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Seizing Opportunities

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Life just doesn't hand you things. You have to get out there and make things happen . . . that's the exciting part.

—Emeril Lagasse[1]

"Smells just like my mom's kitchen," responded Emeril Lagasse to Ella Brennan, who had just asked what the 23-year-old thought of the kitchen of Commander's Palace, the legendary New Orleans restaurant she co-owned.[2] Emeril had been invited to tour the kitchen and restaurant back in 1982 as part of a weekend-long interview process with Brennan and her clan. The Brennans were looking for an executive chef to replace Paul Prudhomme, who had left months before to start his own restaurant, K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen.

It was that answer, coupled with Emeril's talent and enthusiasm, that may have sold Brennan on hiring him. "The enthusiasm, the integrity, the energy, it was all evident," she says. Soon after, the young chef found himself leading the kitchen of one of the top restaurants in all America.

Now running a company worth, by my calculation, somewhere in the neighborhood of $200 million, consisting of nine restaurants, nine cookbooks, two television shows, and a growing list of culinary products and kitchen accessories, not to mention the Emeril Lagasse Foundation, Emeril has achieved a stratospheric business growth rate. From nothing to $200 million in little more than a decade is quite an accomplishment—and a sign that Emeril is not just a chef who happened to be in the right place at the right time. In fact, he is a visionary who knew what he wanted and pursued it from a very young age. And now instead of pursuing opportunities, they are pursuing him.

A Passion for Cooking

Emeril's quick rise to power in the culinary world is not surprising when you look back at his formative years in Fall River, Massachusetts. Born in 1959 to Hilda and Emeril Lagasse Jr. (a.k.a. Mr. John), Emeril was the middle of three children, which also includes Delores, his older sister, and Mark, his younger brother. His French-Canadian father worked at Duro Finishing, a local textile mill, dyeing suit linings, and his Portuguese mother was a homemaker who took great pride in her cooking.

One of Emeril's earliest culinary memories was of helping his mother add vegetables to a soup pot at around age seven.[3] Said Hilda Lagasse, "He wanted to be right there, put the vegetables in. But I would show him how to do it, slowly with a spoon. But sometimes, believe me, he used to get in my way, right in my way. He was always in front of the stove."[4] Even at an early age, Emeril wanted to be in control when it came to cooking.

"My mom and I spent a lot of time cooking together when I was little," he told Parenting.com. "She was so great about letting me help—and much of what I know, I learned from her. Our family life really revolved around the kitchen and eating and cooking together,

and it was then that I learned how happy food can make people."[5] That observation—food can make people happy—would evolve into Emeril's career objective years later.

Emeril did not spend his whole childhood in the kitchen, however. He had his own paper route, played baseball, learned karate, and was a Cub Scout, just like most of the boys his age.[6] But unlike most of them, cooking was his favorite activity. "I was kind of viewed as a weird kid because I liked food," he remembers.[7]

One skill that he would carry forward was his comedic side. "Emeril always knew how to make people laugh in any situation," says former classmate John Ciullo. "He was always kind of a class clown. School was sometimes a tense place and he always knew how to make people relax."[8]

He landed his first job at the ripe old age of 10, by convincing Carreiro's Bakery to hire him as a dishwasher. "One of my chores for my mom was, every day, I would have to go down to the local Portuguese bakery and get bread for the table," he explains. The mouthwatering aromas and congenial atmosphere were appealing to Emeril. That routine led to the opportunity to work with the bakers. For a dollar an hour, four hours after school each day, he would work, washing pans. After a couple of years, he was promoted.

Gradually, the bakers entrusted him with more of the baking duties, and Emeril became skilled at baking breads and cakes. Starting with simple muffins and moving on to sweet breads, Portuguese pastries, custards, and cornmeal breads, Emeril learned quickly.

