

How Chef Scott Daniels Of 3rdPlus Is Helping To Promote Healthy Eating

An Interview With Martita Mestey

Make sure it is your passion, not just a job! You have to love what you do and if you are trying to make people happy, it can be daunting! I have seen far too many in the culinary career fail miserably because they just didn't understand the hospitality industry.

In this interview series, called "Chefs and Restaurateurs Helping To Promote Healthy Eating" we are talking to chefs and restaurateurs who are helping to promote and raise awareness about healthy eating. The purpose of the series is to amplify their message and share insights about healthy eating with our readers. As a part of this series, we had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Scott Daniels.

Scott Daniels, CEC, CCA, AAC, is Vice President of Culinary Operations with Culinary Coach at 3rdPlus and is passionate about putting his experience to work helping senior living communities effectively self-operate — with a focus on training, coaching and fresh, local ingredients.

Scott spent much of his 20+ year career at food services and facilities management company Sodexo, most recently as a District Manager, overseeing 18 retirement/acute/subacute account locations. Scott's credentials include an associate degree in Occupational Studies from the Culinary Institute of America (with Honors), a Culinary Federation's Certified Executive Chef appointment and Certified Culinary Administrator appointment from the American Culinary Federation and he is an American Academy of Chefs fellow inductee.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Our readers would love to 'get to know' you a bit. Can you share with our readers a story about what inspired you to become a restaurateur or chef?

My first interest in becoming a chef began early in life when I would spend weekends cooking with my Italian God Mother whom I referred to as Aunt Rose! We would spend hours in her tiny kitchen creating mass quantities of Italian food, including her family recipes for tomato sauce or gravy depending on which side of the Italian fence you were on. I enjoyed every minute with her in the kitchen and looked forward to going to her house on the weekends. I truly never thought of it as a career at that time (I was probably seven or eight years old when we started). It was just a great joy! And yes, great eats.

I went through high school still not thinking of Culinary as a career, so I went to college for business. Quickly realizing my passion was food, off I went to the Culinary Institute of America and the beginning of my culinary career which led me from very fine dining to contract food service where we served some of the largest corporate banks in the country. And now I work in Senior Living Culinary.

I love that I can combine my love of cooking, knowledge about food, and experience in the food industry to help bring healthier dining to thousands and thousands of our elder adults.

Do you have a specific type of food that you focus on? What was it that first drew you to cooking that type of food? Can you share a story about that with us?

I do not have a single focus on a type of food, but I do have a few culinary passions/hobbies that I am quite fond of. For one, I am an avid saltwater fisherman, so I enjoy seafood cooking and preparation immensely. Everything from brining, smoking, grilling, curing, etc., which leads me to my second culinary passion which is BBQ/Smoking. I have competed and judged in the BBQ arena and have truly enjoyed it! It still amazes me that I was able to combine my hobby and career and I enjoy it beyond belief.

Can you share the funniest or most interesting story that has happened to you since you started? What was the lesson or take away you took out of that story?

Well early in my career I worked at a very prestigious hotel in Memphis, TN. The Peabody Hotel. The hotel was an amazing property to say the least. Most of the Jewish Kosher catered events in Memphis were held at the Peabody, but back then I had no Kosher experience. I was running the catering kitchen one particular day and half of the kitchen had been Koshered for an event. In my lack of kosher dining knowledge, I walked over to speak to a team member on the Kosher side with a piece of bacon in my hand, pork bacon that is, and of course pork is not permitted in kosher dining! Well the Rabbi that was overseeing the kitchen was not too happy and rightfully so. What I learned is that you ask if you don't know something and know what you are walking into before you go, and understand all aspects of your business. Throughout my 30 year career in dining, I have spent a great deal of time working in the Kosher dining arena.

None of us can be successful without some help along the way. Did you have mentors or cheerleaders who helped you to succeed? Can you tell us a story about their influence?

I don't think anyone can truly be successful in their career path without support along the way and mentors to guide you. Along with my parents supporting me, I was very fortunate to understand the importance of networking and creating friends in the industry which ended up

ensuring there was always someone you could reach out to, call for support, or just a shoulder to lean on when times were tough. My motto has always been to surround myself with people, friends, and a team that are as strong if not stronger than you! This has been very helpful in my career.

In your experience, what is the key to creating a dish that people are crazy about?

The food has to be fresh, well thought out, well prepared, and robust in flavor.

Personally, what is the 'perfect meal' for you?

To me the perfect meal consists of a few things. The setting and atmosphere. The meal itself does not have to be fancy or elaborate, but it does have to be well executed and harmonious. And of course, the company you are enjoying the meal with.

Where does your inspiration for creating come from? Is there something that you turn to for a daily creativity boost?

Early in my career it was books, I have 500 plus cookbooks! As a child I had a reading disability so early on I never enjoyed reading. To be honest, I still don't love reading today but cookbooks have bridged that gap. I would read cookbooks for hours on end and I mean hours. I collected them from around the globe, which broadened my international culinary portfolio. Today I still read the cookbooks, but don't collect as many with the availability on the internet.

Are you working on any new or exciting projects now? What impact do you think this will have?

