

HOTEL F & B

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CLASSROOM CHAMPIONS

Orlando hotel rewards teachers with annual in-house celebration.

"I've always felt like teachers don't get enough credit for all they do," says Richard Kessler, chairman, CEO, and founder of the Kessler Collection, consisting of 10 luxury hotels in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Colorado. It's a thought many have but few act upon.

Putting his resources where his heart lies, Kessler has used his Grand Bohemian Hotel Orlando for the past 10 years as a place to reward fine arts teachers from Orange County Public Schools (OCPS), covering dance, drama, music, and visual arts in elementary, middle, and high schools.

This year, 10 instructors from OCPS were given Excellence in Teaching Fine Arts awards at a special luncheon in the Grand Bohemian's Johann Strauss Ballroom. Kessler and a committee comprised of his hotel team and OCPS representatives reviewed approximately 50 nominations, of which 20 became finalists and 10 were winners.

Those chosen were assessed on their ability to create an effective learning environment for their students and to relay the value and impact of the arts outside the classroom.

"We always look for teachers who go above and beyond," says Kessler. "Educational programs seem like they're going sideways, and these awards hopefully encourage and foster excellence."

The AAA Four Diamond Grand Bohemian is perhaps the ideal hotel to host the annual luncheon, since the property is built around the theme of art and music, containing more than 150 rare works.

Sixty-five people, including finalists, past winners, and their guests, received a four-course lunch prepared by Executive Sous Chef Josh Bernstein. The 2011 winners were also given a crystal apple commemorating the event, a two-night stay at the Grand Bohemian, official recognition at the next OCPS board meeting, and a \$2,000 check.

"The money is not to be spent on supplies for students," says Kessler. "It's for the teacher's enjoyment and edification. I get amazing letters back when they use their

money to take a fabulous trip. Some of them go to Europe and study in Florence, Italy, and others travel all over the United States doing special things."

All the components that make up the award and luncheon, including the prizes, ballroom space, and F&B are complimentary for the teachers, says Kessler. "We donate everything. It's certainly an advantage for us, because we control the stage, and it's very easy to create the atmosphere we want."

At the heart of that atmosphere this year was Chef Bernstein's custom four-course menu: Cognac lobster bisque; a salad of baby arugula, pistachio-crusted goat cheese, golden beets, julienned carrots, and raspberry vinaigrette; Atlantic salmon with a lemon-thyme hollandaise, purple Peruvian mashed potatoes, and grilled baby vegetables; and key lime pie with lime meringue and raspberry coulis.

It's something I put together just for this event," says Bernstein. "We serve salmon in our restaurant, but it's prepared differently. There's no spec menu we have to follow in our banquet department, so we can be creative."

To execute each course, Bernstein was assisted by a sous chef, four line cooks, two dishwashers, five waitstaff, and two banquet captains. "These teachers give so much of their lives for so little, and they really care about what they're doing. To be able to reward them in our hotel through our food and beverage program is very important to us," he says.

Winners from previous years are invited back to each subsequent luncheon, and Kessler says this gives the event a unique camaraderie that continues to grow.

"We're convinced this has brought a lot of interest to what we're doing," says Kessler. "We're hoping other companies pick this up and do something similar with teachers in their communities." ●

Michael Costa brings culinary school education, a background in hotel foodservice, and years of professional journalism experience to his position as industry relations editor for HOTEL F&B.



Chef Josh Bernstein (in white) and his team prepared a custom four-course menu including Cognac lobster bisque; a salad of baby arugula, pistachio-crusted goat cheese, golden beets, julienned carrots, and raspberry vinaigrette; Atlantic salmon with a lemon-thyme hollandaise, purple Peruvian mashed potatoes, and grilled baby vegetables; and key lime pie with lime meringue and raspberry coulis.



Mark Kessler, senior VP of marketing and business relations for the Kessler Collection (left), and Ronald Blocker, superintendent of Orange County Public Schools, present teacher Tiffany Weagly with a check at the Excellence in Teaching Fine Arts Awards.



Richard Kessler, chairman, CEO, and founder of the Kessler Collection—which manages 10 luxury hotels in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Colorado—has held the Excellence in Teaching Fine Arts Awards at the Grand Bohemian Hotel Orlando for the past 10 years. This year, Kessler honored 10 instructors from Orange County Public Schools at a special luncheon.