By age 12 he worked at the bakery at night, attended school by day, and slept in the afternoon. "I worked from like eleven o'clock at night to seven in the morning at this bakery. And then I went to school. Then I'd come home at three o'clock from school and my mom would feed me. Then I'd go to sleep. Then I'd get up and go to work at the bakery." Although it was certainly an unconventional schedule for someone his age, Emeril managed to do well at all his endeavors, while maintaining a B-plus average in school.[9]

His work at the bakery had a formative effect on Emeril, who

enjoyed making a difference in customers' lives. "I would just see how happy people were when they came into the bakery," he explained to Molly O'Neill in the *New York Times Magazine*.[10] Seeing the pleasure that he could give customers through food increased Emeril's passion for cooking.

Wanting more instruction, Emeril enrolled in a nighttime continuing education class on cake decorating, where he was the only male, and certainly the youngest, he says. "Every week we whipped up frostings and practiced making buttercream roses and violets." Despite his perfectionist streak, Emeril surprised even himself when he took first prize in the class competition. Wondering if he might truly have a knack for cake decorating, he proceeded to enter a big wedding cake contest and won the grand prize for the Northeast region.[11]

Although baking may have been his first love, music was a close second. And Emeril excelled at that, too, from a young age, playing drums in a local 45-member Portuguese band when he was just eight years old, in addition to playing with several other groups. Never one to limit his learning, Emeril also taught himself how to play several other instruments. "I was a percussion major," he explains in a *January* magazine interview, "but I wrote music and played a lot of instruments besides percussion. I taught myself how to play a lot of wind instruments," including the trumpet, trombone, and flute.[12] Always challenging himself, needing to learn more, Emeril developed skills that would make him successful.

In high school, Emeril opted for vocational training in culinary arts at nearby Diman Regional Vocational High School, where he enrolled in 1973 at the age of 14. Even then Emeril was a standout, according to his former teacher, Chef Edward Kerr. "He was very energetic, a go-getter. He performed his assignments, performed them very well. Even back then he had the signs of being an exceptional student," Kerr reports.[13] Another instructor, Paul Amaral, remembers, "He was a good leader."[14]

But he continued his musical pursuits out of school, playing at

dances, weddings, and parties with a Top 40 band. Ultimately, it was his musical skill that would be rewarded—with a full college scholarship to the New England Conservatory. In his parents' mind, it was an opportunity he could not afford to turn down.

But he did.

Bettering His Position

Faced with a free ride to college to study music or having to pay his way somewhere else, Emeril took the hard way, but the right way for him. He chose to pursue a culinary career instead.

Being able to make difficult choices is the sign of an excellent leader. Early on, Emeril demonstrated his ability to weigh his options, factor in the pros and cons of each path, and make a choice that he knew to be the right one, ignoring outside opinions or preferences. That is a rare skill in someone so young.

Researchers have found that many gifted students, as Emeril surely was in music and culinary arts, have a difficult time establishing priorities and setting long-term goals because they have several potential career paths, as Emeril also did. But the existence of a mentor, as the Portuguese bakers were for Emeril, had a maturing effect that helped Emeril "develop a vision of what he could become, find a sense of direction, and focus his efforts"—the sign of a successful mentoring relationship, according to Sandra Berger of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education.

Dr. Todd Finkle, who runs the entrepreneurship program at the University of Akron reports that, indeed, Emeril's career planning was remarkable. "Most kids have dreams to be something, but most don't follow through on what it is they want to do. For example, 70 percent of kids that get college degrees don't work in the field in which they got their degree.

"So, at such a young age to have already determined that he wanted to be a restaurateur is unusual," Finkle continues. "There

must have been some person who had a significant impact on him . . . a mentor." And, in fact, there was. There were several.

Throughout his career, Emeril has been faced with opportunities to be considered, evaluated, and acted on, but none so important as this first one, which led him on his journey.

