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Volume 10, Number 9 ■ September 2011

foodserviceTMmonthly

The News Magazine Foodservice Professionals Rely On



Palladin Meets Richard:
Mentoring Serves the Future

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Mentoring Serves the Future

BY MICHAEL BIRCHENALL

If I were a historian writing a book on the modern food scene of Washington DC, I would want to define a beginning point from which one could mark the nation's capital's evolution into a city of fine restaurants. It wouldn't take me long ... I would go back to 1979 when the thirty-three-year-old Jean-Louis Palladin opened Jean-Louis at the Watergate hotel.

When he died at his McLean home in 2001, at the age of 55 of lung cancer, the world lost a great chef way too early. Reading the tributes that appeared from the luminaries in the food world that he had so richly influenced, you find all the references to his using the best ingredients of the region: cooking with the finest scallops from the Atlantic, the freshest crabs from the Chesapeake Bay, the best produce of the Mid-Atlantic. His brilliantly bright personality touched so many of the chefs we see credited with today's vibrant food scene in Washington and the U.S. ... Michel Richard, Daniel Boulud, Eric Ripert, Roberto Donna.

All of these thoughts and memories swirled about my head when I recently visited a young assistant general manager at Central Michel Richard in Washington: Verveine Palladin. The young woman who has worked at Central for a year is the daughter of Jean-Louis and Regine Palladin. Verveine has always felt a kinship to the restaurant business having been raised in it her whole life.

As a young adult she started as a waitress at Pesce, owned and managed by her mother. During our

first conversation she told me how she had relished the opportunity to work with her mother and soon she was in charge of managing the floor, and helping to run the restaurant on P Street.

As she is developing her restaurant management skills, I asked her for her best quality. She told me, "The most valuable lesson I've learned is to treat my staff with respect and they will in turn treat me with respect." Then she continued with what I had always thought was what I looked for in myself and my restaurant managers in my operations days: "... to stay calm in situations you cannot control."

Before returning to Washington to enter the restaurant world, Verveine went to West Virginia University and majored in French.

While interviewing Verveine, we saw Michel Richard and he motioned for us to come over and we continued talking, this time with Michel Richard the mentor. We talked a little about the close relationship of Michel and Jean-Louis and how he sees his role in her career development. He smiles and says, "I knew her before she knew me." She was born four years after the opening of Jean-Louis at the Watergate. He continues, "Jean-Louis was the father of my daughter." The playful twist on words ala Michel reveals his love and commitment for Verveine, daughter of his best friend and Washington's greatest chef.

Verveine added a story of being the daughter of a famous chef and his late restaurant hours. She tells us, "When I was little I would always wake up and go downstairs hoping that my father was home. When I saw him I would approach

him and always scare him because his hearing wasn't the best. I would fall asleep with him while watching TV and he would always carry me up to my bed."

When asked about working for Richard, she says, "For me working for Michel is having a little piece of my father with me, while working for someone who is also a father figure. It keeps me close to my dad."

Verveine has her own life, her own dreams and Central Michel Richard is one step along the way and she moves with a quiet confidence and awareness that will form the structure for her future. Her duties span scheduling, service, training as well as expanding her wine knowledge.

What does Michel Richard want Verveine Palladin to take from Central Michel Richard, "I want to give Verveine the spirit of her father and continue to teach her what her father started: the love of restaurants, respect for our diners, to do a wonderful job pleasing the guests."

But more than that he says, "I want her to be happy in her work. When we love our work, we make our guests happy."

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