

# What's In a Title?

## THE EXECUTIVE CHEF



Bam! My guess is that when you hear this term the majority of TV watching adults equate this to Emeril Lagasse. Don't get me wrong, some adults will still connect this to the original Batman series.

However via cable and the tremendous amount of television stations out there such as the Food Network Channel, in the last decade cooking has transformed into entertainment.

How many of us have dreamed about cooking like Wolfgang Puck, Michael Mina or Gordon Ramsay, or maybe even better to be the food critics who sample their food! Whatever the case celebrity cooking has really taken the country by storm, and celebrity chefs have attained rock star status.

To learn a little about the day in the life of a casino Executive Chef, we turned to Ray Leung. Chef Ray received his bachelors of culinary arts degree from the University of Hawaii, and worked at the Hilton Hawaiian Village before moving to the mainland where he worked for Harrah's at three different properties over a seven year span. For the last year he has been with the Cherokee Casino & Hotel, and here is his input.

**G&L:** Tell us about the tribal government, and your property.

**RL:** The Cherokee Nation is the sovereign operating government of the Cherokee people, a federally recognized tribe of more than 300,000 Cherokee citizens. As the largest tribe in the United States, the



*Executive Chef Ray Leung*

Cherokee Nation spans much of northeastern Oklahoma. The Cherokee Nation wholly owns and operates eight casinos and three hotels, including our property, Cherokee Casino & Hotel West Siloam Springs, which sits on the border of Oklahoma and Arkansas.

At the casino we have 1,500 electronic games and 20 Table games, and a seven-story hotel with 140 rooms. We have three dining outlets: Flint Creek Steakhouse which features steak and seafood served traditional Italian style; the River Cane Cafe which gives guests a casual dining option for lunch and dinner, and the River Cane Buffet which offers five food stations as well as a selection of local favorites.

**G&L:** How many people are under you, and who do you report to?

**RL:** I have a staff of 90 people, including five chefs and five stewards that report to me, and I report to the Director of Food and Beverage.

**G&L:** Describe a typical day in your work schedule.

**RL:** My typical day consists of a lot of checking and double checking. I start the day getting reports from my chefs about what is going on in the daily operations, and then I visit with the staff to see if everything is going well. We are a team, so it is important that I ensure they have what they need. A typical day involves reviewing the financials and planning special events. Just before lunch I check the food offerings in the River Cane Buffet, and our employee dining room. Then I start the same routine over with my evening shift staff, including the Flint Creek Steakhouse.

**G&L:** What are some of your top departmental priorities?

**RL:** Our greatest priority is ensuring the staff receives the training and education they need or want, while putting a strong emphasis on the overall work environment. The goal is to professionally develop and groom Cherokee citizens who have an interest in the culinary arts. This allows us to create jobs for Cherokees within their communities and tribal nation. Another priority is cooking our food to perfection, making sure we meet the expectations of our guests with the

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quality and prices they deserve. We want our kitchens to be the best place to work.

**G&L:** Tell us about your department's interaction with other departments.

**RL:** I work primarily with marketing and the human resources departments. With marketing I work to highlight featured dishes and promote our food offerings. We collaborate on special events to ensure our guests experience Cherokee hospitality at every turn.

We also work with the human resources team to recruit and retain employees. Employees, especially in food and beverage, are the most valuable asset. We ensure they have the needed employee training programs as it relates to policy and safety.

**G&L:** What has the popularity of celebrity chefs in the last decade done to enhance the F&B department?

**RL:** In any culture there has to be a person or thing that motivates and stimulates, or for people to idolize. The celebrity chefs are like superheroes

in the culinary culture. They bring interest to our field and give motivation to students. Chefs like Emeril and Bobby Flay have brought a new perspective to cooking. They also change the way we think about food. Eating is no longer routine; it is enjoyment, fun, and an adventure.

**G&L:** Where do you see the future of the industry going?

**RL:** I believe it will all center on incorporating science. It will begin to dictate our industry, and that will be very exciting. Every dish that has been created has been recreated several times, so it is about using new technology or science to make your dish different. As an example we've created a new experience on the traditional Caesar's salad where we use liquid nitrogen on the Caesar dressing; the result is a crispy, crunchy dressing on a tender grilled romaine lettuce.

**G&L:** What advice would you give up & coming culinarians?

**RL:** Learn to combine your culinary education and on-the-job training into one skill. This will

allow you to become a chef who is flexible. Remember to be humble, because there is always someone who is better. Always keep the people you are serving in mind; simply, be a people person. You can't do it all, you are stronger with your team.

I hope this article brought a little insight into the thought process of an Executive Chef, and want to thank Chef Ray for his time. As you flip through the seeming endless list of channels on your television set, you are sure to find a program or two pertaining to cooking. If you haven't done so, please take the time to check some of the information out as more times than not they are very educational, and entertaining.

Please contact me with any thoughts or comments, and hope you read this column again in the next issue of Gaming & Leisure magazine!

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