Choices Count

Although he loved music, his heart was in cooking. So despite his parents' disapproval, in 1977 Emeril enrolled at Johnson & Wales University, in Providence, Rhode Island. "My mom freaked out," remembers Emeril in an A&E television interview. "I think I might have gotten chased around the neighborhood a few times. She just never thought that the cooking thing would stick."[15]

To earn his college tuition, Emeril worked evenings at the Venus de Milo restaurant in nearby Swansee, Massachusetts, where he started as a prep cook and worked his way up to chef de cuisine by graduation.[16]

Although serious about his studies, Emeril still had his own sense of how things should be done, observed one of his friends, Michael Medeiros. Says Medeiros, "He would try to create his own type of recipe. When it was all spelled out for him on paper exactly how much to put in, he would always try to add in an extra spice, or cut back on the water, or add more spices."[17] Even in college, Emeril would try to kick things up a notch. Despite always experimenting, always trying to put his own special twist on a dish, Emeril earned his associate's degree in culinary arts in 1978. Later, in 1990, he would be awarded an honorary doctorate from his alma mater for his contributions to the field of cooking.

The fact that Emeril was able at such a young age to make such a life choice—between two potential career paths he would likely have enjoyed—is unusual. Many teenagers might have been caught up in the prestige of a scholarship and the possibility of a flashy life

in a successful band. But Emeril was much more of a realist who knew what would make him happiest long-term—cooking. Such self-knowledge is rare—even rarer at the age of 17. Coupled with the reality that he would be letting his parents down by refusing the music scholarship, Emeril showed great courage and maturity by making the harder choice, the less popular choice. But it was the one he knew would ultimately be right for him.

It is clear that Emeril had a vision, even then, for what he wanted his life to be like. Or at least what he wanted it to include—cooking. Knowing what would be most fulfilling for him careerwise was a critical first step on his way to becoming a world-renowned chef.

Fortunately, his parents eventually calmed down. Emeril's father was the first to concede that his son's choice was probably a good one. He told him, "Listen, Emeril, if you think that this is something you love, which obviously you do, and if you think this is a way you can get a ticket out of here, then you go for it."[18] Getting out of Fall River typically meant getting a college degree and settling in Boston.

After two years in Providence, Emeril headed farther from home, into restaurants and hotels in the northeastern United States, as well as to France, where his real training as a chef began.

A Student of Food

Emeril's first position out of college was in the kitchen of the Sheraton Hotel in Philadelphia.[19] He then headed to New York City but had trouble getting a job because he lacked the right pedigree. "I went to New York City to cook but had trouble there because I was American," explains Emeril. "Americans weren't supposed to know anything about food. . . . At the time, in the mid-seventies, the good New York kitchens were run by French and German and Swiss cooks. It was difficult to get a job."[20]

His solution? Get firsthand training abroad. That led to a three-month apprenticeship in France—in Paris and Lyon—where he started at the bottom again.

Such a decision is classic Emeril. Undaunted by his inability to land a cooking job, he looked for ways to improve his skills, rather than return to his last job and take a step back. Maybe it is ego, maybe it is a well-developed problem-solving ability. Either way, Emeril always manages to find a way around a temporary setback or roadblock. He is always moving forward, and if he cannot move forward, he takes a lateral move in order to make a move up possible later. Unafraid of hard work, Emeril never limits his opportunities initially.

Lacking opportunities to learn in New York, Emeril created a new opportunity in Europe and vowed to make the most of it.

Taking His Education Abroad

His goal for his time in France was to learn everything possible about classic French cuisine, so revered in the top American restaurants. Although he could not change the fact that he was American, to appease the European chefs making the hiring decisions back in the United States he could beef up his resume with European training.

Unfortunately, the French approach to training was rough—rougher than in America. "You got laughed at, you got yelled at, you got treated wrong," describes Emeril. It is "a very European way of operating," he contends. Despite his culinary degree, his French bosses viewed him as inexperienced. "I was beat up and pushed around and shoved and made to do all the grunt work. But that was OK. That was part of it. I didn't speak the language. Didn't make any money,"[21] which was also okay, since he was there not to make a lot of money, but to learn.

The commonly held belief abroad, Emeril discovered, was that "Americans are stupid, we only know about cheeseburgers and

French fries and fried chicken, and we know nothing about real cuisine." Despite the negative stereotype, Emeril persevered, knocking on a lot of doors and getting "kicked in the you-know-what a lot of times," he says about his experience.[22] He took this in stride, recognizing that once he had European cooking experience under his belt, new opportunities would become available back home.

