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“forty under 40”

Michael Presnal, Age 36: Executive Chef/Proprietor, the Federal Restaurant

When Michael Presnal owned and operated a restaurant, Alchemy, on Martha's Vineyard, he saw a number of famous faces come through the door.

President Bill Clinton and the first family dined there — more than once. Billy Joel stopped in, as did Cindy Crawford, Dustin Hoffman, Jack Nicholson, Kevin Costner, and many other celebrities. Presnal had each of them sign a chef's coat, giving him quite a collection that now resides somewhere at his new establishment, the Federal in Agawam.

Since taking over that landmark in 2002 with partner Ralph Santaniello, Presnal, 'executive chef/proprietor' (that's what it says on the business card), hasn't had any opportunities to add to that collection. Indeed, when asked if any dignitaries had made it to the Cooper Street landmark for its 'Contemporary American cuisine,' Presnal rubbed his chin, thought for a quick second or two, and said, "none that I can think of."

That's OK with him, though, because his business philosophy is to treat everyone like they're a celebrity. This is one of the key ingredients in a formula that has enabled him to thrive in what he described as a "hard business," where the difference between success and failure is razor-thin — like the margins in this industry.

"People look at this business and think it's pretty easy — well, it's not," he said, noting that those committed to succeed in this field must be willing to work hard, put in long hours, and make the sacrifices demanded by such a schedule. "You miss out on a lot of things, like kids' birthday parties, because you have to be here; it's a tough, tough life."

Which brings him to another of those necessary ingredients and perhaps the most important one: passion for the business. Presnal says he's had it since he first started washing dishes at another restaurant on the Vineyard, owned and operated by his aunt and uncle, at age 13. He went on to attend the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont, and eventually became executive chef at the restaurant where he got his start.

His entrepreneurial appetite is rather large, as evidenced by Alchemy, the Federal, and emerging plans for a second restaurant in Western Mass. "We're looking hard at it," said Presnal, offering few other details. "We just need a location."

That's because he already has the passion.