

CHEF DUFFY

By: Valery Snisarenko



Sitting down for an interview with someone who has accomplished well-rounded success in the food industry and is certainly not shy in terms of his energy and personality, I didn't know what to expect from Chef Brian Duffy. But, what I experienced was truly refreshing. A wise, experienced, passionate, energetic and truly down to earth chef; Duffy is not afraid to tell you about his lessons, mistakes, or give you the keys to what has made him such a success in the food and hospitality industry. Chef Duffy exudes a level of confidence and wisdom that only comes with knowing who you are, loving what you do, and being the man behind a remarkable brand.

Worst Job? I've had bad jobs, but I have learned from them. I take them all as experiences that got me to where I am today.

Best Job? The job I have right now. I get to deal with different people on a daily basis. I get to create food all over the world. I get to touch food everywhere.

Favorite city to chow down other than Philly?

Gotta be New York, Chicago or L.A.

Favorite restaurant in Philly? Definitely Zahav. I think Michael Solomonov is a genius. The food that he prepares is exciting, it's fresh, it's cool, innovative and creative. He incorporates history in all of his dishes, so it's not just him cooking it, it's him putting his whole body into it. It's his soul and that is good food.

Favorite restaurants nationwide? Meat & Potatoes in Pittsburgh and Waterloo and City in L.A.

Favorite cooking shows to watch?

I like Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives. Guy Fieri is a riot! He is a genius; he directs, produces, executes, he shows up and he's on fire.

Favorite chef on TV? Eric Ripert

Favorite thing to cook? Peasant Food

Favorite ingredient? Smoked Salt

How do you feel about the cheesesteak? It's a blast because Philly has so many personalities and ideas of what it is, but around the country it's an absolute disgrace.

Favorite place for cheesesteak?

Tony Luke's and Mama's Cheesesteaks.

The Art of Being A Brand **Q&A with Chef Brian Duffy**

Can you recall your experience at The Restaurant School at Walnut Hill College? I was very fond of my time at the school [The Restaurant School at Walnut Hill College]. I use it on a daily basis, no matter what. Like today, I just got done with costing out a recipe. I use what I learned every single day, no matter what it is. This is so unheard of for most people who go to school. Not just for Culinary Arts, but for anything. Whether it's costing out a recipe or putting flavors together, whatever it is, I learned all of that. So, it's cool for me. I remember I was young; about 20 years old and I wasn't 100% sure of what I wanted to do yet. I remember thinking that it was a good opportunity. Our graduating class had 24 people when I started. The school was smaller then, we had photocopied and stapled pages as text books!

Were you a good student? Funny story...I almost didn't graduate! I was a good culinary student; I just wasn't a great student. I used to get kicked out of class because I used to ask a lot of questions. For one final project, all of us were confused, and I stood up (it was Chef Gary Trevisani teaching) and I said "look, we are all very confused, we don't understand what it is you need from us." And he said "get out of my class; I am done with you." So, I was always the guy asking the questions. But, I also finished my apprenticeship (internship) early because I was finished with classes before anyone else. I did my apprenticeship at the Four Seasons as well as a place called "San Marco" on City Line Avenue. I had double the hours that anyone else had. Everyone wanted to start a softball team

while I was in school, and I said "go ahead." While you guys are at practice, I'm going to be working and learning. I was very aggressive.

I have read that your culinary inspirations were your parents; can you tell me about them? Yeah, they are amazing. They were not in the food industry. My father was an educator and my mother was a nurse. My father worked during the day and my mother worked at night. So, my mother made great lunches and my father made amazing dinners. They are both amazing cooks because they were always very experimental. They had no fear of anything – always doing cool s***! My father would bring home live eels and octopus. I learned how to clean a crab by watching my father. I learned a lot from my parents and now, I have turned the tables when we do dinners; I am trying to improvise and tell them how to do it best.

What made you decide to go to culinary school?

I used to cook for friends, girlfriends and dates. So, the passion wasn't so much about the food at that point as it was about the instant gratification. You know, when you make a meal for someone, it's automatic. I didn't think about going to culinary school until I was about 19 years old. I was working in a restaurant when I was younger and I would look at the guys in the kitchen and just think "those guys are just having so much fun." This small tiny little restaurant and there were just two guys in the kitchen, but they always just had so much fun back there. One day, my buddy Jeff, told me that I should go to culinary school because I was so good at it. I didn't

think it was for me at the time; but, I decided to give it a chance. Karl Becker was my Admissions Rep (he's such a great guy!). I remember being so happy because it was cool, it wasn't vague and it wasn't boring. I was happy because it was so directed and I enjoyed that.