Being American was not his only disadvantage, however. His Portuguese heritage was also seen as a black mark. Explains Emeril in a *Playboy* interview, "In a lot of the fine-dining restaurants the dish washers were Portuguese; they were the inexpensive labor. So I had to cross that road also. 'Oh, you're just a Portugee? You're lucky to be shucking oysters. You should be washing pots.' Fine, I'll wash pots. I just sucked in every piece of knowledge I could," he says.[23]

Emeril never resented having to take on some of the kitchen's more menial tasks; no matter what the role he was expected to play or the unpleasant duty that was assigned him, he resolved to learn everything he could from that experience. Even if it was a better way to clean out a grease trap, Emeril would take away something useful.

His biggest breakthrough, however, was not about the food. It was about connecting with patrons. "The biggest lesson I learned was that it wasn't the foam of a sauce, or the aeration of ice cream, or the glossiness of a sauce," he says. "Those things were great. The lessons coming back for me, which changed the curve, was that we all put our pants on the same way."[24] Emeril says he learned more about "just being a person. . . . That it doesn't matter if you're American, Canadian, Swiss, French, German. . . . I mean, if you love what you do—whether you're an auto mechanic or you sew clothes or you cook—it's all about personal passion and love that really makes the thrust to the level that you want to get it to."[25] At that point, Emeril had decided that cooking was what he *had* to do, what he was meant to do.

Emeril says he also learned "that it's not just food. Food is an equal part of a little formula that encompasses ambiance, service, and a wine program. Food is only one of the four parts, and no one of those parts is greater than the other parts. In Europe, I saw the

attention paid to all these little things and I realized there was so much more."[26] This realization would shape how Emeril approached his career and his vision for his first restaurant.

On his return to the States, Emeril spent the next four years continuing his training, quickly moving up the career ladder as he demonstrated his cooking prowess.

Stepping-Stones

He first went to work for a small hotel company, Dunfey Hotels, which owned several properties in New England. There he met one of his mentors, a German chef named Andreas Soltner. "Dunfey ended up buying a hotel that later became one of the original Four Seasons Hotels. I went there as a sous-chef," Emeril explains, and "he became the director of food and beverage, and I ended up taking over the chef's job."[27] Under the tutelage of Andreas, Emeril was groomed to move up the ladder at the company.

Next, he moved to the Parker House in Boston—birthplace of the Boston cream pie, Boston scrod, and Parker House rolls—where he turned his focus to learning about wine and began keeping his own wine journal. "Every week, or whenever my 'Friday' was, I would go buy a bottle of wine for $10 or less. Smell it, taste it, make notes, read about it," says Emeril.[28] In addition to educating him about the many varieties of wine, this self-education process served to increase his enjoyment of them. His appetite for knowledge was unlimited it seemed, as he studied every aspect of what makes a fine meal—including the food, the wine, the atmosphere, and the service.

He then accepted a position working for Wolfgang Puck at the Berkshire Palace Hotel in New York City, where he learned how to work in a high-pressure environment. Although he says they are great friends now, back then "Wolf was very hard on me. I was no one. He was a perfectionist and very talented. But he worked me hard."[29] That perfectionist bent also rubbed off on Emeril.

While working in Manhattan, Emeril used top chefs, such as Alice

Waters, as his role models, studying Chez Panisse and An American Place, among others, and analyzing every facet of each restaurant's success. He made notes on everything from the flatware to the cleanliness of the bathrooms—anything that would impact a guest's dining experience. These notes would later serve as a guide for his own restaurant, which he was already planning, even in the early 1980s.

Mentors, or role models, have played a significant role in Emeril's life, from his mother to the Portuguese bakers in Fall River to Andreas Soltner, who taught him and positioned him for success, to Wolfgang Puck, who showed him what it took to run his own successful restaurant, to Ella Brennan, the major influence in his career. Those relationships were possible only because Emeril was always looking to learn from everyone he met. "Exposure to a mentor who is willing to share personal values, a particular interest, time, talents, and skills . . . can provide both mentor and student with encouragement, inspiration, new insights, and other personal rewards," reports Sandra Berger.[30]

The individuals involved in mentoring Emeril received the satisfaction and fulfillment of making an impact in a young person's life, of influencing what Emeril envisioned for himself. And even so early in his career it was becoming clear that he was exceptional.

