RYAN BENDER – RISING STAR AWARD

Well Worth the Trip

The path leading to recognition for all Ryan Bender has brought to club management included a cross-country journey and a move from an oil field to the kitchen.

While many club managers have interesting back stories for what led them into the field, few can match the combination of distance traveled and professional pivoting that lies behind Ryan Bender's Rising Star recognition as food & beverage director of The Country Club of Virginia (CCV) in Richmond, Va.

Bender was raised in Alaska, in a family where multiple generations had pursued careers as engineers and accountants. With his natural inclination for numbers—"Math was in my gene pool"—Bender also enrolled in college to study engineering.

"Three things then happened to make me learn pretty quickly that I might want to do something else," Bender says. "I took a cooking class as an elective, got a job as a short-order cook in a local bingo hall, and moved in with a new roommate who had a once-a-week tradition of randomly turning to a page in "The Joy of Cooking" to learn how to make a new dish, so I joined him."

The collective joy he derived from those experiences prompted Bender to shift his educational direction to pursue an associate's degree in culinary arts and a bachelor's in hospitality management at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.. He then

In His Own Words: Ryan Bender's Keys to Excellence in Club Management

"We have four primary obligations for our staffs: make sure they understand the targets, teach them anything we are able to, get them the resources they need, and help to remove the obstacles in their way."

"The minimum expectation should be to impress people, not just having them be satisfied."

"Outstanding member service is usually the result of some element of attentiveness, whether it's being available for them, anticipating a need or doing something 'above and beyond.' None of these things are possible without the time to do them. Managers have the responsibility to set their teams up for success, and just finding ways to take one more step out of a process can make a big difference."

got his first exposure to working in clubs through a temporary service, and while the pay paled greatly in comparison to work he had done on an oil field in Prudhoe Bay in the Arctic Circle as a multi-year summer job, Bender was undeterred and set a new course for his career that, not surprisingly, also focused on finding a much warmer working climate in Florida.

Valuable Lessons

That opportunity came initially with Woodfield Country Club in Boca Raton, Fla., where Bender started as a food-and-beverage supervisor in 2011. He credits Woodfield's general manager, Eben Molloy, with providing a valuable lesson by stressing the importance of being results-oriented and paying attention to details.

Bender spent seven enjoyable years at Woodfield, earning a promotion to food & beverage director. While happy with his role there, when a chance to go to The Country Club of Virginia arose in 2018, he felt ready and eager to take on the challenges that would be presented by directing F&B for the club's nearly 8,000 members and its wide range of dining operations that are spread over two very distinct campuses.

He also saw an opportunity to learn more about leadership and thinking strategically from CCV General Manager Phil Kiester, an Excellence in Club Management® (ECM) honoree in 2020 and CMAA Fellow, and to work with assistant general manager Anne Stryhn, who earned Rising Star recognition in 2017.

While Bender would have the same title at CCV that he had at Woodfield, his duties and contributions to the club's success would quickly extend well beyond the food-and-beverage realm. In addition to directing impressive increases over six years in F&B revenues (77%), meals served (59%) and the overall growth of the department to over $11 million with 16 dining venues, 250 employees and 32 managers and supervisors, Bender has served as management's primary capital-planning liaison to the CCV board and club committees in a number of settings. In that role he developed a dynamic capital project modeling tool to compare components of the club's four distinct master plans, conduct "what if" modeling and make ROI cost-allocation decisions. He is currently leading the planning and implementation of a major renovation and expansion project for CCV's James River clubhouse (see rendering below).

"What makes a rising star *the* Rising Star is demonstration of executive skills, [and] Ryan's performance as an executive at CCV is what makes him stand out," Kiester wrote in nominating Bender for ECM recognition. He then delineated how Bender has displayed executive skills and qualities in 10 areas: change agent, communications champion, culture advocate, service ambassador, financial results expert, relationship and network building, strategist, talent and team developer, technology enabler and thought leader (see "Ideas and Achievements" box, pg. 28, for specifics of Bender's accomplishments in several of these realms).

His achievements as a thought leader also speak to how Bender's contributions to the advancement of excellence in club management extend well beyond the CCV properties. He has developed break-even and labor-cost analysis programs that he teaches at the Business Management Institute program for the Club Management Association of America and the Management Development Programme for the Club Management Association of Europe. Partnering with Ben Lorenzen of Champions Run in Omaha,

Neb., Bender has also developed and expanded the "Innovation Club" newsletter-sharing program, to help spread details about good and proven ideas for improving operations and enhancing member experiences to a network that now includes over 160 clubs from several countries.

The overriding objective for any initiative he leads, Bender says, is to "ultimately translate any strategic decision or insight into action" and align everyone in pursuit of clear and common objectives. "I'm a big believer that at the end of the day you attain results by getting everyone in a unit or organization to work for an end goal," he says. "Growing your perspectives, making new observations and coming to important conclusions lose their value if they don't ultimately translate into something experienced by the end user.

"Sometimes it may seem that it's hard to get everyone to be action- and results-oriented. But I've found that investing in training and development is its own form of hospitality. The team benefits by growing and being even more prepared to make the most of their own careers, and the members benefit by getting a better experience." ■

Ideas & Achievements

Implemented at The Country Club of Virginia through Ryan Bender's Leadership and Contributions

■ Directed the launch in 2018 of the Cool Springs Café (see photo, below), a fast-casual dining venue that has become one of the club industry's biggest F&B success stories. Originally budgeted for an estimated $700,000 in annual sales, the restaurant gained immediate popularity and has since grown to generate $2.3 million a year, serving 240,000 individual items and 121,000 full meal equivalents and expanding to a seven-day operation.

"It's a place for a good meal that's not about dining; it's about eating," Bender says. "We built it for speed and got it right over time; it's still growing and we can still make it better."

■ Designed, purchased and rolled out Mobile Food Trolley and developed a new limited-service food offering at CCV's newly constructed Golf Performance Center in 2021. Designed and constructed a 100-seat outdoor a la carte dining terrace at the James River clubhouse in 2022.

■ Spearheaded a quick and nimble response to COVID restrictions, including pop-up events that led to regular sales of hundreds of pizzas and orders of fried chicken, home-delivery meal service from one of the club's restaurant venues, a new slate of more than 10 "CCV Saves Christmas" events and a Friday drive-through offer for free coffee and complimentary snacks that has since become a December tradition. The response created a sustained innovation mindset for CCV's F&B program that evolved into a post-COVID strategy of more varied offerings such as mobile ordering, enhanced carryout for holidays and continued expansion of pop-ups and other events. Christmas takeout sales now exceed $60,000.

■ When emergency repairs triggered a loss of the kitchen, a "Sushi Takeover" concept was developed with a menu that did not require the use of typical a la carte cooking equipment. It has since evolved into a specialty dining series.

■ Overhauled F&B offerings for player and family dining and clubhouse access pass holders during CCV's hosting of the PGA Tour Champions Dominion Energy Charity Classic. The superior F&B offerings contributed to CCV winning Player's Choice and President's awards for the tournament.

■ Developed J-1 recruitment program in 2019 that started with four students in the culinary deparment and has since expanded to 24 students in both culinary and service. Developed Manager in Training program to include international managers and a J-1 program for both back- and front-of-house students.

■ CCV has earned recognition in the large organization category as one of the Top Workplaces in Richmond for four consecutive years, based on employee survey results, and also received a speclal Management Award.

■ Generated 100th percentile member satisfaction scores for three of CCV's dining areas in the 2022 Member Satisfaction Survey.