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by Total Food Service

Q&A Julie Rose

President, Sweet Hospitality Group

How did you get into the business?

I originally moved to New York to write musical theater. I graduated with a music education degree. My boyfriend at the time was also a musician and he was working in a catering kitchen in Queens called Culinary Connection. It was a company that did film and television shoots. And so I started working in the kitchen, too. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. However, the thought of having to punch a time clock if I became a teacher, was anathema to me. I'm an entrepreneur, at heart.

Then what happened?

I ended up working in this catering kitchen for cast and crews on television shoots. I lived in Tribeca at the time and they gave me a car. I would go at 3:00 in the morning to pick up the food, get to Queens at 4:00, load up the truck, get the food into my car, then go on the gig and set it up and I loved this. But there was a company that was a little better at this. I went and saw what they did. And they had real tablecloths, real flowers, they had silver urns. And it looked fantastic. That was the difference, the presentation.



How did this turn into Sweet Hospitality?

I just knew there was a better way so my boyfriend and I heard about a theatre that needed someone to sell soda and candy so we wrote a one page proposal. A gentleman named Steve Callahan liked what he saw and gave us a chance. I spent five hundred dollars on a white table and silk flowers and I bought tableware and thought, I'm going to make this really beautiful. And I'm going to serve the stuff that I or my family would want, not just candy bars and popcorn. We didn't have a liquor license. But we had Soho's Sodas, one of the first specialty sodas (later bought by Snapple). Gourmet was the big word back then so I started baking, and I made banana bread, lemon squares, brownies and blondies. I'd spend the whole day baking and getting food and it was delicious. So, early on, a person from Restaurant Associates (RA) came to me and said, what you're doing isn't practical. I said, they're buying it. They like it. The theater's happy that I'm doing this, so what's the problem? And he said, you can't just do coffee.

So how did this all turn into your business?

I met some people who helped me learn what a P&L was. I was always good with numbers, and I began hiring people. I learned what a menu mix was, how to read what was selling, what was not. And I loved it. I realized I was developing a concession business for the theaters. That's where it all began.





What actually landed you on Broadway?

The big concession companies like RA controlled the theaters. They'd walk in and say, this is what we want. Back then the theater wasn't about being nice. It wasn't about hospitality. They were doing you a favor, that was their attitude. It was, we're creating the art for you. I was on the front lines, talking to the people. I would hear what they wanted, and I would try it. We tried to have a little array of everything.

How do you look at what you do?

I think of us as being in the foodservice and hospitality industry. So I think of trying to innovate the food and beverage space. And to do that, you need hospitality. "Hospitality's" a buzzword today. But hospitality, to me, is just being nice, and efficient. It's trying to get that balance right. We seem to be in the people business, and we seem to be serving food and alcohol. For me, that's what hospitality is.



Hors d'oeuvres selection from Sweet Hospitality Group (photos from Meg Wachter)



What is it like today competing for a “space” you created?

Here's what I think about competition. It's not just about being different, but it's about having your style. And when it comes to competition, nobody can do what I do. And nobody can do what you do, right? I can't control what they're doing. I can only control me. We try to partner with our theaters, because it's not just about what we want. Disney Theaters may want something totally different than the Jujamcyn Theaters Roundabout has a different style. That's also part of the fun, being a chameleon. It's like being an actor, about reinventing. It's our role, so how is our partnership going to be different than this partnership?

We all kind of come at it in different ways. RA started with restaurants, right? So I just look at it as trying to keep doing what we do really well, and trying to stay current, and building the relationships. I have credos. Our first is, build a relationship and the rest will come and that can mean with your client or patron. I mean that's why I love doing this. We're there to enhance the experience. We aren't the experience. They're not coming to see us. It's on the stage and it would be really dumb for me to think that it's about us. It's not. I call us the concierge of Broadway and off Broadway.

What about the role of cocktails and wine and things like that? How do you approach that? Do you have somebody that runs that piece of the business for you?

We've had different people. We started doing the Cocktail on Broadway. He had 10 cocktails that became our signature very early on. We initially launched specialty drinks that were related to the shows. The Girl in the Yellow Dress was one of the drinks. And they were these delicious cocktails and he always attributed it to “Sex and the City,” which was big at the time. People were stealing our menus. It was fantastic. Now Michael Demona manages it for us. We call him the drama mixologist. And drinks have changed a lot. So, he tries to keep current. He reads the show scripts and comes up with the ideas.



Cocktail offerings from Sweet Hospitality Group.



Do people balk at your cocktail prices?

It is very expensive, but our goal is to enhance the value of the experience. I take it very seriously that people are coming to see the show. This may be the only theater they're ever going to see in their life. And we don't want to wreck their experience; we want to give them the best experience possible.

What do you think makes you successful?

You have to hire right. And you don't always get it right, but it's a type of personality. It's like actors. You can be very shy and be a fantastic actor. Our bar manager, was so shy, you could barely have a conversation with him. But he was an actor, and when he got behind the bar, he was phenomenal. He was probably one of the best bartenders we ever had.

What's the process for sourcing everything from coffee to food? Do you look for a relationship with a Sysco or US Foods or Dairyland or Baldor?

We've got them all and they've changed, of course, because a sales rep will say, hey, I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that then all of a sudden, they're not doing that and then you go back to the initial people. And then there are other kinds of relationships where one of our employees was walking in an airport and saw this cup of coffee that you could get a single cup of, like espresso that you can make yourself, and he loved the idea, thinking, I'm going to figure out how to do this. We may all eat something and go to the chef and say, look, can you try this. So that's the fun part. It's constantly changing. We're always thinking!

What are the hot-selling food items right now?

Believe it or not M&M's still rule Broadway. It's decadence and things that make people happy. We do menu mixing to make sure we satisfy everyone. Disney has these great lollipops, they're beautiful. We don't sell a lot but we still want them to create signature fantastic empanadas. People still don't expect to go to the theater and eat. I hope our company can continue to change the expectations of what people can have in the theater.



Sweet Hospitality's delicacies have become a staple for Broadway and Lincoln Center theatre goers. (Photo from Meg Wachter)