

Benjamin Chesley

Executive Chef, Epoch Restaurant & Bar at The Exeter Inn, Exeter, New Hampshire



Last September, Ben Chesley was appointed executive chef at Epoch Restaurant at the ripe old age of 26. “Age is just a number,” Chesley declares. “The key to doing this job is to always keep pushing. For years I worked as hard as I could, always pushing for more responsibility and never missing an opportunity to learn from previous chefs.”

What do you appreciate about cooking a great dish?

The biggest thrill for me is transforming beautiful raw materials into a delicious finished product. I also really enjoy how we, as chefs, have the ability to make anyone happy regardless of their background. Food is a universal language. After you’ve eaten a great dish, you have formed a memory. That

memory will be strong enough that you will crave that same feeling that you had while eating that food. This is why restaurants sometimes can’t take items off the menu; they keep people coming back.

Creating a great dish is hard and sometimes it takes a few tries. The most important part is the balance of flavors, whether it’s sweet and salty or rich and savory. You always have to think about sharpening flavor and how to keep the balance.

What are some menu changes you’ve made at Epoch?

We did just overhaul the menu in May. We have a new concept, a large menu

that includes everything from small plates to sandwiches, in addition to the classic entrees we have always done. My goal is to make Epoch the neighborhood spot in Exeter. We want everyone to come in whether they are out on an anniversary, a first date, or just out with the family for a casual dinner.

I have chosen to take the small plates section and break it up into regions of the world. This gives me a great chance to play with flavors outside of our normal cuisine. I am a huge fan of ethnic food from all over the world, so I really like taking things like that and making them our own.

We are doing a really delicious short rib taco featuring a guajillo salsa roja and cotija cheese with pickled red onion. We are also doing a basket of fried shishito peppers. These are a Japanese heirloom

pepper. Most of the time, the peppers will have a mild heat, but one out of every ten is quite spicy; it’s kind of like playing Russian Roulette with food. We are serving these with a little spicy mayo dip.

How did your road to early success begin?

I started cooking with family as early as I can remember. My mom always grew her own vegetables. This was great because we always had super fresh produce around. My mom taught me how to raise vegetables from seedlings and then we would make really great stuff with them once they grew. This influenced me to have a love of fresh produce, and for preparing it simply and letting it shine. More than this, I think growing up with a garden taught me to appreciate the value of fresh ingredients. It also taught me about seasonality.

I started professionally in high school through a vocational program at the Seacoast School of Technology. I chose the career because I have always been too hyper to sit at a desk. I like the way time flies by in the kitchen. I get to do what I love and get paid for it.

I’ve always been a decent cook; this job has taught me to be so much more. To be a chef you have to be a leader, an accountant, a human resources specialist, a PR representative, and a marketing engineer, among other things. The most important part of working in this industry is loving what you do. Anything less and it will chew you up and spit you out. Fortunately, I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. ①

Epoch Restaurant & Bar
The Exeter Inn
90 Front Street
Exeter, N.H.
603-778-3762
epochrestaurant.com

BY ALANA JERALDS