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For additional information, please contact Renee Slovick at: (508) 541-1238

KEEFE TECH CLASS OF 2001 ALUMNUS NOW OWNER OF CATERING BUSINESS

“Before I came to Keefe Tech, I used to burn Jell-O,” laughs Holliston native John Wadkins, who is now the co-owner of On Time Creative Cuisine Catering. “I was a terrible cook, but that all changed during my freshman year of high school.”

Wadkins, a graduate of the Joseph P. Keefe Technical School Class of 2001, enrolled for ninth grade with every intention of pursuing an education in the school’s Automotive Technology Career Program. “During the Freshman Career Exploratory Program, I quickly realized that Auto Tech was not for me,” Wadkins admits, laughingly. “But when I was introduced to Culinary Arts, I knew I had found something that I really enjoyed and could learn to do well.”

The Freshman Career Exploratory Program at Keefe Tech was designed to help ninth grade students make an informed decision about which of the school’s 13 Career Programs coincide with their interests and aptitudes. Students evaluate each one of the programs and choose four to attend and explore for a half term each, ultimately enrolling in the one in which they were most successful.

“During my Freshman Exploratory experience in Culinary Arts, the lead culinary instructor, Chef Zentgraf, recognized my interest and told me, ‘This is for you,’ ” Wadkins recalls. “I quickly decided that Culinary Arts was what I wanted to do. By the end of my freshman year, I had picked up on baking skills and was allowed to ice and decorate cakes, which is unusual for a ninth grader.”

Under the guidance and mentorship of Chef Zentgraf, Wadkins was introduced to the world of cuisine, and began building his knowledge through the expertise of the industry professionals employed as Keefe Tech’s team of Culinary Arts Instructors.

“John was always such a motivated student,” recalls Chef Snyder, Keefe Tech’s Bakery Instructor. A pastry chef with 25 years’ industry experience in upscale bakeries and fine dining establishments, Snyder taught Wadkins during his junior year in the Culinary Program. “He was extremely well-rounded. He was so enthusiastic about learning, but also made time to enjoy the full high school experience. He was a huge sports star and was on the football and wrestling teams.”

Between academic weeks and after school sports, Wadkins learned how to plan menus, determine portion sizes, select, store, handle, and prepare food, and gained an understanding of hotel and restaurant sanitation, public health issues, and quality control.

“Working in the East Side Room helped immensely,” says Wadkins of his time working in the Keefe Tech in-house, student-run restaurant. Open four days a week, the East Side room serves lunch to the public and provides catering services for in-house events. “The East Side Room gave me wait staff experience and taught me how to manage the front and back of a restaurant,” he adds. “It was just nonstop learning.”

By the time he was in his junior year at Keefe Tech, Wadkins was already employed part-time at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Natick as a Banquet Chef. “Across the board, the Culinary program taught me



all I needed to move up to the next step,” Wadkins stresses. “I had such a wide range of culinary knowledge and was totally prepared to work in a ‘real’ kitchen.”

After graduating from the Keefe Tech Culinary Arts program with a ServSafe certification, Wadkins attended Johnson & Wales University, and began work as a full-time Banquet Chef at the Natick Crowne Plaza Hotel. He later took on a role as a Kitchen Manager at Pepperoncini’s Restaurant in Framingham. Now the co-owner of On Time Creative Cuisine Catering, Wadkins also works as a production cook and per diem chef at Pepper’s Fine Foods Catering in Northborough.

“As a senior in high school, I already knew that I really loved the catering aspect of the culinary industry,” Wadkins acknowledges. “I knew catering was my future. I decided, this is what I want to do, and then I did it.”

Wadkins and On Time Creative Cuisine Catering co-owner Megan Dunn, a graduate of Johnson & Wales University, started their business by operating out of the Framingham Lodge Of Elks kitchen. “That became our home base, and we spent the first year building our business,” he remembers. “We had nothing, no supplies, no equipment. We just booked every job we could for Elks members so we could earn the money we needed to build our inventory.”

On Time has evolved into an up and coming catering business, and offers a full menu of creatively prepared food and services fit for any occasion, including corporate and social events, private parties, weddings, and Bar/Bat Mitzvahs. “Our menu offers a full selection of delicious appetizers, hors d’oeuvres, entrees, side dishes, and desserts,” Wadkins explains. “We know that every client has different needs, so we designed our catering menu to take the guess work out of planning an event.”

“We’ve expanded to provide a selection of great wedding packages, breakfast menus, buffet options, corporate boxed lunches, cookout packages, platters, and spreads that are personalized to order, and also offer personal chef services,” he notes, adding, “We can even provide linens, flatware, china, banquet tables, chairs, and on-site chefs and wait staff.”

“At Keefe Tech, we’re all so proud of John’s accomplishments,” says Chef Zentgraf. “We are happy to provide all of our Culinary Arts students with amazing opportunities to learn and grow. It seems like yesterday that I was sending John off to work on his first co-op at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, and now in a few, short years, we’re hiring him to cater school events for us. Seeing his success is very gratifying.”

Wadkins attributes much of his success in his chosen field to the education he received while attending Keefe Tech. “I felt so prepared for the ‘real’ world from all that I learned at Keefe,” he relates. “I had all the experience and know-how that I needed to land a job. I had one-up on every one who I was competing with who didn’t go to a vocational technical high school.”

Currently serving as the Chairperson for the Keefe Tech Culinary Arts Advisory Board, Wadkins hasn’t forgotten how important his time at Keefe was in cultivating his future. “I went into high school thinking I was doing one thing, and instead I discovered a talent I never knew I had,” he says, throwing his hands up into the air. “I never would have known I could cook if not for Keefe Tech.”



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“Now I always try to give back to the Keefe Culinary Program and take current students out to job sites,” he adds, noting that over the years, he has kept in close contact with both Chef Zentgraf and Chef Snider. “My former teachers helped me to build relationships in the industry and taught me about the importance of networking, so I try to help the students out. Plus they always do such a great job.”

At the end of the day, when Wadkins looks back on his high school experience at Keefe Tech, he feels that he took full advantage of every opportunity that was made available to him. “I would tell any 8th grader who is deciding what high school they’d like to go to that they should go to Keefe Tech, because it gives them such an advantage,” he advises.

“I worked twice as hard as the average student who attends a comprehensive high school. I had my academic classes, studied, took tests, and then every other week, learned about Culinary Arts,” Wadkins surmises. “It wasn’t just about learning academics or becoming a chef. Keefe Tech gave me life experience and taught me how to succeed.”



Keefe Tech alumnus and catering business owner John Wadkins of Holliston visits with Keefe Tech Pastry Instructor Amy Snyder at the school’s in-house, student-run restaurant, The East Side Room.

