

Concord chef scales new culinary heights

By Michael J. Solender

PUBLISHED IN: Z COMMUNITY SITES | CABARRUS | NEWS

James Hettinger took on the role of executive chef at Concord's Embassy Suites Golf Resort & Spa in March.

Scaling culinary heights is nothing new for the Johnson & Wales University (Miami) graduate and alumni of demanding chef roles from five-star dining establishments, to top resort and country club kitchens across the country.

Height is the operative word. Chef Hettinger, 35, stretches the measuring tape at 6-feet-11, making him one of the tallest chefs in North America. Shoe size: 18. Neck: "Not sure" Waist: 42 inches. Anyway you look at him, Hettinger is a big guy.

"When I was with the Ritz-Carlton, they billed me as the tallest chef in their entire worldwide operations," he said. "It took their seamstress three chefs coats that she altered for me into one coat big enough to serve as my uniform."

Today Hettinger wears a custom-made 4XL personalized chef's coat that Embassy Suites general manager, Terry Crawford was only too glad to provide.

"James is a special chef and we are fortunate to have landed him on our team," said Crawford. "He has super experience particularly in using fresh local produce, herbs, cheeses and proteins and creating locally inspired dishes. He is a gentle giant with a great personality and is fitting in well after only a few months on board."

Hettinger relocated to Concord with his wife to take the role of executive chef after most recently being with the Amelia Island Country Club in Florida. "This is a big job, with a number of responsibilities including banquet, catering and food service operations supporting the golf club at Rocky River."

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Hettinger has upward of 30 kitchen personnel that he supervises. He said he has come to use his height as an advantage, but that hasn't always been the case for the Lansing, Mich., native who said he grew a foot between his sophomore and junior year in high school.

"Garde manger, or the French technique of cold-food preparation, can involve hours hunched over a prep table making hundreds of tiny appetizers," said Hettinger. "After a round like that, my back would really be shot. I learned a simple trick of raising my work surface using some glass racks and now this is one of my favorite kitchen responsibilities."

Hettinger said he has to keep reminding himself he's no longer in his 20s where he would think nothing of throwing around 250 boxes of produce that normally call for two or three helpers. "I'm much more conscious of my body now than I have been in the past."

Apparently so are some of his staff members. Hettinger likes to tell the story of a particularly busy night at a former employer where a very difficult customer was causing havoc with the floor staff and demanding to see the chef. When Hettinger arrived, presented the patron with his meal, crossed his arms and asked if there would be anything else, the stunned patron apparently shocked by his host's size, was at a loss for words and remained silent through his meal and left without causing any more trouble.

Hettinger said he toyed with the idea of trying to get on with one of the food-reality shows that are so prevalent today – but thought better of it. Even though he enjoys "Top Chef" and "Restaurant Impossible," he's not willing to take time off to pursue the bright lights quite yet.

"I've got bills to pay and a family to support," says Hettinger. "Plus, my style of cooking is very basic, and while I'm versatile I'm really a down-home chef. Give me a great steak to cook and I'm a happy guy."

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