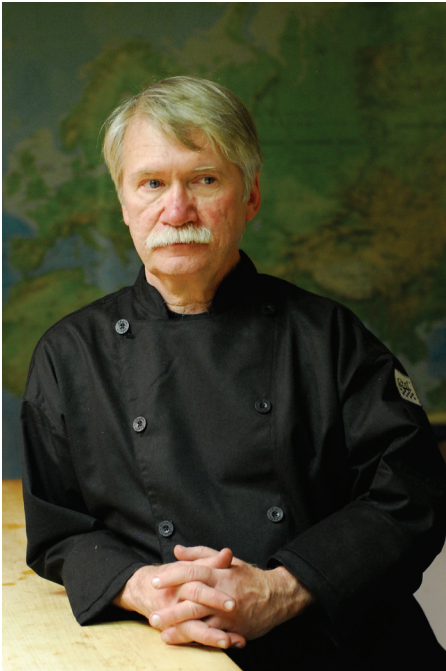


the interview



Paul Sorgule, MS, AAC President, Harvest America Ventures

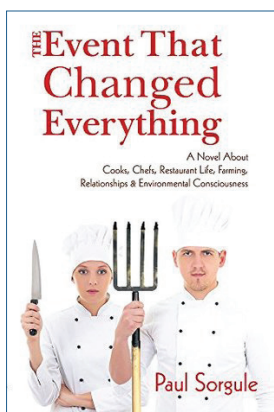
By Stacy Gammill

Paul Sorgule, MS, AAC, is the president of Harvest America Ventures, a consulting firm for restaurants and culinary arts programs. An avid competitor, Chef Sorgule was a member of the **New England Culinary Olympic Team** that earned an individual and overall team gold medal at the Culinary Olympics in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1988. He has been invited to cook at the James Beard House in New York City, served 26 years as the Dean of Culinary Arts and Hospitality Management at **Paul Smith's College** and served as the Vice President of the **New England Culinary Institute** as well as time as the Executive Chef for the four-diamond Mirror Lake Inn Resort and Spa.

Chef Sorgule has dedicated his life to training and mentoring the next generation of culinary professionals. Because of his contributions to the industry, he is the recipient of the ACF Chef Educator of the Year award in 2001 and is a member of the prestigious **American Academy of Chefs**, the honor society of ACF.

He writes regularly on professional development for the **Culinary Cues Blog** on his website as well as for ACF's **We Are Chefs** blog, among other culinary websites and publications.

Chef Sorgule recently published ***The Event that Changed Everything***, a novel about “cooks, chefs, restaurant life, farming, relationships and environmental consciousness.” He shares his inspiration for the book, which is grounded in his life experiences, and his outlook on the future of our industry.



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Harvest America Ventures





What inspired you to write this novel?

ps: I have been in the food business since my first job as a dishwasher in 1965. During that time I have worked with the finest, most caring, transparent, talented and real people that I have ever met.

My career was like many who work their way up from apprentice to chef. My time working in Vermont from 2008 to 2012 truly changed my outlook on the state of our industry and the beliefs I always carried but did not always practice: the state of the food industry, the impact we have and the serious challenges before us.

This book reflects what I know, what I have witnessed, what I have been an active part of and how I transitioned late in my career.

How much of it reflects your personal experiences?

ps: This is not an autobiography, but the storyline reflects my first-hand experiences and connections with others in this business. It would be difficult for me to write any other way. For those who are

wondering, Jake, one of the main characters is not based on my life although many of his traits are.

One of your plot lines is about a foodborne illness outbreak. Why did you choose that angle?

ps: The greatest responsibility we have as chefs and cooks is to handle food properly and keep our customers healthy. The greatest fear that any chef has is being part of a foodborne illness outbreak. Any customer who becomes ill from improper food handling is a

crushing blow to a chef and one that is very difficult to recover from professionally and emotionally.

Aside from the fact that an outbreak can result in the demise of a restaurant, it is a violation of the trust that the dining public places in our hands. I know chefs who have experienced this in their careers, never to recover from the feeling of guilt and shame. I knew this topic would strike a chord with every chef who has held the responsibility for the well-being of guests.

