The restaurant quickly became known for its impeccable service and authentic dishes including osso bucco, tagliolini with lobster, and lasagna Bolognese al forno.

Twenty years later in July of last year, Chef Mauler retired, leaving the restaurant to JW Marriott to manage with menu, decor, employees, kitchen and reputation intact.

The challenge was to find the right leader to build on Mauler's successes.

Looking within, the company found two good candidates for the position. Megan Shaver was first promoted to executive chef and then in the fall was promoted to sous chef for the entire Resort at Summerlin property. Matthew Burwell was named executive chef in October, after serving the company for just three years, starting as chef de partie, and then making his way to sous chef.

After being promoted, Burwell continued to learn from and observe the kitchen operations for several weeks before making any changes. Paying careful attention to what worked and what didn't, he slowly started tweaking things to better suit his management style.

His first changes involved creating more teamwork among the kitchen staff members. He started cross-training people on different positions to cut down on log jams during peak production times.

"It is really important that everyone is helping and supporting each other," said Burwell. "Many cooks have the mentality that 'I'm just working the sauté station so that's all I'm going to do.' I think that sort of separation causes problems and work slowdowns. There has to be good communication and support."

When asked about how he managed moving from the position of a peer in the kitchen to executive chef, he replied, "I've tried to keep a separation between personal and professional relationships, especially since moving out here. I've made that mistake, become too close of friends with coworkers. If you want to advance, that has to be your priority from the get go. You can't come into a restaurant just to make friends and think that you're going to advance. I've developed that separation to where we're friendly and have fun, but there is a time to

get the job done and stay focused."

As to the menu, Burwell has left that pretty much as it was under Mauler's direction. "The person before me was Chef Megan," said Burwell, "and we just tried to do our own specials rather than make menu changes. I've adapted some of my ideas to the offerings but don't see any reason to change the menu at this time."

Burwell grew up in Toledo, Ohio and started in the restaurant business as a teenager, washing dishes and eventually working his way up to cook. The decision to become a chef led him to Monroe, Michigan, where he attended culinary school at Monroe Community College.

Upon returning home, he snagged a job at Bottle Employee Five, a gastropub, where he worked his way up from cook, to sous chef, to executive chef. After five years, he made the move to Vegas and worked at a locally-owned Italian restaurant in Summerlin before moving to Spiedini.

"Advancing in your job is a lot of hard work," said Burwell. "It involves gathering as much knowledge as you can and turning around and putting that knowledge to use and exhibiting that you're absorbing that knowledge."

He apparently paid attention when one of his culinary school faculty members said, "The moment you stop learning is the moment you get left behind in this business." He likens this to the competition for customers among Las Vegas restaurants.

"If you just stick to what you're doing, you're going to become outdated and a piece of the past," he said. "To really hold onto what you're doing, you have to constantly evolve. That's what I see a lot of the restaurants around town doing."

As to Spiedini's evolution? Burwell didn't want to say too much, but he did share that a new pizza oven—scheduled to arrive this summer—will add a whole new section to the menu. He also indicated that there would be a few more additions and changes. He wants the details to be a surprise.

**Spiedini Italian Ristorante**

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