

## Seasoned Chef Still Perfecting His Recipe for Success

As the *sous* chef at a five-star hotel in Florida, Jeremy Emmerson once faced a situation so terrifying that he briefly imagined abandoning the career he loved. What pushed this accomplished man to the edge? He was asked, without warning, to read aloud during a meeting of the hotel's 30-plus department heads.

Jeremy has dyslexia. And he did what many dyslexic adults do in such situations, no matter how confident they usually are — he panicked. “I was more fearful than I was when I was a kid,” Jeremy recalls, “because I had a lot more on the table at that point. I considered just flat out saying, ‘I’m sorry; I can’t do this. I don’t want to read aloud.’” Fortunately, his resourcefulness saved the day, or, as he puts it: “I just did my usual — somehow managed to bluff my way through it.”

By any standard, Jeremy is highly successful. Executive chef at San Francisco's Four Seasons Hotel since 2003, he manages a staff of 50 people who provide \$11 million in food services a year. At a single catered event, he and his team can feed as many as 1,000 people! He came to San Francisco after working at Four Seasons-affiliated hotels in London, Chicago, and Florida. In addition to his “day job,” he regularly donates his talents to community activities, and works on the web-based magazine [GlobalChefs.com](#), which he founded.

### Early challenges and inspirations

Raised in England in the 1970s and '80s, Jeremy spent his elementary and secondary school years struggling to learn, not aware that he had a learning disability. Picking up on cues from the adults around him, he assumed that he must be lazy or stupid. Dyslexia often runs in families, and both of Jeremy's brothers are dyslexic. He and his older brother, Julian, were out of high school when their little brother, Jamie, who is 11 years younger than Jeremy, was identified with dyslexia. That's when the older siblings realized they also had the disorder. By then, Julian had been “asked to leave school” and was on to bigger and better things. He's now a software engineer for Intel, and a self-taught mechanic and craftsman. And Jeremy, having decided that academics were definitely not for him, had begun his training as a chef.

Jeremy's career path was set partly by chance and partly by choice. At age 13, when his best friend announced at a barbecue that he was going to become a chef, Jeremy immediately latched on to the idea: “I thought, ‘What am I going to do with my life?’ It wasn't going to be academics. And I wasn't going to work on the factory floor; I'd worked for my dad on weekends in his factory and it was just sinfully boring. Over the next three years before I graduated from high school, the chef idea sounded better and better — cooking was also becoming a little more hip at that time.”

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#### Tidbits

##### Who inspires you?

- [Jamie Oliver](#) (Britain's “Naked Chef”) because he was successful when he was young and has put that privilege to great use
- My dad, for his determination — he never, never gave up
- People who have overcome adversity
- People who are true to themselves
- People who are happy and know how to have fun

##### Career in sight

Once Jeremy started planning for life beyond high school, his focus and energy took a turn for the better. Instead of just “scraping by,” he worked harder at his academic subjects, researched local culinary schools, and ultimately applied to Westminster Catering College in London. He'd been warned that admission to the catering college was very competitive. But he got an interview, and it went so well that they offered him admission on the spot.

From that point, success began to build on success. In the six months between high school graduation and entering the catering college, he got a job at a “really good” restaurant near his family's home. For the first time in his life, his “teachers” were excited about his goals and happy to teach him all aspects of their work. “I was 16 years old and really full of myself,” Jeremy says. “And the guys that worked at the restaurant thought it was fun to have someone around who was so young and wanted to be a chef. They taught me a lot in those six months — I worked as a

waiter, in washing up, and sometimes in the kitchen.”

That introduction laid the groundwork for Jeremy to excel at college — and to achieve a level of self-confidence he hadn’t experienced before. “Because of the restaurant experience,” Jeremy recalls, “when I went to cooking school, it wasn’t foreign; I knew exactly what was going on. I did really well that first year, and that’s where I found my confidence. I felt a little bit special — a wee bit cheeky.”

Tidbits

#### **What’s your favorite cooking magazine?**

Ones from the UK because I don’t get to see them too often: *Food Illustrated*, *Olive*, *BBC Good Food Magazine*

#### **What’s the best meal you ever had?**

It’s not the “what,” it’s more the “where.” I love eating at pubs when I am back in the UK. But not in the restaurant, in the pub garden on a warm summer’s day — it’s such a British thing and holds lots of family memories!