I now work in the Senior Living arena and guide senior living communities with regard to their dining programs. We continually work to educate not only the providers but the customers, who are the residents living in the communities about just how important it is to eat healthy. Breaking the crazy beliefs that healthy food is boring, tasteless, and just plain blah. Food can and should be exciting, refreshing, vibrant in color and taste, and amazing to the palette.

The Culinary Coach team offers support to modernize dining programs across the continuum of care, providing systems and tools to enhance operational excellence, offering healthier options, consulting by a registered dietitian and equipment consulting.

Ok super. Let's now jump to the main part of our interview. You are currently leading an initiative to help promote healthy eating. Can you tell us a bit about what you and your organization are trying to change in our world today?

We are first trying to change the mindset of just what healthy dining is! It is about providing the education, knowledge, and training to have the best possible understanding and outcomes. I truly think society is ready to eat fresh, eat simple, and eat to live not live to eat.

The Culinary Coach team works with senior living communities to make aging better and this includes delivery of fresh, healthy and modern dining experiences. We work with all areas in a community, but for people in assisted living, memory care and skilled nursing, mealtimes are often the highlight of their day. With planning and creativity, residents will be delighted with healthy meals which deliver stimulating experiences for sight, smell, taste and sound. Our Dining with Dignity program helps communities deliver appealing and tasty dining experiences to health service residents that are on par with meals in independent living.

Can you tell us the backstory about what inspired you to originally feel passionate about this cause?

When I first began work in the Seniors landscape, I was not passionate about healthy dining. I was passionate about providing a great meal, meaning a meal that I thought was amazing and that the customer enjoyed. And yes, they are one in the same to some point, but when we think about the value of what we consume, not just volume, but nutritional value, we begin to think about just what that is. In Culinary school, we typically thought great food meant great ingredients. But, not all great ingredients are great when we think about health. And while moderation was stressed, butter, cream, animal protein, and fat in larger quantities were the norm. Science and continued education have led us in a different direction.

Without saying specific names, can you tell us a story about a particular individual who was helped by your cause?

There are many. One in particular was an individual who had eaten in the fashion in which he was raised. This man, in his early 60's, had lost his wife who did all of the cooking in his home. He became an overnight regular in the restaurant I was leading. He wanted food that he was used to, which is not a surprise, but we did not serve this type of cuisine. He was used to fried food, thick gravies, and heavy fat laden items. So he was quite surprised by the menu. Why did he continue to visit? Well, he did not drive, and we were just down the street. He was a great guy, and the team loved him. And he loved the team, so the transition was not as difficult as it could have been. It started slowly with trying new items on the menu, education around what he was eating, and then he had a health issue followed by doctors orders to eat healthy. He asked us for

help since he dined with us three to five times a week. SO, it truly started with a mandate from a doctor, an ask for help, then an education around food and what was good to eat and what was not good to eat. We then helped him with shopping guides. I guess you could say it all came together as a plan. He began to eat healthy and understand healthy choices not only when dining out, but when eating at home. This gentleman turned an unhealthy life around and became a senior Olympian and farm-to-table fresh only diner.

Are there three things the community/society/politicians can do to help you address the root of the problem you are trying to solve?

We have to reduce the carbon footprint of the foods we consume and reduce the additives. I truly don't think the general public understands the impact on our bodies and society. We need more education at the early childhood development ages. If we start the children off on the right foot they will more likely continue down a good path. I also think we need to eat more meals at home, at the family table, using fresh ingredients. Too many kids dine in the car that has driven through a take out line at a fast food restaurant.

If society starts to view food as medicine and more information is shared through articles like this about the benefits of healthy eating, this could have a huge impact, not only for seniors, but for everyone.

What are your "5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me When I First Started as a Chef or Restaurateur" and why? Please share a story or an example for each.

Make sure it is your passion, not just a job! You have to love what you do and if you are trying to make people happy, it can be daunting! I have seen far too many in the culinary career fail miserably because they just didn't understand the hospitality industry.

You have to provide the customer with what they want, but you can educate, experiment, and be creative all at the same time, especially once you have become a trusted individual. When I entered into the "Chef world," I wanted to do it my way. IT wasn't about the customer, it was about me. But in reality, it has to be a balance providing both sides with positive outcomes.

It's not going to be easy and it's not always glamorous! Well now that is a real truth. I think people often go into a career thinking it will be easy. I sure did! This career surely isn't easy, but it sure has a great reward. Just look at the face of a happy customer who has enjoyed the meal and the fact that it was healthy makes it even better.

You can truly make a difference in someone's life. When entering a career at a young age you often think of yourself only. You can truly impact so many as a leader in your field. Developing a team member to be bigger and better than you is a great feeling. Providing for a customer's needs and knowing you exceeded them feels amazing. And giving back to your community is transformational.

Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)

Well there are many, a great deal have passed. If we are speaking of someone alive I would have to say Alice Waters. She was so far ahead of the healthy, farm-to-table movement, much of which would have hit the "healthy foods" target of today. She used the best possible ingredients, minimally manipulated them, and turned out amazing food. Just think where we would be today if more chefs of that timeframe executed as she did in the kitchen. Every meal I have had at Chez Panisse was better than the previous and so inspiring.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

You can learn more about Culinary Coach and 3rdPlus at:

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<https://3rdplus.com/culinary-coach/>

This was very meaningful, thank you so much. We wish you only continued success on your great work!