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# the tao of sam and josh

BY BRYAN BASS

## DYNAMIC DUO MAKES THE GRADE AT THE VENETIAN

Most successful individuals share one thing in common: a mentor that has helped guide and assist them on their journey to success. At Venetian club and restaurant Tao, a major point of praise is a highly organized and trained kitchen staff that creates culinary masterpieces in a timely fashion while serving customer counts that often exceed 1,000 guests per night. Heading up this frantic kitchen is a pair of chefs that walk and talk the same game for a reason: Executive Chef Sam Hazen taught it to Chef de Cuisine Josh Thomsen.

**T**he year is 1990, a period that sees Nelson Mandela freed in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall and U.S. troops sent to Iraq for the first time. In a Culinary Institute of America classroom in New York's Hyde Park, Josh Thomsen walks into his first class fresh from his high school graduation. "I was so green," laughs the ever-cheerful Thomsen. "And Sam was the instructor that no one wanted to draw, we used to walk out of his class thinking 'What an ass!' because we didn't know any better."

Hazen was one of the instructors teaching the "skills" class, the chef's boot camp where young students learned the basics. "It's the most important class because it's where you learn the small stuff and without it you have nothing," says Hazen before continuing with a chuckle. "Yeah I was really strict, but only because I needed to be."

Hazen returned to CIA, his alma mater, after working in the kitchens of London's Le Gavroche and Milan's Gualtiero Marchesi. After his arrival back in the States, he became executive chef at New York City's Terrace In The Sky. But Hazen harbored a desire to teach and help mold the next generation of great chefs. "It is so rewarding to see those students that excelled at school now excelling in the real world," he says.

Hazen had a wealth of knowledge to teach, and the young Thomsen soaked it all in. "His class was so great because he ran it like a restaurant and that's what we all needed at that time," says Thomsen.

Hazen sometimes sat in for a week at Aureole or Le Cirque, bringing the latest innovations back to his class. But the call of Manhattan's kitchens proved irresistible. He manned the stoves in prestigious restaurants such as the famed Tavern on the Green in Central Park and Cascabela before opening his own Rue 57 and the original Tao.

"I always followed Sam's career after I graduated. My parents would cut out clippings and mail them to me," says Thomsen. "When Sam opened Tao I even sent my parents in to eat and say hi."

Hazen hadn't forgotten one his favorite students either, "You always remember the good students and Josh was just that; you could tell he had a fire and a passion in him. Along the way he would work with friends of mine and I would hear

great things about what he was doing."

As plans were being made for Tao's Vegas invasion, Hazen found himself dining at BOA Steakhouse and Sushi Roku in the Forum Shops at Caesars Palace. Thomsen was serving as corporate executive chef, and Hazen was not disappointed by his former protégé's cuisine. "It was the first time he ever cooked for me," says Hazen. "And it was one of the best meals I have had in Vegas."

It was a new experience for Thomsen as well; "It wasn't like cooking for your boss. When it's the guy that taught you it's a whole new program and an awesome experience." Hazen enjoyed the experience so much that he immediately set his sights on Thomsen for the Tao kitchen. "I wanted the best player on the field," he remembers. "And in Josh I definitely found that."

"Once a mentor, always a mentor," Thomsen happily adds.

While Tao's kitchen may be one of the busiest in Las Vegas and can look close to chaos, appearances are deceiving. "I run a kitchen by eliminating the opportunity for mistakes through organization," says Thomsen. "When you are organized, whether you are cooking for nine, 90 or 2,000 people, it doesn't matter. When you can do this level of volume and it works, it is extremely rewarding."

When Hazen is in New York overseeing Tao's sister kitchen, Thomsen still talks with him on a daily basis, with Hazen in the mentoring role yet again. "It's just like school," says Thomsen. "He's yelling at me now, he was yelling at me then."

Watching the two chefs interact is an interesting experience indeed. The elder Hazen still commands Thomsen's attention when he speaks — a sure sign that the disciple is always learning, no matter how small the lesson. Conversely, Hazen proudly beams when Thomsen speaks. Sometimes even the teacher becomes the student, and Hazen is quick to support Thomsen's menu ideas and kitchen initiatives. It is obvious that the dynamic between this detail-orientated duo is key to Tao's success. "Just as I learnt so much from him at school, I have learnt so much more from him working together at Tao," says Thomsen.

That's probably a good thing because as Hazen himself puts it, "I can still change his grade!"