Fortunately, Emeril was patient and did not rush to tackle a head chef position right out of Johnson & Wales, or even on his return from France. His focus on learning as much as he could about being a top chef is what prepared him to be one later.

Emeril took his time absorbing every bit of knowledge about the many facets of cooking and running a restaurant, never in such a hurry that he missed an experience, and never skipping ahead to a position he was not ready for. Confident that he would ultimately get there, Emeril appreciated the process of becoming a chef.

Emeril's Big Break

Emeril's next position was as head chef at the struggling Seasons restaurant in Portland, Maine, which was owned by Dunfey Hotels.

In short order, Emeril's cooking and management know-how turned the restaurant around. Impressing his superiors, he was offered a position at another Dunfey property on Cape Cod—Clancy's, where he was given the same marching orders.[31]

It was there, on Cape Cod, that all of Emeril's hard work would pay off. A restaurant recruiter on vacation happened to sample some of Emeril's cuisine and reported back to Ella and Dick Brennan of Commander's Palace in New Orleans that they should take a look at this innovative young chef. Commander's had recently lost its well-known executive chef, Paul Prudhomme, when he elected to open his own eatery. An interim chef was in place for the short term, but the Brennans knew they had to find a permanent replacement. The recruiter thought he had found him. But when approached about considering a job in New Orleans, Emeril was initially resistant, not wanting to leave New England.

Until he learned who was hiring.

By the same token, Brennan was skeptical that Emeril was right for Commander's. "He was young and, in my opinion, inexperienced, and here we had this restaurant that was 'going and blowing,' and doing very well, and oh my Lord, we're going to let this child come in here?"[32] There was plenty of competition for the opening, with many of America's finest chefs applying for the job. But something about Emeril stood out. So she called him to learn more.

Thus began the four-month job interview. "Every week we would talk," says Emeril. "She would say, 'Today I want to talk about what inspires you. Is bread inspiring you? Is a book inspiring you?' Ella is a genius with people. We would talk for a half hour, 40 minutes. The next Wednesday, the phone would ring: 'Today I want to talk about your philosophies about people. How do you motivate people?' "[33] During these phone calls, Emeril would learn about Brennan almost as much as she learned about him. The mutual respect grew.

After grilling him for about 16 weeks, Ella was ready to meet her chef candidate in person. Says Emeril, "The last week she called

three times. 'OK, I guess now I'm convinced you deserve a trip down here, but I want you to know, you have to give me a long weekend—not just Saturday and Sunday. I have to have Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, because my family is so big." The Brennan family is a well-known institution in New Orleans, revered for their culinary and management savvy. Many family members are involved with managing the restaurant.

And so began the interview that would change his life. Emeril spent all weekend with the Brennans, culminating in dinner with Ella and her brother, Dick. Recalls Ella, "My brother, Dick, and I sat down and had Sunday dinner with him. And I promise you, we weren't sitting there 15 or 20 minutes when my brother left the table. Next thing you know, I have a phone call—it's my brother calling from the next room, and he said, 'I think he's our man.' I said, 'I do, too.' "[34]

Emeril was hired.

His Own Style

"The enthusiasm, the integrity, the energy, it was all evident," claims Brennan, who is not at all surprised by Emeril's success following his stint at Commander's. "Emeril can do anything he wants to. He has great talent and great energy."[35]

Nonetheless, his first few months on the job as executive chef at Commander's Palace were not easy ones, as he tried to put his own imprint on the operations. So perhaps drawing on his own training in France, where standards are high and chefs volatile, Emeril's early days reflected those experiences. It was not pretty.

