

BizSmarts



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Executive Profile

Jacques Haeringer

Chef and owner,
L'Auberge
Chez François



The basics

Background: Since age 11, Haeringer has been at the Great Falls restaurant his father opened in the 1950s, although there have been side jaunts, including a PBS cooking series. Now 62, he took over the kitchen and business offices when his father died in 2010. He added his own touches – new bistro, expanded garden – while maintaining the classic dishes that made the restaurant famous.

Education: Bachelor's in English, specialty in 20th century American literature, Virginia Commonwealth University.

First job: Not counting at his father's restaurant, delivering *The Washington Post*.

Family: Late wife Evelyn; daughter Madeleine, works at NBC; son Marc, works in publishing; girlfriend Carol; lives in Great Falls.

Business strategy

Your biggest challenge: Increasing food costs.

On your role since your father's passing: Dad always was the final authority. He ran the place, needed to be in control. I had the best teacher in the world. I think I try to empower people a little bit more. I'd like to do more of the marketing and special appearances and find other folks to be more involved with the day-to-day operations.

What keeps your staff there, up to 25 years? I guess they make enough money, and I treat them the way they wish. I give them a Frenchlike vacation, a month off after five years. I want them to have a life as much as possible.

On TV appearances: I'm a ham, and I've always done cooking demonstrations. We just had our eighth appearance on the "Today" show. It's great for business.

On feeding famous customers: Oh yes, kings, queens, almost every president. We haven't had the current president unfortunately. I think besides that, we've had everyone once since Truman, though they weren't always president at the time. Mick Jagger, Michael Jordan. But when the gossip columns call, we always say, "No, we don't know."

Judgment calls

On how the restaurant evolved: Dad was a restaurant genius. Everyone told him he was crazy when he moved out to Great Falls, and we've been busy ever since. I've added more specials, more local stuff. I opened the brasserie so people can have a drink and appetizer.

On balancing old with new: You wouldn't believe the cards and phone calls after dad died, saying "You're not going to change anything, are you?" But we've become more seasonal, while still giving people what they want. And the brasserie lets us be flexible – a lot of older people don't want six courses.

On the garden: We've had herbs for years and expanded a bit last year. We've more than quadrupled the size, up to about a quarter acre. We bring out truckloads of manure, coffee grounds from the restaurant. I love gardening, and it's even better now that someone else does most of the dirty work.

True confessions

What do you cook at home? My girlfriend used to say, "You

don't cook; you just take food home from the restaurant and heat it up." I say that a lot of people would be just fine with that. But overall, cooking for the person you love? It works.

What would you order at your restaurant? Right now, soft shells. I get the grilled rib-eye a lot. I'm a carnivore.

Your hobbies: Hunting, some fishing, mostly in Argentina. Mostly birds, ducks, large quail.

Your personality in high school: I was in a rock and roll band. We still play about once a year. The Ax Men. I'm a drummer.

Your travel destinations: St. Bart's is nice. I probably get to France once a year. I sometimes take people in my cooking class with me.

Pet peeve: We appreciate everyone's comments when we get them, but want them to address them at the time. That gives us an opportunity to fix it. The biggest complaint is too much salt. We serve food we think is well-seasoned. They say a chef who serves salty food is in love. I'm always in love.

Interview by Missy Frederick

Fact:
Eggs are one of the few foods that contain vitamin D, also known as the sunshine vitamin.

Now let's get down to breakfast, shall we?

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