What are the professional and personal characteristics that lead to the success of your main characters?

ps: Without giving too much away, Carla and Jake both share admirable characteristics and some that are not so positive, but they adjust and overcome. They have a passion for their work and it is an extension of them.

Secondly, their work ethic is like many chefs with whom I have had the pleasure to align—a whatever-it-takes motto.

Third, they refuse to accept mediocrity in anything they do; they are all in on the excellence train.

Finally, they have vision, a plan and the ability to stick with that plan to the end. Ironically, some of these traits can also become liabilities if not kept in perspective and under control. This becomes clear at various times in the book.



You focus on the complex U.S. food system. What advice do you have for chefs with buying responsibilities—how can they buy smarter?

ps: My advice is simple: a chef is only as good as the ingredients he or she works with. To this end, your vendors are a critical part of your team. Communicate, listen and make them work hard for you just as you would any employee. Teach them when necessary and listen to their advice when appropriate. Learn about the source of the ingredients and make your vendors do the same—this is part of their job.

Instill in your cooks the understanding that the ingredient is sacred and part of their job is to respect

the ingredient and handle it properly. Buy from vendors, farmers, fishmongers and meat purveyors who have this same respect and do not treat everything as a commodity that comes off the back of a truck. Whenever possible, visit the farms, processing plants, dairies, cheese makers, cattle ranchers and fishermen who provide you with the tools to transform ingredients into finished, delicious works of art.

I always remember a quote from Wolfgang Puck when asked what his formula was for success: “I buy the best raw materials and try not to screw them up.”

How can a chef navigate between quality of ingredients and price? Is it ever okay to sacrifice quality for price?

ps: Never sacrifice quality for price. Search for the best deals and push your vendor to work with you in this regard. The minute you sacrifice the quality that you know is important is the minute that your restaurant begins the long road toward failure.

Americans spend the least amount of money on their personal food budgets as a percentage of their income than any other civilized nation in the world. One of the jobs of the chef is to help to convince people to eat a little bit less, pay the farmer or producer a fair price for quality and learn that food is the basis for our health—and maybe this deserves a higher percentage of their working dollar.

Another approach is for chefs to take a hard look at their menus. How many menus feature premier ingredients that cost the property dearly and require the least amount of talent on the part of the chef or cook? We tend to take the path of least resistance



and offer items we know people will be attracted to rather than show our ability to make less expensive cuts and less familiar fish taste just as extraordinary, but with a lower price tag. A chef friend of mine once said, “There is far less skill involved in preparing a lobster tail than a leg of chicken—the real talent of a cook is creating a lobster experience for the guest with that chicken leg.”

How do you see the hospitality industry changing in response to increased foodborne illnesses?

ps: We are changing, at least initially, because we are afraid of the consequences. However, the new generation of cooks has had the opportunity to take the **ServSafe Program**, which from my perspective is the greatest contribution that the **National Restaurant Association** has made to the restaurant business in my lifetime. This has become the gold standard and one that is truly making a difference.

We need to get past the feeling that the health department, when they show up to our door, is somehow the enemy — they are in fact our greatest friends. We all know that most inspectors take their job seriously and truly want to help restaurants do things right; but there are others who appear to

flex their power muscle as a way of finding a way to punch a chef. This will always exist, but if the restaurant takes a proactive role requiring staff members to become ServSafe certified and build food safety into their culinary program, then great things will happen.

The **HACCP Program** is one example of a great tool that too many restaurants are viewing as another bureaucratic step making it more difficult to operate, yet chefs would agree that time and temperature are the greatest deterrent to a foodborne issue or the greatest contributor to problems.

What advice do you have to nurture relationships with farmers and food purveyors?

ps: This process takes time. Like many chefs, I accepted the attitude that vendors can't be trusted. My attitude changed as I began to view them as partners. Sure, there were times when I was frustrated with a sales person, farmer or fishmonger, but once I put on the hat of partner, then things began to change.

above: Sorgule with his culinary crew at the four-diamond Mirror Lake Inn, Lake Placid, New York. **left:** Cooking at the James Beard House in 2008.



The farm-to-table movement is great, but it has yet to work on the challenges both sides face. Chefs need consistency in size, color, flavor, arrival times for orders, and the quantity that the restaurant business demands. Many, if not most farmers, grass-fed beef producers and fisherman have yet to develop a business model that can address these needs.

