

From One Generation to the Next

Jeff Safari

By Jaymi Curley

In the midst of the new food celebrity with big-name chefs and rock star restaurateurs, it can be easy to forget about the sweat equity that goes into running a restaurant. Considering the average 3% profit margins and high-failure rate of new restaurants in the U.S., anyone taking that roller coaster ride had better forget the glamour and prepare to roll up their sleeves. Atlanta restaurateur Jeff Safari embodies the spirit of hard work, good management and solid values that spells the best shot at success in any field.

The Safari adventure in the hospitality business began with Michael Safari, Jeff's father. Michael Safari emigrated from Iran to the United States in the early '60s and at age 20 began work with the Fairmont Hotels chain in Oklahoma as a busboy. With a lot of hard work, the elder Safari managed to

put himself through school, and rise through the ranks of the Fairmont chain, eventually taking a position in Dallas, TX, as a food and beverage manager for the Fairmont Hotel.

"Fairmont opened a hotel in a little town called Atlanta," said Jeff Safari. "I was 3 or 4 when we moved here." The old Fairmont Hotel stood on the site of what is now Colony Square. "It was a four-star hotel," said Safari, "but it didn't work out, obviously, so Dad kind of went out on his own. He opened the Diplomat. That was our first restaurant, the premier restaurant in Atlanta at the time."

Jeff Safari's first taste of the family business didn't happen until the family bought Atlanta Catering in 1987, now renamed Southern Hospitality Management (SHM). Like his father before him, Jeff started learning the business at ground level.

Thrive's General Manager A.D. Allushi and owner Jeff Safari



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Thrive cocktail

"I was in high school. My dad wasn't about to give me a corner office to start," chuckled Safari. "He'd want me to sweat a bit first. I washed dishes and waited tables."

With as much experience as Safari was gaining in the catering business, and after gaining his business marketing degree from Georgia Southern University, it would seem only natural for him to take up the family mantle, but he was initially resistant. "Oh, I never, never wanted to work in the family business. I had graduated from college. I had another job, sold computers for a while. It was actually my wife, Carrie, who convinced me. My dad came to me one night and asked me to be the assistant operations manager. My wife told me if I was going to work hard for someone, it should be for myself, for the family. So, I decided to give it six months. It turned out to be a really great thing for us, and for my relationship with my father."

After working for a year as an assistant, Safari became the manager of operations for the family company. He then ran a branch of SHM, American Food, and began managing his own restaurants under the Safari Restaurant Group moniker, created when Safari opened his popular European-flavored restaurant, Thrive, in downtown Atlanta in early 2007.

Thrive came about when a leasing manager with whom

Safari had a long friendship approached him about doing "something really cool downstairs" in a downtown building he had just purchased. Safari envisioned an upscale environment, with a clean European look and a sophisticated menu, but affordable. "Everyone needs to feel welcome, that's really important. That's how you get people to come back time and again," says Safari.

"One of the most important elements in restaurant ownership is choosing a great general manager," says Safari. That element led him to hiring A.D. Allushi as the General Manager of Thrive. "A.D. came from Bluepointe, and I kept hearing about him. I went to watch him, and I loved his customer service. He treated everybody really well, making everybody feel special. That is so important." In addition to customer service, a good GM has to bring a sense of trust and loyalty to the table. "It's key to find a good manager so I don't have to be here every night. It's about trust," said Safari.

With restaurants operating on such a tight margin to begin with, and with wholesale food costs rising by as much as 5% in 2007, being able to rely on a GM's honesty is even more crucial. "In this business, you have so many people who come and go, and they'll rationalize hooking their friends up with free drinks night after night. Food going out the back door. That's how you lose money. And we're not making 20% here. You make 3, 4, 5%, you're having a great month. I need someone who's going to watch the pennies. A.D. would starve before he'd take a dollar from me. I really believe that."

But a success like Thrive doesn't happen without being able to meet challenges creatively. In downtown Atlanta, parking is a problem. Safari was able to overcome this obstacle by arranging for free valet parking after 5 p.m. "People can park and go right in to the space. It's a way of overcoming a lot of the stigma people have about downtown," states Safari.

Another challenge is marketing. Safari has to be very creative in getting the word out about his restaurants. "We can't do radio, we can't do television, we can't do a billboard. It's really a grass roots effort right now. We've done a lot of events, used promoters and used publicity. Sometimes, if there's something going on at the club Tabernacle or at Philips Arena, we have street teams go out and hand out small cards that invite people to come to our restaurant. Downtown has already come so far just in the last few years. Downtown is really changing for the better."

Safari's newest Atlanta venture, Hot Stix, an Asian fusion grill, grew from his encounter with a local restaurant, Chow Baby, located on the Northwest side, near his nightclub Compound. "The manager of Chow Baby came to us and asked if we would let guests of Chow Baby into Compound for free with a dinner receipt. We said sure." When Safari became aware that Compound was getting 100 customers a night from

the nearby restaurant, he was intrigued. "I figured, if these guys are holding 100, 200 people, and turning it over twice a night, this was something I needed to see." Safari started investigating the Asian grill concept, first visiting Chow Baby and then flying to Chicago to visit Flat-Top Grill. Safari decided that this was to be the next restaurant concept in the Safari Restaurant Group family.

Safari chose Lindberg City Center as his first Hot Stix location. "I like this location. It's right off GA-400, it's easy to get to. I like that it's convenient, right in between Buckhead and Midtown." In addition, the construction of town-homes and condos in the area around the Lindbergh station, along with the planned development of 70,000 feet of retail space and two additional condo towers, can only help build a strong local clientele for the future. "This is an up-and-coming area. I knew our first year was going to be tough. We are still

Hot Stix stir fry line



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Matt's Bowl

two years ahead of the curve in this location." Safari's outlook for Hot Stix is positive, and his plans far reaching, as the Lindbergh location serves as a testing ground for possible future franchising. "We'll tailor it a little bit," said Safari, "but we are definitely going to want to franchise Hot Stix. We've gotten a lot of great feedback. It's a concept that works."

In a business with a lot of mobility, Safari's belief in his staff goes a long way to keeping great people sticking around. Safari adds, "I think our staff turnover is a little lower than average. I try to thank my guys a lot. You always want your employees to be happy. They talk to the customers, they interact and you want them to feel good when they are doing it. Even on the corporate side, most of those people have been with us 10, 15 years."

Safari makes sure that even though he devotes a lot of time to his business, he is there for his wife and his three children, two sons, 8 and 6, and his six-month-old daughter. "Growing up, my dad worked day and night, I hardly ever saw him," said Safari. "I may work one, maybe two late nights a week at the most. Otherwise, I'm home around 6:30 p.m. every night for dinner. I spend time with my kids. I coach their football teams, their baseball. I think it's really important."

At the moment, his sons are too young to think of the family business beyond begging to eat at their dad's places, the "best restaurants in Atlanta," but Safari is looking forward to the day when he may be able to work side by side with them. "I'd love to work with my boys one day. It made my relationship with my dad so much stronger."

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