"I was a young 26," he says, although when he started at Commander's he was actually 24. "I came in with guns drawn. I lost a lot of people real quick because I was young, but I wasn't stupid. I wasn't going to put up with mediocrity. I began right out of the gate setting standards: No, we weren't going to use canned this. We weren't

going to use frozen that. We were going to cook from scratch. I brought in a young sous-chef from France."[36] Whatever it took to make Commander's even better was what Emeril was willing to do, and what he expected everyone around him to commit to. But some of them hadn't banked on the upheaval and change in leadership style that Emeril represented.

Fortunately, he realized that he had a lot to learn and saw that his tactics were not getting the results he wanted. So he turned to Ella Brennan, who became his mentor, for help in managing his staff.

"Miss Ella really influenced me to change my style," admits Emeril. "I had everything going for me, but I was harsh." Unintentionally, Emeril was modeling behavior he had witnessed in Europe, in the French restaurants where he had apprenticed. Instead of attempting to hide his frustrations or anger with his staff, his temper showed his inexperience.

"He did some dumb things," allows Brennan. "Every now and then the adrenaline would be pumping and he would do a little screaming and yelling. I had a yellow legal pad and I would write a note on it, 'You are too damn smart to be so damn dumb,' and I'd tear it off and hand it to him. And he'd look up at me like, 'Why did I do that?' "[37]

Today, however, he says he has "calmed way, way down." He explains, "I didn't know any better because that's how I was trained. She really sort of turned the world around for me—you know, you don't have to be an asshole to people. If you respect people and treat them the way you want to be treated and do it with intelligence and finesse, you could walk into the room wearing a T-shirt and they'll know you're the chef." (Perhaps to test his own clout, Emeril routinely wore T-shirts on the set of *The Essence of Emeril.*) Nowadays, instead of screaming and yelling in public, Emeril is more apt to take someone aside for a chat privately. "I have my sessions where I have to get my point across, but I never do it in public anymore. It's always closed-door."[38]

That does not mean he never has bad days, however. *Cigar Aficionado* reports that a fishmonger who repeatedly tried to sell Emeril fish that did not meet his standards found his entire bale of seafood thrown onto the sidewalk. And a customer who insisted that one of Emeril's waitstaff had misidentified that night's salmon suddenly found Emeril himself standing before him, "brandishing a 15-pound whole salmon, none-too-subtly asking the customer to please enlighten everyone."[39]

High standards were at the root of his temper. "I'm not saying I was a tough guy," explains Emeril. "I just, I would not compromise. I refused to compromise quality, respect, tradition. So it was like, 'Don't bring me bad fish,' 'cause if you brought me bad fish, I would throw it in the middle of the street. . . . I would fire seven or eight or nine cooks, doesn't matter, one shot. Whatever I had to do, whatever it took"[40]—that is what Emeril was ready for.

"Emeril was the type of boss that you gave your all, and if you didn't, you didn't fit into his world," says Eric Linquest, now vice president and general manager of Emeril's Homebase. "Giving your all" was the least he expected. Fortunately, he also gave plenty of recognition for the job well done.

His perception of the type of chef he wanted to become and the type of establishment he wanted to run was clear from the very beginning of his tenure at Commander's. Although his methods may have been rough at the outset, the prestige of working at Commander's and the excitement of witnessing a new chef take over may have convinced some employees to stay. Those who did certainly were privy to an important time in Emeril's development as a chef.

Rather than overhauling the menu at Commander's Palace, Emeril sought to update it, fusing Cajun and Creole cooking with some of the seasonings and techniques from his Portuguese background. Although guests will still find traditional dishes on the menu, such as Louisiana Seafood Courtbouillon filled with wild fish, shrimp, and oysters in a Cajun, or Acadian, sauce, there are more

sauceless dishes now, such as Pecan Crusted Gulf Fish, Muscadine and Chicory Coffee Lacquered Quail, and Grilled Veal Chop. Typical New Orleans desserts like Bread Pudding Soufflé are featured, in addition to Lemon Flan, Chocolate Fudge Sheba, or a less sugary cheese plate.

Not wanting to scare away Commander's loyal following with his arrival, Emeril tweaked a recipe here, modified another there, adding his own touch to a top-notch selection, making it even better.

