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The leading trade publication for foodservice and event professionals

SWEET SURPRISE

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Meet Robin
Selden, ICA's
New President

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Paying It Forward



As **Robin Selden** becomes president of the International Caterers Association, she explains how the group enhanced her career and what others can gain from joining

When Robin Selden—managing partner and executive chef of Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning in Stamford, Conn.—joined the International Caterers Association (ICA), “it changed my entire career,” she says.

Robin recently took over as president of the ICA, after serving as a board member and on the ICA’s Culinary Council, and she praises the association for the benefits it bestows on its members. “What I love is that it’s a noncompetitive networking opportunity that creates invaluable forums for sharing and learning from fellow caterers who understand this crazy, amazing business that we all love so much!” she says.

It’s been a busy year for Robin, who in addition to taking over the ICA reins recently won the Chef of the Year CATIE award from the ICA. Marcia Selden Catering—founded nearly 40 years ago by Selden’s mother—was in the running for the CATIE Caterer of the Year award, and last year it was the first catering company ever inducted into the Connecticut Restaurant Association’s Hall of Fame.

Not bad for a business that Marcia Selden started out of her kitchen, catering parties for friends who’d recommend her to their friends, until eventually she was booking 700-guest galas at Sotheby’s. “She grew the business all through word-of-mouth,” says Robin, who grew up helping out in her mother’s business with her brother, Jeffrey, who’s now



Robin Selden (top left) is executive chef and managing partner of Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning. Examples of the company’s cuisine include (clockwise from top right) parmesan frico with watermelon carpaccio and mango chutney; beet checkerboard salad, with roasted beets, mache, crumbled chevre, toasted pecans and baby heirloom tomatoes with a lemon truffle vinaigrette; and grilled salmon with an asparagus ribbon and roasted tomato salad.



Above, clockwise from top: Chocolate ribbon dessert with a trio of sorbets and fresh fruit confetti; Peking duck and Mandarin pancake hors d'oeuvre with shiitake mushrooms and hoisin sauce; a tablescape from a Marcia Selden wedding. Opposite, top: Soba noodle bundle with caviar, filled with lemon crème fraîche. Opposite, bottom: An amuse-bouche of chilled tarragon pea soup, topped with crispy shallots.

managing partner at the company. "She was originally an art major, and her love of cooking and her creative eye was what was so special and what still is so special."

Robin and Jeffrey both moved to New York City as young adults and embarked on their own careers—Robin in advertising and design, and Jeffrey overseeing catering at luxury hotels—before returning to Connecticut to help Marcia take the business to the next level. Robin enhanced her culinary skills by taking classes, "but for the most part, I learned by doing," she says. Today, as executive chef, she oversees a team of 12 full-time chefs at the Stamford headquarters, which counts 26 full-time employees and is about to expand its commissary space. The company also runs a private dining room for an 80-employee hedge fund in Greenwich, Conn., and recently opened an office and small venue space in New York on West 38th Street, which it shares with famed pastry chef Ron Ben-Israel.

"We can very proudly do our tastings there and use it to do events," says Robin. "We've done a couple of small weddings there and a lot of cocktail parties. It's a really cool space, and also nice to be aligned with someone who has name recognition."

Catering Magazine recently caught up with Robin to find out her plans for the ICA and her insights on the catering industry.

CM: How did you get involved with the ICA?

SELDEN: Years ago I met a couple of members at a trade show. I didn't know what it was, and as they started sharing, I thought, "These guys are competitors, but they're willing to offer their knowledge." So I joined, and it's benefited our entire team.

CM: What are some examples of how the ICA has benefited your company?

SELDEN: There's a private Facebook page that's a roundtable. For example, I had a client who wanted traditional grits, and I posted, "What do you do to make your grits really amazing?" Caterers are willing to share their recipes. It's a great resource and a great way to learn from other specialists.



I've used it as a networking resource, and I've made some of the best friends that I have through them. We've done a lot of destination events—most recently, this past summer, a million-dollar wedding in Martha's Vineyard [Mass.], and I needed to have 50 staff come on an island that is at high season. So I called members of ICA, and I had three chefs from Boston who work at very high-end catering companies come join our team, as well as waiters that are ICA members. That kind of a benefit is amazing. Right now we have approximately 500 caterer members. That doesn't include vendors.

They also have monthly webinars—topics that are happening right now that we need to talk about, whether it's insurance issues, new trends, good practices... you name it, we've done them. I did one that was on hiring, inspiring and retaining your staff. One thing I'm really proud of is how our team at Marcia Selden Catering is a family. They've been with us for a long time, and I'm happy to share with people how to create that environment.





CM: What are your plans as president of the ICA?

SELDEN: The ICA has an arm called the Culinary Council, which I joined when I started with them. It's a group of chefs who are seriously passionate about what they do. I want to help them to grow that and bring catering chefs up to the forefront, because I feel like—especially now with the Food Network—you don't hear about catering chefs. We're not considered the cool, sexy chefs like the ones at restaurants are. I want to help the ICA grow and put [catering chefs] at the forefront. We are innovators.

