

A Tropical Heart Within

Anthony Fothergill

Executive Chef, DoubleTree Hotel, Orlando

By Alicia Callanan Mandigo

His soft-spoken nature and his easy smile certainly give him a laid-back island persona. It's possible it's in his genetic makeup. His parents, after all, are originally from Jamaica. But when Executive Chef Anthony Fothergill speaks, there's no mistaking it — he's British. But don't go scanning his menu for bubble and squeak or toad-in-the-hole. His heart lies in the tropics. "While I've worn many hats, my passion is Floribbean, the cross between the fruits, spices and root vegetables, it's a whole different concept compared to Western cuisine," says Fothergill, "and all the local seafood and shellfish really opens the door to being more creative."

Fothergill studied culinary arts at Clarendon College in the United Kingdom, and then completed an apprenticeship at The Chateau, a four-star restaurant in Nottingham. He's been in the United States since 1983, beginning in Miami, where he worked in several hotels and restaurants, including the Sahara and the Dessert Inn on Miami Beach. He eventually moved on to Fort Lauderdale's Hilton Hotel, where he served as sous chef. He was then appointed executive chef at the Park Plaza Hotel in North Miami.

It was Westgate resorts that finally brought him to Central Florida in 1997. He spent three years with Westgate before he decided to pursue his own catering company. But he wasn't to stay solo too long. "I had a friend that worked at the DoubleTree, and he told me about the job. He basically coerced me into coming and interviewing for the position, and I kind of fell in love with the place," says Fothergill. Recognized as one of Orlando's oldest convention venues, the DoubleTree has three restaurants for which Fothergill is responsible, in addition to its banquet services. He says there were several things he liked about the place, not the least of which is the support he receives from Food and Beverage Director Steve Conway. He's also enjoying a new level of creative freedom.

"For example," he says, "if I had a VIP menu at Westgate, I'd be given a menu. Now I make the menu, set the pricing and basically set the whole tone for the function." He's been at the DoubleTree less than a year and already he's receiving letters of gratitude from banquet clients who say his service exceeded their expectations.

Like many chefs, Fothergill has had opportunities to cook for celebrities like James Brown and Senator Hillary Clinton, but he says his most significant experience as a chef was the opportunity to prepare an Orthodox Passover banquet, not once, but three times. "It was extremely fascinating, doing those was one of the highlights of my career, to see the rich culture and the Jewish community, it was amazing," he says. He was working in South Florida at the time, when a friend recommended him to a group from New York that was planning to be in Fort Lauderdale for Passover.



Fothergill was responsible for everything except the menu, the host provided that. "It was my job to make sure it was all executed correctly. He gave me four or five kosher books which explained Passover and how to handle the food. We worked from three kitchens, a meat kitchen, a dairy kitchen and a parve kitchen (parve basically being anything that's not meat or dairy), and nothing can move from one kitchen to the other, not even a knife that's been cleaned and sanitized. You also can't bring in anything from the outside, you can't even bring in your own personal Starbucks," he says.

It sounds like it could be confusing and overwhelming, but Fothergill didn't see it that way at all. "It was extremely interesting, and it's something I've never done before. I loved it. But it's one of the hardest things a chef could work," he says.

But clearly he is now on to new challenges. Backed by what he feels is a strong culinary team, Fothergill is working hard to improve the level of service at the DoubleTree, which spent some time without leadership in the kitchen. And he's capitalizing on his multicultural staff by encouraging them to incorporate their own ethnic touches into the food, particularly those cooks who are of island descent. "What we have been able to accomplish with Chef Anthony's culinary team has been very impressive. Not only are we satisfying and exceeding the expectations of current guests and groups, but we are also well-positioned to attract more group business and grow the success of our restaurants and lounges," says Food and Beverage Director Steve Conway. And while Fothergill is keenly aware of the rising British population in Central Florida, he says the only British influence he's allowed to sneak its way on to the menu is a tea and scone service. "When people come to Florida, they want seafood, that's what they really come looking for," he says. This is a good thing for a chef who has a truly tropical heart within. ■

Alicia Callanan Mandigo is a freelance writer in Winter Park.

Sponsored by:



SYSCO FOOD SERVICES OF CENTRAL FLORIDA, INC.

800.877.8500 • 407.877.8500

www.sysco.com