### **A seasoned chef**

A few years into his career, Jeremy had an “ah-ha” moment when his self-confidence became part of his outlook on life: “It dawned on me,” he says, “that if I could cook a banquet for 800 people — if I had the skill to coordinate a team of people that a chef possesses — I could achieve other things. I’d say to myself like a mantra, ‘If I can cook for 800 people, I can read that book. If I can cook for 800 people, I can do X.’ I use that as a platform of confidence, and I try to apply it to everything I can.”

His mantra was put to the test when he decided to start a web-based international cooking magazine. The project was inspired by the year he spent backpacking with his future wife, Nicola, through India, Nepal, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand in the early days of his career. Knowing that he was “not academically minded” and had no interest in computers gave him pause. But he tackled the project using his preferred learning style: “I go to the computer with no computer experience and, using the tutorial that came with the software I bought, I figure out to design and publish a website. The tutorial was great because it was ‘show-and-tell’ and provided my preferred learning experience.” He also consulted with computer-savvy friends, whose oral tutorials he collected in 10-minute bites — his limit for “lecture format.”

Maturity and parenting two young daughters have changed Jeremy’s perspective on the value of academic learning: “I can acknowledge completely now that academics stretch your mind, just as if it were a muscle. ... I’ve gone from hating school — hating what school stood for — to realizing that I was in a good school. I had to stop being angry at [school staff] for not helping me. If I’m not sharing information about myself, how can people help me? Whatever you do in life, you have to look to yourself first — but not in a blaming way. You have to ask ‘Am I doing the most I can do?’” As the parent of Lucy, age 7, and Charlotte, age 3, Jeremy places a high value on learning. He jokingly describes his wife, Nicola, as an “absolute lunatic” about making sure that Lucy becomes a skilled reader. “We crack the whip big time about that,” he says.

When his dyslexia causes him to stumble occasionally — for example, in word pronunciation, phonetic reading, or driving directions — he matter-of-factly lets people know that he has difficulty with some skills that others take for granted. “It doesn’t mean you give up on learning those things,” he says. “I can’t say to people, ‘Don’t ever ask me to read a map.’ You’ve got to keep going back and working on it.”

Tidbits

#### **Could you describe a meal you cooked that’s especially memorable?**

Cooking for ex-British Prime Minister, John Major — a breakfast for 50 people here in San Francisco. The breakfast was totally British, and the PM was thrilled. He asked to meet me, and we had our picture taken together, and he later sent me a copy with a note written on it. Not too bad for the “thick” kid of the class.

### What's your favorite meal to cook for your family?

One that my youngest daughter will eat, she is my toughest critic. Lately, that's pasta and meat sauce — not exactly the most extravagant dish!

### On to the next course

Jeremy has several passions that keep him inspired and energized. He loves being good at what he does — “I want to be the best hotel chef in the city and build the best team in my department” — but not at anyone else's expense, he's quick to add. “If my colleagues ask me where I buy a certain ingredient, I tell them in a heartbeat. If someone wants a recipe — not that anyone's called me for one — I'll give it to them. Because, by the time someone else is asking for it, I should be working on something else anyway.”

He also loves doing “good things for other people,” such as teaching women inmates at a county jail how to cook nutritious meals, mentoring kitchen staff who lack formal training, or initiating a food and wine event to help a family in his San Francisco neighborhood whose husband/father had died tragically. “I'm not a saint or anything,” he says, “but I just think you can give back in a variety of ways. My brother once asked me if I was a ‘hippy Buddhist.’ I told him, ‘No, I'm just lucky; my position allows me to give back.’”

Jeremy considers himself a work in progress and feels it's important to always have goals. “I'm not successful yet,” he says half-jokingly. “I always planned on doing what I'm doing right now. Being a chef in a five-star hotel was a goal, and now I've done that. I just haven't figured out what the next goal is. So, put me in the ‘somewhat successful’ category for now.”

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Tidbits

### What's your advice for future chefs?

1. Go and work in a restaurant kitchen for free before going headlong into this career. You might find the image does not match the reality.
2. Read as much as you can, ask questions, and digest what goes on around you — you can learn more from your mistakes than your successes, but it's less painful to learn from other people's mistakes.
3. Roll up your sleeves and shut your mouth (kind of harsh, but true).
4. It is only what you did yesterday, are doing today, and going to do tomorrow that matters (This is a borrowed theory, not mine).
5. Every meal has your reputation stamped on it.
6. Don't take it so seriously. Be relaxed — it annoys the uptight chefs. Have fun; it's just food!

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### About the Contributors

**Linda Broatch**, Writer/Editor, has an M.A. in Education, with a focus in Child Development, personal experience in supporting those who have learning difficulties, and has worked for many years in nonprofit organizations that serve the health and education needs of children.