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Interview with Rodney Mowery

Rodney Mowery

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Accession number: ELFS-LKS-F111300.A
Researcher's name: Leah Sokolofski
Event: Interview with Rodney Mowery, Executive Chef
Place: Kenyon Inn Restaurant, Gambier OH 43022
Co-workers present: none

The Kenyon Inn is a hotel in Gambier, Ohio; there is a small restaurant inside called the Kenyon Inn Restaurant. I was interested in learning more about the Restaurant and its connection to local food systems. When I first contacted the Executive Chef, Rodney Mowery on the telephone, he seemed willing to do an interview. We set up a time and date. I arrived for the interview at the set time, but he was out doing an errand. I sat in the hotel lobby for a while making observations and looking at the menu. I noticed that the Restaurant serves only two meals: lunch and dinner. The lunch menu seemed fairly upscale, but not unusual. I looked at a copy of the dinner menu and noticed a change. The dinner menu had more unusual dishes. A local bison entree was served. Sushi and other Asian dishes were on the menu. The menu included: appetizers, salads, soups, entrees, desserts, and a wine list. The menu noted that the Executive chef, Rodney Mowery had coded the wines and entrees so that customers could coordinate their dish with the appropriate wine selection. I finished looking at the menu and glanced into the dining room. The dining room is off of the main lobby of the hotel. It is a single room with a large, elegant bar at one end. The room has French doors that open up to more seating on a patio outside. The tables had white tablecloths and fancy, folded napkins. Classical music was playing in the restaurant and in the hotel lobby as well. The atmosphere of the restaurant was elegant and upscale, yet classic. There was one waitress serving the few guests in the restaurant; she was wearing a button-down white shirt, black slacks and a white apron. I noticed that the waitress kept leaving the dining room to come up to the hotel's front desk. I realized that the front desk handled all the checks and money. There is not a separate cashier within the Restaurant's dining room. After a while, I left a note for Mr. Mowery and left the Kenyon Inn. I got in touch with Mr. Mowery later and we tried to connect again. Our efforts failed until two weeks later.

I walked into the Kenyon Inn a little bit hurriedly. After two weeks of trying to meet with Rodney Mowery to interview him, I was thrilled to finally get in touch. I surely did not want to miss him once again. I walked into the reception area and asked to see Mr. Mowery. He came into the reception area after a few minutes. I noticed that he had a presence of importance about him. He is in his late twenties or early thirties. A white male, with dark hair. He was wearing a white chef's coat that was embroidered with the "Kenyon Inn Restaurant." He was wearing black chef's pants and black clogs. He looked very professional. I explained what I was doing, a little bit about my class and the purpose of the interview. I also asked if it was okay that I record the interview. I informed him that it was so I could better pay attention to the interview, and not be worrying about remembering the information correctly. I mentioned that I would ask him to sign a Release Form afterwards. He seemed comfortable with all of that and eager to do the interview. I thought about suggesting moving to a different location. We were sitting in the hotel lobby and there was a bit of distracting noise coming from the dining

room. Though Mr. Mowery seemed comfortable and since there were few people in the hotel, I decided to not make the suggestion and stay in the lobby. So, I turned on the tape recorder and we began the interview.

I asked about three of the questions I had planned on asking. We started by talking about his job as the Executive chef and what that entails. From there we discussed the catering business and how that relates to the business in the dining room. Mr. Mowery talked about his past jobs, and the recognition he has brought to the Kenyon Inn Restaurant, coming from the Columbus area. I asked about the menu and changes in the menu. He talked about the availability of different foods, particularly the specialty foods he works with. He talked about his distributor and the local foods he gets (bison, and produce sporadically). I brought up consumers' responses to local foods, though Mr. Mowery seemed to feel that it did not really matter whether the food was local or not. He considered one of people's motivations to go out to eat, so that they do not have to think about where the food comes from. I asked about the bison example and why people were interested in it. Again, he seemed to feel that the novelty of the food item was more of a draw than where it came from. I brought up food systems and asked how we might be able to strengthen them. From his perspective, the farmers cannot really produce the quantities he needs to buy, for a reasonable price. It is more cost efficient for him to buy through a distributor. He talked about his father, who farms a variety of produce, as opposed to farmers elsewhere who produce a lot of one crop. Although Mr. Mowery respects the small-scale farmer, it is still better for the Restaurant to go through the distributor who buys from the specialized farmers. I asked about seasonal changes and the regularity of business in the dining room. He felt it was pretty regular, and talked about the upper-middle class community members that frequent the Restaurant.

I brought up my understanding of the College's recent acquisition of the Kenyon Inn and the Restaurant. Mr. Mowery asked me not to make public knowledge of that and I agreed. I should have apologized and changed the subject, but he began to talk a little more in-depth about the process. In trying to sum up and move on, I made a mistake a mistake in using the word "threat." He sort of jumped on that asking why he might feel threatened. I unsuccessfully tried to restate my question, but fortunately the topic found closure with a bit of uncomfortable laughter. The conversation was diverted to how well the restaurant is doing and to some of the goals Mr. Mowery has, including a bi-monthly gourmet food club run through the Restaurant. I asked more about the regulars that come in, and he elaborated a bit more on the people in Knox County that the Kenyon Inn Restaurant really caters to. I began to wrap up the interview, when we were interrupted by a woman behind the front desk, who needed to talk to Mr. Mowery. When he returned, he again requested that I not discuss the Kenyon Inn being connected to the College. I tried to assure him that I would not, and offered that he could write that into the interview release form. He mentioned that in the past, other chefs have been portrayed poorly in interviews, and asked that I speak kindly of his Restaurant. He summarized what he tries to accomplish at the Restaurant, for me. I thanked him for his time and the interview wound up.

Overall, Mr. Mowery seemed eager and enthusiastic to talk with me. He seemed to trust me. I tried to ask as many follow-up questions as I could. Those seemed to go pretty well. I feel I got a good amount of information. The glitch in the interview was a question I asked regarding the College. It seemed to go okay in the end, though my

prompting in attempt to sidestep the question resulted in an uncomfortable moment. However, I think the interview went well in general. I realized that Mr. Mowery, being in a business was concerned with his reputation. Clearly a business's reputation plays an important role in interviews or any interaction with such a project.

After the interview, we chatted a little about things in the community. He seemed interested in talking more with me. We talked about Chicago and culinary interests, restaurants and such. I was interested to learn that he grew up in Knox County and that his father is a farmer. I asked where he went to culinary school and was surprised to learn that he had never attended such a school. He learned what he knows through experience, reading books, and keeping up with local trends. We also talked a little about local news: the disappearance of a Kenyon student and the more recent disappearance of an Otterbein student. After five to ten minutes of small talk, he had to get back to work and I left. Overall, it was a positive experience. Although it was not a perfect interview, it was an interview. I was able to ask questions and to record the conversation.