I also strongly believe in the education factor, and helping caterers in the business grow and be successful. I saw my mother grow this business out

Clockwise from top right: An example of "dinner by the bite"—pan-seared cod with wilted spinach and roasted tomatoes; gooseberries dipped in white chocolate; heirloom tomato "orgy," with herbed ricotta cheese.

of her home kitchen and the growing pains she went through to build a multimillion-dollar business out of a love of cooking. A lot of caterers do that.

CM: What do you like best about your job, and what do you consider your biggest challenge?

SELDEN: The ability to be creative is what's exciting to me. I'm never bored because every week is different, every party is different, every client is different. We're customizing and designing things we've never needed before to create special experiences for each and every client. We want to create a really luxurious restaurant experience, particularly for weddings. We take the time to really get to know couples and make it special, not "pick A, B or C." We're very fortunate, being in the New York metro area, that the people we cater to travel all over the world, eat in the best restaurants and expect that kind of experience. We get to give it to them.

The creativity and keeping up with that is also the biggest challenge. Once a client works with us and sees what we're all about, when they call [again] I need to show them a totally different experience. It's not like seasonally we have these menus; it's always changing. It's the biggest challenge, but it's the most fun and one of the things I love most.

I'm also so proud of the people I work with and the team we have here. They take

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Pan-seared rack of veal with forest mushrooms and Yukon potato rösti (above left); and deconstructed lemon meringue tart.

so much ownership in what they do. We do quarterly training with our staff, everything from, "Today we're going to set a table," and then we go around and critique it, to, "Now let's go around and everyone has to open a bottle of wine." It can be something as simple as that, but it sets us apart from the typical caterer. Those details are really important to us. We do the same with our culinary team; we take pictures of each plate and attach it to menus, so each chef knows what the garnish is and what the plate is supposed to look like. Some chefs don't work with us full-time, so I need to ensure that what the client saw at the tasting is exactly what the client is going to get. It's getting everyone to understand why we have these standards and why they're important.

CM: What do you think the state of the catering industry is today?

SELDEN: What I've heard from different friends is mixed reviews. In some of the markets, [business is] down, and they're looking for creative ways to keep themselves afloat. Seven years ago my mother said, "What are we going to do in case business drops off?" That's when we created a corporate delivery business, Gourmet to Go, on our website. It has separated us from other caterers in the area, and it's a really creative way for us to get into companies. Our sales team may show up at a company, talk to the first point of contact and say, "How many assistants do you have?" And then they'll say, "Next Wednesday we're going to

deliver lunch; we want to introduce you to Gourmet to Go." We know the assistants are the ones ordering lunch, so right off the bat we've walked in the door and gained a client.

With the ICA, you can share ideas of what you've done in the past. So I can share that with people who may be struggling in middle America and say, "This was helpful to us. This was an affordable way to show how special our company is, and it worked for us."

CM: How do you plan to continue to grow Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning?

SELDEN: I think it's just organically growing, keeping up with the demand of business we have. We're bringing in another sales person. Through the years we've never had a full-time accountant, and now we have two, and a full-time marketing manager, who's here every day. When I started 18 years ago, we didn't even have a dishwasher; I did dishes when I was done cooking. But obviously as the business grows, so does what we need. I don't think we ever want to build into a large commercial business, because I never want to lose having our hands in everything. You can't possibly have what we have if you're too big. ●



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Clockwise from far left: The International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York attracted more than 18,100 attendees; more than 500 companies exhibited, including Eastern Tabletop; Robin (far left) and Jeffrey Selden from Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning, pictured with Catering Magazine editor Sara Webber, presented an educational session in the catering track; three photos from the U.S. Pastry Competition, won by Justin Fry of Norman Love Confections in Miami (his sculpture is top right).

ATTENDANCE UP AT SUCCESSFUL NEW YORK RESTAURANT SHOW

The International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York, which took place March 6-8 at the Javits Center in New York, grew in attendance from last year's show by about 4%. More than 18,100 industry professionals attended the show, which featured more than 500 exhibiting companies.

Highlights of the show included Pitch the Press, in which 20 exhibitors were chosen to pitch their new product or service to a panel of media judges, which included *Catering Magazine*. The winner was Farms2Tables (farms2tables.com), which developed an app that allows local buyers to purchase products from a wide variety of New York farms through one point of purchase and have the products delivered. Runner-up was HEAT Chef Apparel (heatchefapparel.com), maker of chefs' coats that have a moisture-activated cooling liner.

The show also featured the Culinary Demonstration Theater, where awards were presented to acclaimed restaurateur Drew Nieporent and celebrity chef Sara Moulton; and where Manjit Manohar from The Pierre Hotel in New York won the Rapid Fire Challenge appetizer face-off. Attendees could try more than 20 craft beverages in the Pub, while 75 companies provided samples of new foods in the Food Trends Experience. Justin Fry from Norman Love Confections in Miami won the Pastry Chef of the Year title in Paris Gourmet's U.S. Pastry Competition. In addition, more than 40 educational sessions were available for attendees, including a catering

track sponsored by *Catering Magazine*. Produced and managed by Urban Expositions, and sponsored by the New York State Restaurant Association, the 2017 International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York will be held March 5-7, 2017. For more information, visit thefoodshows.com.

