

# Lessons learned at the Mt. Washington Tavern

After working at the Mt. Washington Tavern for more than 20 years each, my business partner, David Lichty, and I bought the tavern 10 years ago from the original owner, who started it with a friend in 1979. We have both worked several positions over the years, bartender, cook, bar-back, manager, general manager, etc. The tavern is about to enter its 40th year in operation, making it one of the longest-operating restaurants in the Baltimore area.

During our 30 years at the tavern (60 combined!), we've earned very regular and great customers. We also have learned what works and what doesn't and how to weather different "storms," whether economic or literal in nature.

That said, the restaurant business is a tough one, as the dozens of local spots that closed last year prove. We certainly don't have all of the answers, but here are some tips we've learned over the years about making it in a very unpredictable industry.

**It's not about the food. OK, it is. But so much more, too.**

Mt. Washington Tavern has been our

ROB  
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Commentary



home away from home since we started working there, a week apart, back in 1986. Our customers are like family to us. Great food and drinks are what we do, but creating an environment where people feel welcome and comfortable is a very, very close second.

It's very gratifying to look out into any one of our dining rooms and see three generations enjoy a meal at the same table. After a devastating fire in 2011, the support from the local community was amazing. We re-opened a year later and our loyal customers were back in a place they view as special, welcomed by almost all of our pre-fire staff!

**Speaking of loyalty ... be good**

**to your employees, and they will be good to you.**

We have several employees who have been with us 20-plus years. We have one who has been at the tavern for 38 years. Combined, our staff has over 400 years of experience working at the tavern. That's pretty unheard of in an industry with a traditionally high rate of staff turnover.

Our employees are family to us. We help them however we can when life gets difficult. We love having their families come in to visit.

**Be consistent (but don't be afraid to stray at times).**

We have an extensive menu with some common themes, most notably fresh seafood. When our guests come in, we want them to know the experience they have will include friendly service, a wide selection of drinks and great food. We keep the favorites on the menu but love trying new dishes on our weekend specials menu. Additionally, we love bringing in great craft beers and new cocktail ideas – we are the

first bar ever to put a Sagamore Black-Eyed Rye on tap. It has been extremely popular.

**Diners want healthy options.**

No surprise here. Today's diners have expectations as far as healthy options, allergy awareness, sourcing and sustainability. We are constantly working with our purveyors to provide just that.

**A positive attitude and resiliency.**

Many of these tips are applicable to businesses in any industry, but none more than this. Every business has its bumps and hurdles. The ability to plan for them and stay positive is vital. (Great Recession anyone?!)

Always focus on doing what you love, making people happy and enjoy the crazy ride.

**Rob Frisch is co-owner of the Mt. Washington Tavern.**