When you graduated college, did you have a plan or an idea about where you wanted to go in your career?

No, not at all! I was working two jobs for free and going to school full time. I would work from 7 am – 3 pm at the Four Seasons, then at 4 pm go to my other job until 9 pm and then leave that job and go bounce at a bar. My first job was when I worked for a place in Key Largo, Florida and I made \$425 a week. I worked there for about a year for a chef who was the biggest a*****! I learned everything NOT to do from him. You learn more from those kinds of guys anyway. Like me, I made mistakes, and I was a tough and egotistical chef the first 10 years of my career. The reason is that I didn't really come out and work for someone. I came out of school and I was the Chef. I worked for this guy in Key Largo, but when I finished with him, I never worked for anyone else after that. I came back and boom, I was the Chef at restaurants. I developed my own style; I did all of my own stuff; my own methods of running kitchens, organizational tools and standards. When I wanted to get ideas from other chefs, I worked at places like Striped Bass, but me and the Chef cursed each other out and I never saw her again.

Did you ever envision becoming a brand? No, I had

no idea what I was going to do.

So, when did that change? What was the big breakthrough or opportunity? Well, I've always worked at independent restaurants, and then I left those places and went to McCormick and Schmick, where I was the Executive Chef and was thrown into the world of food costs. I mean, I worked with food costing before, but I was literally just launched into a pile of food costs and now, I was working with \$5.5 million in food. So, the opportunity I was given was huge, but I hated it. I couldn't stand it. The corporate atmosphere was one that I knew I didn't want. So, I left and I went on to do Irish pubs, seafood restaurants, organic, and Mexican through the McGrogran Group. But, even then, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew that I wanted to teach people about food, that I wanted to cook and that I was going to make a mark in it somehow. So, I became friends with a woman on FOX and she contacted me about doing a segment for them. I remember it was Memorial Day weekend in Philadelphia and no one was around. I borrowed my buddy's truck, drove to my parents' house, took their grill, and put it in the back of the truck. I drove to Market Street [in Philadelphia] and unloaded everything by myself; the huge grill and the coolers! That was the first experience I had on TV. Right after that, I did CN8 with Paul Dillon where I killed a live lobster on camera and got death threats because of it! After that, I did some local stuff on NBC. I did segments for about 8 years on NBC's morning show and I loved it. It wasn't even about the fame. Everything I did was on the fly. I never used a script. You have to know what you are talking about because everything is live and there is no second take and I did really well with it. I was taking it easy for a while and a show called me and asked if could send them my tapes, the show was called "Date Plate" on the Food Network. So, I did that show for three seasons and then went back to NBC. Then came Bar Rescue...

How did you get started on Bar Rescue? My brother was the Senior Vice President of Programming at Spike TV. He called and said that he was looking for a Chef who has some good TV experience. I am a straight shooter so I said, "You're an a****. I've been doing TV for 10 years!" He wasn't sure if the show was for me, so I asked for more details. He said "I need an Irish chef." and I said "I was voted best Irish Chef two years in a row!" Then he just hung up on me. About five minutes later, someone from a casting company called me and said that Spike asked for my tapes. So, I went through the same process as everyone else [to get onto the show] and my brother and I never spoke about Bar Rescue again (the business end of it).

So, what was your journey into becoming a brand? I worked my ass off. I did all of my own marketing and I did all my own PR... I still do. I do all of my own social media, and that's what I think people like about me. Also, chefs are blue collar workers; chefs are regular guys and girls. We work our asses off for the money - there is nothing wrong with that. For chefs, it's a blue collar and approachable way of being. There is that 1% percent out of a 100 where it does just happen. But, it's far and few between. It's hard work. Look at Rachel Ray; she was never a restaurant chef. But, she became a brand and she had the personality to do it. She got onto Oprah, she did

her thing, and she was a personality that had something to talk about. Emeril was the forefront for all of this and people like Julia Child, Jacques Pepin and Martin Yan. But, the one thing people don't realize is that it usually doesn't just happen. You have to work your way into it.

Advice you can give to those who want to be on TV? Don't plan on becoming a chef on TV...just do your thing. If you are lucky to get spots then do them. Rule #1 - unless you are the best known chef, if you are a d*** you're done. People won't want to work with you. I am lucky enough because I love production crews. They are my kind of people. I feel that I have a good reputation with the media and production crew and have a lot of repeat business because of it.

