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BY RICHARD TAMBORRINO

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Chef of the Year

Executive Chef **Bill Ryan** revives resort with his vision and his never-say-die attitude.

William Ryan, executive chef at Hawks Cay Resort, was named “Chef of the Year” by the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) during the organization’s Hospitality Stars of the Industry Gala in 2019. And while that accomplishment is noteworthy enough, it’s what he’s done with food and revitalizing the resort that’s just as important.

Ryan has taken the reigns of all the resort restaurants and established a culture of excellence. His leadership, vision and service are just plain exemplary.

“No one is more deserving of the Chef of the Year award than Chef Ryan,” said Hawks Cay Resort Vice President and Managing Director Sheldon Suga. “From successfully building a team from the ground up for our Angler & Ale restaurant to reimagining all six of our culinary outlets after Hurricane Irma, Chef Ryan has set the standard for what we look for in a crew member and we’re honored to have him as a part of the Hawks Cay community.”

Ryan has traveled far and wide, starting with

being born and raised in Akron, Ohio, and then making stops in Detroit, Buffalo and New Jersey early on. “My father worked for J.C. Penney and his job was to travel to different stores to help them improve sales, so we moved a lot,” said Ryan.

His first job in the food industry was at 16, doing food prep at a Greek restaurant. “I cooked chicken livers with onions, prepped the salad bar and put in 50 hours a week while attending school. I worked until 11:00 PM most nights and loved every minute of it,” he recalled.

He particularly loved “the flames on the stove on busy nights” as well as the excitement and chaos on those nights when the kitchen was humming. “It was like the floor of the N.Y. Stock Exchange” in terms of the frenetic pace, “but everyone knew what to do to make it work,” he said.



LEFT: The elegance of 61 Prime at Hawks Cay Resort is largely due to the vision and commitment of Chef Bill Ryan.

OPPOSITE PAGE: With over 30 years in cooking and restaurant management, Chef Bill Ryan has taken the reigns of all the Hawks Cay restaurants and established a culture of excellence.





LEFT: The redesigned dining room at 61 Prime, which used to be Alma's, is exquisite in every sense of the word and a true upscale dining experience in the Middle Keys.

BELOW: A signature dish at 61 Prime is Wagu Beef Carpaccio, paper thin beef with capers, microgreens, radish and mustard aioli, enhanced flavor courtesy of a smoking gun.

BOTTOM: Attention to detail and a passion for delivering finely prepared dishes to his patrons is what drives Chef Bill Ryan.



After high school he attended the New England Culinary Institute and made his way to line cook at a French restaurant called Pauline's. Eventually he worked his way up to chef. He won the first of many awards while there, winning the Silver medal in an American Culinary Federation competition. Winning awards became a theme for him and exemplified his creative and competitive spirit.

"That competitive spirit fuels my cooking," says Ryan.

At one of his stops while at The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa, S.C., he attended the Bill Clinton Global initiative in New York City for a weeklong annual event and was able to work with and for an amazing array of food professionals.

But it was his time in St. Lucia in the West Indies that Ryan really expanded and perfected his cooking skills. There, all the food that was served had to be sourced from the island, allowing him the opportunity to work with fresh fish, indigenous fruits and vegetables.

While there, he won the very prestigious and rigorous Wine Spectator Award of Excellence, which propelled him to make his way to the Florida Keys.

At Hawks Cay, he oversees six restaurants as executive chef, with one banquet chef and two restaurant chefs reporting to him. He spends most of his time at the new Sixty-One Prime restaurant at the resort, which was called Alma before Hurricane Irma did extensive damage to the resort. It took more than a year for Sixty-One Prime to open because of all the work that needed to go into the design, menu development and hiring that took place after the storm.

When asked why the name Sixty-One Prime, Ryan smiled and said, "Well, it's located at MM 61, so it seemed appropriate."

Ryan is very proud of the restaurant's beef, which is sourced from Clewiston on the southwest coast of Florida. He's particularly proud of the Wagu beef he procures from the McCoy Ranch in Fort McCoy, Marion county.

Local fish is also on the menu, like cobia, yellowtail snapper and swordfish. He is zoned in on 'micro-greens', a combination of herbs, flowers, petals and greens that he gets from Odessa, FL.

Today, some of Sixty-One Prime's signature dishes include Wagu Beef Carpaccio, which



A true leader, **Bill Ryan mentors** an average of 10 international interns every year who train with him to develop their own culinary skills.



ABOVE: Chef Bill Ryan is introducing simply sophisticated dishes throughout the resort property.

RIGHT: Chef Bill Ryan, flanked by sauté station chef Don Glidden (left) and grill master Gary James, from St Lucia, (right) form a pretty mighty team in the 61 Prime kitchen.

BELOW: It can get pretty hot in the kitchen, but Chef Bill Ryan has enjoyed the chaos and action there since he first started in the food business.

OPPOSITE PAGE: This mouthwatering Tomahawk steak is one of the signature dishes at 61 Prime.





is paper thin beef with capers, microgreens, radish and mustard aioli. He uses a smoking gun to add to the flavor. He says octopus is very popular too, but he really grabbed our attention when describing his Toy Box Tomato Salad, which is made with mozzarella balls. "We also make a mozzarella ice cream" he revealed.

Ryan lives on Duck Key with his wife of 30 years. She is involved with food and beverage and has been by his side literally and figuratively for that entire time, having often worked together at the same properties.

It's clear that Executive Chef William Ryan's more than 30 years of vast culinary experience in various parts of the world has served him and his employers well. A true leader, Ryan mentors an average of ten international interns every year who train with him to develop their own culinary skills. Several of those young interns have gone on to work for him directly.

"It is a tremendous honor to be named the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association's Chef of the Year," said Chef Ryan. "This award is a true testament to my commitment to delivering culinary excellence and I could not have accomplished this without my crew at Hawks Cay." 🍷