

Abundant Catering

Interview with Jackie Williams

Summary

- With over 40 years of experience in both the corporate and small business food worlds, Williams is an executive chef with abundant experience and a drive for excellence.
- Williams's experience, combined with business development assistance through the Micro Entrepreneur Program, Minority Economic Development Association, and classes at Women's Venture all helped her succeed when beginning her own business.
- In 2009, Williams began operating out of A Toast to Bread but needed to find a new kitchen out of which to operate when A Toast to Bread was shut down in January 2014.
- Communications between state inspectors and individual owners who had operated within A Toast to Bread were lacking. Williams was unaware that her business was listed as "out-of-business" by the state until she needed to communicate with state inspectors about obtaining a license for the Renaissance Festival.
- Current discussions with a City of Minneapolis inspector about the Kenwood Isles kitchen expectations leave Williams and the manager of the property desiring clearer understanding of expectations since they vary by inspector.
- Williams has a number of inspection and general improvement ideas related to food safety coursework requirements, recognition of minority/ethnic business owners, increasing incubator kitchen space, and more.

Introduction

Jackie Williams is an executive chef with over 40 years of experience and owner of Abundant Catering in Minneapolis, MN. Abundant Catering was founded by Williams in 2000 and has been at the root of her food business enterprises ever since. Williams is driven by a desire for excellence, a fact that can be seen throughout her career. Early in her career, for example, Williams became the first African American woman to graduate from the Chef Apprentice Program at Allegheny Community College.

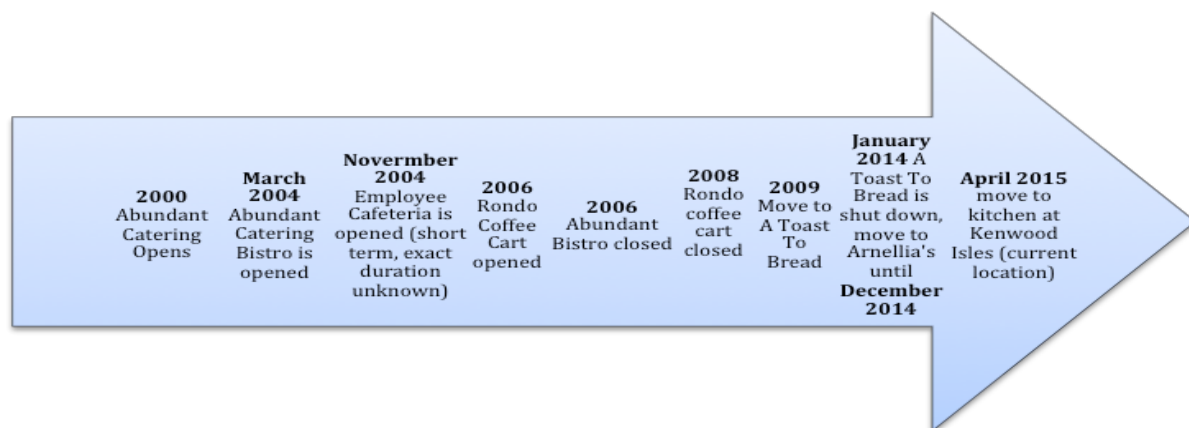
Williams career began as a corporate trainer for Houlihan's and then transitioned to an Executive Chef position in corporate restaurants in 1990. In 1996 she left corporate America to work at Eat Your Heart Out Catering, a backstage entertainment catering company. In 1998, Williams left Eat Your Heart Out Catering to start her own catering business, In Good Taste Catering. However, when she got her business license from the Secretary of State, she did not incorporate the "In Good Taste Catering" name. As time went on, she found out there was another woman with the last name Williams who also had a Minnesota business called In Good Taste Company. Williams thus had to change her company's name and decided on "Abundant Catering", which she incorporated in 2000.

First Steps

When Williams first started her business, she went through the Micro Entrepreneur Program at the Neighborhood Development Center (NDC) in Minneapolis. She worked with the Minority Economic Development Association (MEDA) to write a business plan, and also consulted with and participated in finance classes at Women's Venture. Ultimately, she obtained funding to start her business from NDC, but the input and knowledge from NDC, MEDA and Women's Venture helped her have a solid, well-thought-out business plan.

The first step Williams took when starting her business was to register her business at the Secretary of State. She learned the hard way that she could have saved money by registering the business and incorporating the business name at the same time, but this was not clear when she initially registered with the state. After this registration, Williams contacted The City of Saint Paul and had an inspector come out to conduct an inspection of the kitchen space she was using.

Throughout the first years of Abundant Catering, Williams tried a number of business ventures (illustrated in timeline below) in addition to the catering. From 2004-2006, Williams operated Abundant Catering Bistro (a soul food restaurant located in Saint Paul). In 2004 she also operated an employee cafeteria for a very short period of time, and from 2006-2008 she operated a coffee cart in the library in the Rondo Neighborhood of Saint Paul. When Williams closed down the Abundant Bistro restaurant in 2006 to more deeply pursue the coffee cart business, thinking that it was the smart business decision, it unfortunately wasn't successful. Williams then decided to regroup and refocus on just Abundant Catering and has tried this focused approach to her business ventures ever since.



A Toast To Bread

In 2009, Williams decided she wanted to started making food again, but since she no longer had the Abundant Bistro to work out of, she began operating at an incubator kitchen in Saint Paul called A Toast To Bread. Early on at A Toast To Bread, Williams noticed a food safety hazard

with another operator's food preparation process. This operator was making a fermented bread starter in a noncontrolled, open environment. Since she was good friends with the owner of A Toast To Bread, Williams asked him if he was sure that this person was allowed to operate under these conditions. The owner said everything had been 'okayed', so Williams went on with her day-to-day operations even though this practice went against her years of experience with the inspection process and safe food preparation. Then, in early 2014, a state inspector came into A Toast To Bread to meet with a new operator who was trying to get licensed. Although Williams was not present when this occurred, she was told that the inspector immediately called his supervisor when he saw the other operator's open-air fermentation process.

