

HOW TO SHUT UP A CROWD

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All of the cooks in my kitchen can tell you how old I was when I took my first job in this industry, and where my job was. They've all heard it a thousand times. If you can't tell from reading my past articles, or if you are new to this weekly tirade of culinary mayhem, I love to tell stories. My wife and kids tell me I am oft recounting my many life adventures in my sleep. I don't think they'll ever get me to shut up.

In 1983, at the ripe young age of fifteen, my parents took me to eat at the Annapolis Chart House for my birthday, and for those of you who haven't had the pleasure of eating there, suffice it to say that it is probably still worth the trip. It was my first experience of an exhibition kitchen, and as we ate our dinners, I could not stop watching the hustle behind the line.

Less than a month later, I was working there. I worked the salad bar for about a week or two, and then I pressed the managers to give me a shot behind the line. After a little persuading and a few weeks of cooking under my belt, I knew that I had found my true love.

There was bullying (at 6'2" in 1983, I came in at 134 pounds), yelling, an occasional heavy-handed disciplinary action being performed by an older cook (remember, this was before political correctness and new-age management), general chaos and an attitude of working in hyperdrive from the time we started to the time we left for the night. I found myself trying to measure up to my peers who were mostly four to seven years older than me. But there were also nights of flawless production, serving hundreds of people, with no problems. And as we worked in an exhibition kitchen, I could now watch the guests as I had watched the cooks at my birthday dinner.

This was very satisfying to me, as I enjoyed the dynamics of that design. As a result, there were many, many weeks during my last two years at Saint Mary's High School that I also worked full-time at the Chart House at night. My parents did not seem to mind, as it was keeping me out of trouble.

Probably the most memorable experience of all was when I was cooking a Sunday brunch shift with my brother Danny, who had also joined the team as a cook. Since we were always so busy, we would have gallons of hot, melted butter on hand, and whether it was Danny's fault or my own, the handle of the metal butter pot was set accidentally over a lit burner. It got hot. It got really hot. And as I reached back and grabbed the pot, my brain did not quite register that my hand was making that searing sound. It wasn't until I was halfway in the turn that I realized two things. One, that I was burning the living garbage out of my hand, and two, that I could not possibly drop the butter, since we were so busy.

So I delivered the butter to the other side of the line. Unfortunately, it was not without shouting, very loudly, the grand-daddy of all nasty words, and with the trumpet-like vocal cords of a fifteen year old, I was able to bring a room of 300 diners to almost complete silence. And after the managers saw the burn, I didn't get fired. That's when I really knew that I loved this business.