

Gastronomic Greatness: An Interview with the Chef at Grandale Restaurant

For Grandale's Executive Chef, Author Clark, cooking is more than just a passion for culinary greatness. It's a way of life; a constant evolution of matching modern techniques and ingredients with classic methods and culinary combinations.

Grandale's chef has been there since the very beginning. A chance meeting with a local vendor at a farmer's market led to Grandale's opening in a picturesque setting nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Chef Author's passion for fresh ingredients and culinary excellence are the cornerstones of Grandale's development, and continue to drive the culture and atmosphere at the restaurant today. Driven by an unyielding dedication to provide spectacular experiences for all guests, Chef Author has helped Grandale grow into the award winning, farm-to-table restaurant that it has become.

A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY, AJ has more than a decade of fine dining restaurant experience with eight years as Executive Chef. He possesses a diverse culinary background, including five-star and five-diamond restaurants (such as the local L'Auberge Provencale) and New York's finest catering establishments (Oliver's). Using this culinary acumen, Author is able to design and create quality experiences using food and atmosphere for Grandale's guests. Under his tutelage, a meal at Grandale is designed to be "a symphony of wine, food, atmosphere and good company."

I recently sat down with Author to find out more about his passion and steadfast devotion to creating memorable customer experiences at Grandale.

Question: How did you discover your passion for food and decide to become a chef?

AC: My father's family is very involved in preparing, preserving, and processing their own food. I traveled a lot with my family as a child and was influenced by experiences with different styles of food and types of restaurants. My father is very adventurous with cuisine and I would play sous chef for him in making the weekly Sunday meal. I appreciated the quick gratification associated with creating meals and guest experiences. I saw and experienced the ability of a restaurant to change and enhance someone's mood, and make their occasion memorable. Today, I get to do that! I enjoy designing and creating quality experiences for people using food and atmosphere.

Question: Did you attend school to become a chef or was your development entirely through on-the-job training?

AC: I trained under 2 Culinary Institute of America graduates before attending the CIA myself.

Question: What is your philosophy on food and creating gourmet meals for people?

AC: I take the best of local and regional products and attempt to match them with a demographic, market, or event, and deploy the best skills and techniques to enhance the natural quality of the ingredients.

I was a supporter of using local, fresh ingredients long before there was a movement for that. In fact, I met Dr. Orme (my previous partner with Grandale Restaurant) at the farmers market, where I would buy his products each week for Village Square restaurant (in Winchester, VA). Fresh, local, modern. That is what I prefer!

Question: What do you enjoy most about working as a chef?

AC: My biggest reward as a chef is to watch customers enjoy and interact over a great meal in a great place.

Question: What is the farm-to-fork movement and why is it important to you that Grandale follow that model?

AC: Grandale was founded on the Farm to Table movement. Literally, the restaurant was built on land that was farmed for produce. Today, we still source as many local items as possible!

Question: Has working so closely with a winery over the past year changed your perspective at all?

AC: Merging with the winery has given us the opportunity to complete our guest experience. We create the food, wine, and ambiance. I have a lot of experience with wineries, and it is fantastic to have a one to partner with in rounding out the customer experience!

Question: Where do you draw inspiration for new recipes and food combinations? Ever watch those cooking reality TV shows like Chopped or Top Chef?

AC: I am not a fan of the televised cooking angle. I was always attracted to the professionalism and “hush, hush” of this industry before it became televised. I stay current with all the modern chef’s books and blogs, but I rarely watch a cooking show.

Question: What should people expect when they come to Grandale for a meal?

AC: A meal at Grandale is a symphony of wine, food, atmosphere and good company. That is what they should expect.

Question: What are the biggest food trends that you’re noticing right now?

AC: Modern chemistry cooking. Leveraging the physical and chemical transformations that ingredients go through during the cooking process. It’s an art.

Question: What is the one recipe that you couldn’t live without?

AC: I am classically trained, pre-TV, so I am not fond of recipes in the savory application. That said, I could not live without Escoffier's ratios and the practical knowledge of La Repoitere.