A Valuable Lesson: Recognizing Opportunity

Most critics agree that Emeril the chef is quite talented—his numerous awards attest to that. But Emeril the businessman has received far less press. And, in fact, his abilities as a businessman have fueled that reputation as a chef.

As mentioned, even as a child, Emeril had a unique ability to sense important opportunities and pursue them. After all, how many 10-year-old children do you know who would have the willingness and confidence to persuade the owners of a bakery to hire them? Very few. Even when that job entailed working unconventional hours—overnight—Emeril negotiated an agreement with his mother that as long as he kept up his grades, he could continue his employment.

It may be that his music career, which had him touring with a local band as early as age eight, also fostered his foray into cooking. The experience of working with adults on a regular basis, hearing the applause and appreciation the audience provided, may have led him to understand that he was capable of much more—and gave him the self-confidence to ask for opportunities he wanted.

But again, when it came to choosing a career path, Emeril realized he could not do both music and cooking. So even when he was offered that full scholarship to study music, he recognized that was not an opportunity that was right for him, and he turned it down.

That in itself is unusual, but his decision also taught Emeril a lesson: that sometimes you need to turn down good opportunities in order to pursue great ones. As his career has flourished, Emeril has increasingly had to sort through the good opportunities in order to identify and pursue the extraordinary ones. Many restaurant deals have been rejected and licensing opportunities declined as Emeril has refined his vision for his company, clarifying what it will and will not be, just as he has defined his brand name.

But Emeril has had help in this regard, from his current staff and advisors, all the way back to his early influencers, his mentors.

Benefiting from Mentors

Emeril has had several mentors, most of whom evolved into that role, assuming it informally rather than officially. Either way, the impact of a mentor can be profound, says Rene Petrin, president of Management Mentors, Inc.[41]

The impact of a mentor is twofold, explains Petrin, helping the mentee learn both interpersonal skills and specific tasks and responsibilities. Through a close relationship with a mentor, individuals can build their self-confidence and foster a belief in themselves. "A mentor also provides a vision [the mentee] may not have thought of," says Petrin. The mentor might also share the vision the mentee has already developed. Like the Army motto, a mentor can help someone "be all they can be," says Petrin. Emeril clearly exudes the self-assurance and poise of someone who grew up surrounded by mentors who believed in him.

On top of building interpersonal abilities, a mentor can also teach his or her charge valuable skills, sharing the secrets of success that outsiders do not have access to, explains Petrin. "Mentees learn about the inner workings [of a company or industry] not usually available to the average person." The mentors who most likely did

the most to improve Emeril's insider knowledge were the Portuguese bakers and Ella Brennan, both of whom tutored him in the art of running a kitchen, but at different professional levels.

Although not the case with every mentor-mentee relationship, mentors can also move an individual's career along. "Even the most talented individual may not be the most successful," says Petrin, "but most [successful people] have support, such as from a mentor." By virtue of the mentor's access to powerful people, the mentee can be presented with opportunities that would have been out of reach. Such a mentor can be a career champion of sorts, providing encouragement and opening doors.

Interestingly, the most successful mentor relationships are built on chemistry, which is hard to predict and sometimes hard to find. And if chemistry becomes the top criterion for identifying a potential mentor, mentees may limit themselves too narrowly, says Petrin. Looking for compatibility, rather than chemistry, may be more realistic.

His mother was Emeril's first mentor, teaching him the basics of cooking, allowing him to gradually take on more responsibility as she felt he was able, and teaching him basic skills. Much of his family life revolved around cooking and sharing meals, which also served to communicate the value of the art.

His mother encouraged his interest in cooking, allowing him to work in the local bakery from a young age. Rather than stifling his interests, Hilda Lagasse was a role model. She also gave Emeril support and encouragement early on, which helped him become more self-confident and poised.

Building on his cooking experiences at home, Emeril expanded his baking repertoire with the help of the male bakers he worked with. Although at first they may have viewed him simply as a nice neighborhood boy, over time he demonstrated his true interest in their vocation. And they slowly tutored him in how to make various baked goods. His confidence and his knowledge base grew as he did, as he faced a serious choice between his two loves, music and cooking. In this, his mentors certainly played a significant role.