That night, Williams received a call from the owner of A Toast To Bread, saying that she needed to look for another kitchen out of which to run her catering business. Within days of inspection, A Toast To Bread was shut down and those who operated there needed to find somewhere else to run their business. Rather than directly notifying each business owner operating with A Toast To Bread, the state inspectors instructed the owner of A Toast To Bread to inform each owner of the closure. Additionally, each business operating within A Toast to Bread was registered as "out of business", but this was also not directly communicated to Williams verbally or in writing from state inspectors. It wasn't until later, when Williams went to register to serve at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival through MDH that she found out she was registered as "out of business". She then had to fax over her license and prove that she was still in business and had never been out of business. Immediately following the closure of A Toast to Bread, Williams began running her catering out of Arnellia's, a bar and restaurant in St. Paul run by a close friend, where she stayed until December 2014. Then, in April 2015, she moved to the kitchen at Kenwood Isles, where she has been ever since.

Williams felt lucky to have the connection to her friend at Arnellia's because it allowed her to continue operating her business - even though she was unaware that her business status had been changed by the state. In hindsight, she believes this unbeknownst registration as "out of business" may have had an effect on her amount of business since she had been on the state of Minnesota's list of minority-owned business under the Targeted Group/Economically Disadvantaged/Veteran-Owned (TG/ED/VO) Small Business Procurement Program but was removed automatically when listed as a closed business.

Interactions and Inspectors

Williams now operates out of the kitchen in the Kenwood Isles condominium building. She's been there for about a year and is licensed through the City of Minneapolis. She also has been at the Renaissance Festival since 2009 and is now licensed for that operation through the MDH.

Williams describes her relationship with her City of Minneapolis inspector as 'okay'. "The problem with him is that he's a new, young guy. I've been in the industry for over 30 years and this kitchen has been here for 30 years. He came to inspect the kitchen this year, which has been licensed for 30 years, and told me, 'you need to install a three compartment sink in this

kitchen.’ Why do we need a three compartment sink, all of a sudden, when we have a dishwasher?” Williams got the building manager, Pat, involved, and they contacted this inspector’s supervisor. The email that Pat received back said that kitchen should have never been licensed in the first place without a three compartment sink and went on to ask for floor plan changes as well. This has felt like an unexpected and costly change in expectations to Williams and the building’s manager considering they’ve never been told there were any issue with these features with previous inspectors. Pat and Williams are continuing to communicate with the City of Minneapolis to work through any issues.

This setback, Williams noted, relates generally to her other experiences with inspectors. She noted that it is difficult to predict what a new inspector will focus on and thus make improvements in advance of inspection. She described her love-hate feelings about “old school” inspectors: “they go by the book and look in the littlest crack - really inspect everything. The younger ones come in and the things you think they are going to look at they ignore, and the things they do look at - it doesn’t pertain (as directly to food safety).”

Ideas for Systematic Improvements

Because Williams has so much experience and knowledge in the food business world, she feels as though the confusion around the inspection process hasn’t impeded Abundant Catering. However, she does have ideas for improving the system. For example, she witnessed cross contamination and other food safety issues among some operators within the A Toast To Bread. Often, these were operators with MDA licenses that didn’t require operators to take Certified Food Manager or other food safety-based trainings. “Anybody who handles food should have to take the class. MDA doesn’t require that, but they should...they should make it a law to make everyone safe.”

An additional opportunity for improvement is for the state to recognize challenges around promoting minority and/or ethnic small business owners. Abundant Catering is certified with the state as a minority-owned business under the Targeted Group/Economically Disadvantaged/Veteran-Owned (TG/ED/VO) Small Business Procurement Program, but this doesn’t automatically create the more equitable conditions it is intended to create. Williams pointed out that its focus misses the broader picture of an individual business owner’s experience that is beyond their race/gender/ethnicity. “When they put us all as minorities – Hispanics, Asians, blacks...everyone is minorities - as a black woman, you are still fighting...we still struggle,” says Williams. “[Right now] it’s true when they say ‘well it doesn’t matter how much experience or education you have’” says Williams. Although Williams has a wealth (over 40 years) of food business experience and education, this is not captured in the limited scope of the TG/ED/VO Small Business Procurement Program.

A greater system challenge for startup food entrepreneurs is finding an incubator kitchen. There is much more demand for incubator kitchens than there is supply, and many kitchens have specific stipulations attached (e.g. only gluten-free foods can be made). Additionally, she sees

many food entrepreneurs chasing food truck ideas because it seems simpler than finding a kitchen, without realizing they'll need a commercial kitchen space for cleaning of that truck equipment. Her advice to other food entrepreneurs is to know the differences between food businesses and know what kind you want to do. Additionally, knowing where to go to get your license (MDA, MDH, or delegated authority) is also not only necessary but extremely helpful if you get it right the first time. Lastly, Williams said that she thinks every business entrepreneur should begin by heavily researching their business options. "Start out at the J.J. Hill Library - it's a business library; anything you want to know about starting a business you can find there."

Conclusion

Looking back, Williams thinks she might be more successful in her catering business if she had just stuck with the catering business instead of testing many additional business ventures, like the coffee cart. She decided eventually to reassess and now solely focuses on catering. "My hands were in too many things to perfect just one thing...my advice to other food entrepreneurs is to not grow too fast. When you grow too fast, you're going to fail," said Williams. However, now that she is focusing only on Abundant Catering, her business is doing very well.