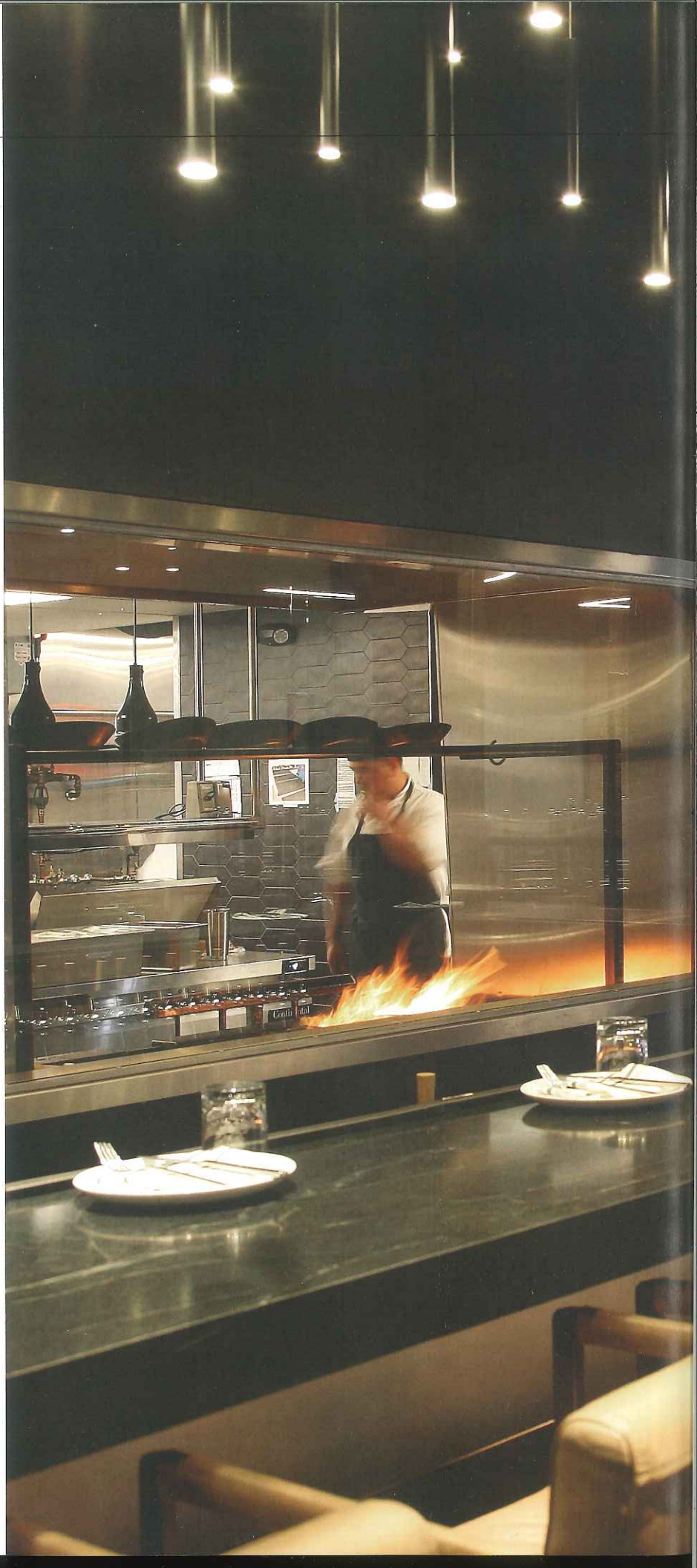


Paul Cesario built an equipment empire

HE'S NEWLY RETIRED BUT
STILL HAS PLENTY OF
OPINIONS ABOUT RUNNING A
SUCCESSFUL RESTAURANT

BY ANDREA YU





After building up his food equipment operation, Trimen, for 32 years, servicing heavy hitters like Wendy's and Tim Hortons, Paul Cesario recently stepped down from the business. I sat down with Cesario to hear about his lessons learned from starting a business from scratch and future trends in foodservice.

Straight from the horse's mouth

ON THE TURNING POINT OF THE BUSINESS

I was working on the Wendy's account for a long time when we landed it. That was the turning point. It was like, 'Wow, we're supplying triple-A accounts.' We were no longer dealing with local businesses. It was national. I was focused on strictly chain accounts while my competitors weren't. After Wendy's, which I picked up in '93, I went after Pizza Hut, KFC and Taco Bell, which I picked up shortly thereafter.

ON KEEPING YOUR STAFF HAPPY

You always need to put yourself in their shoes. You need to give them security. We've always maintained our staff level even if we were slow. And we really listened to them and created an environment where they're comfortable to come to work. We talked openly with the staff. We didn't have too many rules or regulations. When we were expanding in 2000 and looking for a building, the staff said it's very important to get daylight inside the plant. So we looked for a plant that had windows to let the sunshine in. We kept the doors open during the day. The first three employees I ever had are still in the company. They've been with me from day one. There are 25-year veterans in the company. I've taken care of them, and they've taken care of me. It was a mutual relationship.



ON THE BIGGEST TRENDS IN KITCHEN EQUIPMENT

Ironically enough, the industry has gone back to its roots. So if you look at the very first kitchens, they cooked with wood and charcoal. And the biggest trend right now is cooking with wood and charcoal. At the same time, we have seen kitchens become more sophisticated. We see the introduction of combi ovens. These are ovens that cook with steam, convection and microwave heat. They cook a lot faster with a better quality of food.

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ON EMBRACING OPEN KITCHENS

The open kitchen goes hand-in-hand with full transparency. The customer comes in and sees their food being cooked. I think it helps with food safety. It makes operators aware of how they're doing things because there are people looking in. The kitchen also becomes a stage. It's almost a performance. People love to sit close to the kitchens, and they love to see the action that's happening inside the kitchen. But it's very difficult to maintain because you have to be aware of everything. It is a harder kitchen to operate, an open kitchen. Still, I think the open kitchens are here to stay. They're good for the industry, good for foodservice and great for food safety.

ON THE EVER-SHRINKING KITCHEN

As real estate becomes more expensive, the days of the big, big kitchens are gone. And operators and chefs are becoming conscious of the fact that they have to watch their footprint and are shrinking the kitchen as much as possible. We are going to have to depend more and more on technology, for example, the combi oven, which combines three or four pieces of equipment. Chefs are becoming very versatile and very shrewd in terms of how they're building the kitchen.

ON MENTORSHIP

I've always had a soft spot for younger staff because someone believed in me when I was 20 years old, and I want to give that same opportunity back. So when somebody comes in that has the right attitude, and their heart's in the right place, we focus on teaching them. We need to support the younger staff, and we need to support people getting into the industry. We need to be sympathetic, and we need to teach them as opposed to just hiring experience.

ON THE RIGHT TIME TO STEP AWAY

It was a very tough decision. A long time ago, I decided that when you start a business, you either grow it, and you pass it on to your kids, or you grow it to sell it. For me, it was a no brainer to grow it and sell it. Gordon Food Service purchased a majority of shares in Trimen in 2014.

This whole journey was building the business. Taking it from 1,000 square feet to becoming the largest foodservice equipment supplier in Canada, from four to over a hundred staff, it was a lot of fun.

Happy retirement, Paul!



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