

TAG TEAM

Go behind the kitchen door to meet some of the area's top chefs and their dedicated sidekicks.

By Ryan Ritchie | Photos by Dhrumil Desai

In 1967, the Beatles released "With a Little Help From My Friends," a tune about the importance of relying on strong relationships to get us through the good times and the bad. While the track relays a valuable lesson about positive personal affairs, the message of the song also applies to work associates, and nowhere is this concept of maintaining healthy business relations more significant than the inside of a kitchen.

Head chefs get the acclaim. Their names may be written on the menus and in headlines, but no successful restaurant is a one-person operation. Diners often don't think of the staff when they're enjoying an exquisite meal, but they should because the overall quality of a restaurant isn't simply dependent on the head chef's talent.

Powerful connections between head chefs and their staffs are especially apparent at five local eateries. Though these bonds may differ in terms of specifics, they're all based on the same cornerstones of mutual respect and understanding. Here are just a handful of Laguna's most powerful pairs that make some serious culinary magic together.



Executive Chef Marc Cohen (left) says that he collaborates with General Manager Tim Garner (middle) and Director of Operations Joe Guillena to develop dishes and select wines.

DONDEE QUINCENA

Marc Cohen,
executive chef /co-owner
Tim Garner, general manager
Joe Guillena,
director of operations
230 Forest Avenue

Executive Chef Marc Cohen doesn't have a person to help him run 230 Forest Avenue; he has people.

The chef holds weekly meetings with Tim Garner, the restaurant's general manager, and Joe Guillena, its director of operations, to discuss topics like potential wine specials, wine pairings and culinary events happening across Laguna. Marc has the final say in all aspects of operating his business, but no decision is made without the agreement of all three men.

"All decisions are the decisions we feel are the right way going forward," he says. "Once we make a decision and we are in agreement, we follow it through. Once we agree that's the path we're going to take, we back it until it's over."

Marc jokingly describes his relationship with Tim and Joe as a three-headed monster, but the 43-year-old is quick to point out the different functions the men serve at 230 Forest Avenue. Joe's role involves working with Marc to determine how to get the best deals for customers, what the servers are capable of selling and which dishes the customers will enjoy most. With Tim, Marc collaborates on developing the dishes and selecting wines that are best for both the customers and servers.

"Tim knows my food, and he understands what I'm trying to accomplish," Marc says. "He also knows the customers and understands what he thinks they want. Then it's my job and Joe's job to secure prices that are affordable to the customer."

Marc notes that he's "absolutely open" to suggestions from Tim and Joe, which often become topics of discussion during their weekly meetings. The head chef trusts his employees' opinions because he believes they are just as invested in the business as he is. That level of trust directly contributes to the success of 230 Forest Avenue, Marc says.

"You're only as good as the people you work with and for," he muses. "They have respect for me and what I do, and I have respect for them and what they do. It's a very healthy relationship."