When those carrots or potatoes come in all random sizes, everything in the kitchen has to change. When organic chicken breasts are delivered in random sizes, the cooking times, methods and portions leading to profitability are out of whack. Finally, most farmers don't get the wholesale pricing model, which results in higher costs to the restaurant and less room for effective pricing and profit. This will eventually get better, but right now it is a problem.

On the other end, chefs rarely take the time to understand the farmer's perspective. Their farm, the rotation of crops and the growing cycle may not allow them to produce those perfect carrots through a season or longer. Chefs need to adjust how they look at menu planning, how long a menu is kept and whether they can change those menus based on peak maturity of vegetables that may only be around

for a few weeks in a cycle. There's lots of room for improvement and understanding on both ends. Communication is key.

You mention in the book that the sign of a great restaurant is that it can thrive even during tough times. What are the tough times that restaurants currently deal with?

ps: The problems that the restaurant business is facing today are mind-boggling. To begin with, the greatest dilemma we face is a soft labor market. For a multitude of reasons there is a real shortage of cooks, servers and other key personnel in restaurants. The industry as a whole must strategize on the cause and come up with a long-term solution. Unless we address labor issues like attracting employees, training, retention, pay scales, benefits, flexible scheduling and other quality-of-life concerns, we may find the exponential growth rate of the 80's and 90's come to a halt.

Secondly, the integrity of the food supply is coming into question. Are GMO's safe? Even if they are safe, why can't we mandate that those products be labeled as such so chefs can make a choice? Is organic the same as certified organic? If not, why the gray area of labeling? Do the advantages of centralized farming and

year-round availability override the quality that comes from regional, indigenous products that are able to fully mature before distribution? Growth hormones, the overuse of antibiotics, incorporating artificial ingredients, grass-fed versus corn-finished animals, free-range versus pen-raised chickens, high-fructose corn syrup, excessive use of sodium in products we buy, etc. These tough questions need answers.

Finally, rent gouging is putting incredible strain on restaurants that might otherwise be successful. When a community goes through gentrification, usually a restaurant starts the process. Once the community evolves, there is a new breed of landlord perfectly willing to price the restaurant's rent out of the realm of reason. Look at Union Square Café in NYC and talk with Danny Meyer about this. One of America's greatest, highly successful restaurants closed its doors to look for another location because of rent gouging.

I could go on and on, but the bottom line is that it is increasingly difficult for restaurateurs to remain successful in today's market.

What resources do you trust for education and advocacy with regard to food safety education and sustainable agriculture?

ps: Regarding food safety, I give a nod to the National Restaurant Association and their ServSafe Program. Additionally, the emphasis ACF places on sanitation for its **certification** and **accreditation** programs has played a major role in improving awareness and advocacy.

Sustainable agriculture is still finding its footing, but farmers can take advice from groups like **The Monterey Bay Aquarium** on sustainable fish. Not all farmers are sold on sustainable practices, moving to

a non-GMO, organic approach that emphasizes less dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Farmers have been pushed into a model that is geared toward the yield necessary to feed a growing population and the small profit margins that exist in agriculture. Resources for them are not mainstream, but organizations like **Chef's Collaborative** and **Slow Food USA** are a good start. I am pleased to see far greater involvement on the part of the ACF. Recent issues of **National Culinary Review** are a breath of fresh air in this area.

In the end, it is still up to the chef to establish standards of excellence and operation and communicate his or her needs with farmers, producers and vendors. Hopefully, **The Event That Changed Everything** will wake people up to the challenges ahead. I truly believe that this is a book that every culinarian will find enlightening and useful. *The Event That Changed Everything* could very well become a great resource for a number of classes in culinary arts programs or a personal resource for young cooks working their way through a **kitchen apprenticeship**.

You can order a copy of *The Event That Changed Everything* through **amazon.com**, **barnesandnoble.com** or through the publisher at: **www.iuniverse.com**. ■

opposite left: Receiving the four-diamond award for Mirror Lake Inn. **opposite right:** Sorgule with the 1988 New England Culinary Olympic Team.