Having worked in a bakery for several years, Emeril's perception of what it took to run such a business was realistic. And he wanted that type of life—a life filled with cooking and food and enjoyment. The baking skills he had learned from his mentors there provided a strong foundation for a career, but their friendship and confidence in him may have actually meant more in the long run.

Once back from his training in France, his boss at Dunfey Hotels mentored him more in the management side of cooking: how to run a successful business. With his support, Emeril was promoted through the organization.

Learning from Culinary Leaders: Wolfgang Puck

Wolfgang Puck was also undoubtedly a role model for Emeril—someone he aspired to be like—and helped shape his concept of what a successful chef looked and acted like. By working Emeril to the bone, he also conveyed the importance of hard work—something Emeril was by now quite used to. But Puck demonstrated to Emeril that it was acceptable to expect that same level of energy and commitment from your staff.

Like Emeril, Wolfgang Puck began his culinary career early in life, inspired by his mother, Maria, who was a hotel chef in his native Austria. He began his formal culinary training at age 14, working in such famous three-star French restaurants as the Hotel de Paris in Monaco, Maxim's in Paris, and L'Oustau de Baumaniere in Provence.

But Puck left Europe in 1973 at the age of 24, taking a job as chef at La Tour in Indianapolis, and moving on two years later to Los Angeles, to become the chef and part owner of Ma Maison. As Emeril was to Commander's Palace and is now to his own nine restaurants, Puck was the star attraction. Melding French, Asian, and California techniques and ingredients, Puck created a signature style that is world-renowned.

In 1981, Puck published the first of his five cookbooks, *Modern*

French Cooking for the American Kitchen (Houghton-Mifflin), which led to the 1982 opening of Spago in West Hollywood, in partnership with his wife, designer Barbara Lazaroff. Immediately successful because of its casual, sophisticated style and cuisine, Spago won rave reviews.

Puck quickly became involved with branded products, commissioning well-known contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol and Richard Meier to design wine labels for the restaurant's own chardonnay and cabernet. However, he didn't really jump in with both feet until 1986, when he released his first video, *Spago Cooking with Wolfgang Puck.* That would be followed by other cookbooks and a line of frozen foods in 1987, through the Wolfgang Puck Food Company. In addition to his food company, Puck also formed WP Productions for the licensing and product-related marketing activities, including his line of cookware sold on the Home Shopping Network. Puck separates his other culinary activities from the restaurant side of his company, and Emeril did the same in his own.

While extending his brand beyond restaurants, Puck was simultaneously growing his restaurant empire. In response to customer demand, Puck opened other Spago branches in Beverly Hills, Palo Alto, Chicago, Las Vegas, and Maui, although the original Spago closed in 2000. Other restaurants include Postrio, Granita, Trattoria del Lupo, and Vert, as well as a chain of Wolfgang Puck Café casual dining restaurants and Wolfgang Puck Express fast-food-oriented eateries. He also moved his catering company, Wolfgang Puck Catering and Events to a larger complex in 2001, positioning it to handle Hollywood's largest special events, and established a base of operations in Chicago, where the company handles events for the Museum of Contemporary Art, among others.

In 2000, Puck developed his own TV show, *Wolfgang Puck,* which airs on the Food Network and won a Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Service Show in 2002. In 2003, later, Puck broke into print media when he originated his own syndicated column, Wolfgang

Puck's Kitchen, through Tribune Media Services in which he shares cooking tips and easy recipes.

Not satisfied to grow his own restaurants, Puck acquired other restaurants as well, including Cucina! Cucina! in the Pacific Northwest.

In many ways a role model for Emeril, whose revenues are dwarfed by Puck's sales of more than $375 million a year, Puck is a hardworking innovator who relies on partnerships and high standards of quality to maintain his brand image. Although he had not yet reached this level of success back in the early 1980s when Emeril and he crossed paths, the similarities in their business strategies suggests Puck surely made an impact.