Can you tell us about being a brand? I have the brand of Chef Brian Duffy. Which is not just a person, it's a brand. To be a brand, you have to stick to what you know and what you do. If I am going to go out there and say, "hey you, I want you to buy this bra" - people will say "wait, who are you?" So, I have always tried to stick to what I know and what it is that I am. I am a Chef, I love to cook and to have fun. That's the way it works. So, I try to keep things in the same realm. Now, it has changed over the years because I went from being a bachelor to now being a dad. I have two little girls; they are 13 and 10. But, they are a part of my brand: a part of who I am. Being a brand is weird. You have to be very careful of what you do because you have to protect the brand. It's not you, it's the brand. Look at Chick-fill-A, Abercrombie and Paula Deen - all from a moment of mistake. You have to be careful of what you do because the idea of a brand is that it's not just a personality, it's a business.

Out of all of your businesses (CBD Solution, Duffied Spices, Endorsements, TV), which is your absolute favorite? My favorite is my business - which is CBD Solution. I have clients all over North America and Hawaii. I am actually going to NY tomorrow for a consultation, and then I come home and leave for Canada. So, I go into established or not established businesses and I do training, concept development, motivational speaking, conversations about up-selling, provide knowledge and education, and work directly with chefs to pull them back on track. I also work with food costs, menu and concept development, and design - basically, every single part of it.

What kind of experience would a chef need before thinking of creating a brand? Well, it took me 10 years just to have an understanding of food costs and the workings of a line. I just had a conversation with a friend from LA who had an issue with food costs and she has been a chef for years. She said "I'm not tracking right or not doing something right" and I spent an hour and half on the phone with her educating her on the way that food costs work. It took me 20 years to get to this point and I still learn every single day new ways to do things. I spend 3-4 hours a day on social media because I don't want anyone else doing it for me - and your followers know! To give you an idea, I had 3k followers on Twitter last year and I had a conversation with a media expert who said that you have to interact and engage. So many people will just post and sit back and wonder why no one is responding to them. Well, when I post something like "where am I a going" while I am at the airport, I am

engaging them. I am creating a relationship that they are going to respond to. And now, I hit 15K followers last night! I didn't spend any money on it; I wasn't promoting (ads), it's all from me just engaging and communicating. It's part of creating a brand.

What would you say to students who are graduating or just graduated and maybe aren't getting that instant gratification right way? You have to work through it. Take your time and learn your craft. I always tell people - find your desire, fuel your passion and share it. That's a massive thing. If you really love what you do, it's not going to come to you overnight. You have got to own your craft. You have to get in there and wash dishes; you have to wash the entire kitchen's knives and wrap them individually in towels and lay them down on the table when you are an apprentice. You have to get in and you have to make mistakes. You can't be scared to ask people for help. Ask "what do you mean?" It doesn't matter if you have been in the business for 10 days or 10 years. So ask questions and don't forget to make mistakes, and every day try to make a new dish, and everyday try to present that dish to your chef. Say "hey Chef, I made this for you today," because there will be that one dish out of a hundred that the Chef will go "hey, that's pretty good, we'll run that as a special today." As chefs, educate your staff. Take time every single day to pick one guy/girl in your kitchen and just spend an hour with them. Show them how to make the dish. Show them what they are doing wrong. Take a dishwasher and show them how to hold a knife or how to peel an onion. I had restaurants where the waiters couldn't wait to finish their shift so that they can come into the kitchen and learn. I always wanted one cohesive unit. I try to educate every step of the way - it took a long time to realize that. I think that TV has made it more of a novelty to become a chef and not so much a career. That's why we have restaurants like Outback that pay guys \$10-15 dollars per hour, when a great restaurant pays minimum wage! Why? Because at these places you are learning the craft; and that's what it is... it's a craft and it's a passion. I can teach you how to cook but I can't teach you how to love to cook. My true motto is that it's the art of the preparation. I love a great meal but it's the art of the preparation of putting that meal together that I LOVE.

What are you working on currently? Currently, I am working on seven restaurants that are getting ready to open (not my own but my clients) in the next couple of months. I have a lot going on in media sense (TV and commercials) that I can't really talk about. But, I can say that there will be some big things coming out this year. I just signed a deal with a writer for my own cookbook which will be coming out in about a year.

If there is anything I want people to get out of this interview, it's that being a chef and becoming a brand is a business that you have to work at to be successful. It doesn't just happen!