



"I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. My parents tell stories about when I was a little boy—they would plop me down in front of the TV, turn on *The Frugal Gourmet,* and that was my favorite show. I would stand next to my dad in the kitchen with a chair pulled up, watching him cook. My mom cooked the majority of the meals, but if it was something special, my dad did it.

One of my most vivid memories of being intrigued by food—I was very young, and my dad made an appetizer of soy and sesame marinated asparagus. It was served cold, and I had really never experienced anything like that. It kind of blew my mind that a dish like that didn't have to be served hot. It opened up the idea of manipulating flavors, temperatures, and textures.

One of my first jobs was as a bread boy in a little Italian restaurant—I heated bread, put it in baskets, and made salads. I liked the camaraderie of the kitchen. I liked the tangible effect of putting something together and seeing it at the end. I fell into carpentry after that—joining a construction crew into my early 20s. I was making good money, but eventually I reached a point where I just wasn't happy. I needed to make a change, and I knew I liked cooking, so I made the decision to go to culinary school.

The people I worked with laughed and ridiculed me for it, but the people who really knew me were ecstatic. They knew I was following my passion, something I was good at, and that I was furthering my skills and career.

But honestly, I didn't spend a lot of time there. I didn't graduate culinary school because I quickly realized I could gain more real-world experience working in restaurants than sitting in a classroom. So I got a job in a kitchen and left school.

Then through my 20s and 30s, I battled addiction. I had my wisdom teeth out, and the doctor gave me a prescription for Percocet—90 pills, with three refills. They made me feel good. But by the end of that, I was physically addicted, and I didn't understand what was happening. I felt terrible and didn't realize I was experiencing withdrawal.

It's the tale I'm sure you've heard many times—you start getting pills on the street. Eventually, it becomes too expensive, and someone says, "I can give you heroin for \$5." I took it one time and knew it was over. I was an addict and didn't want to admit it. Over the next 10 to 15 years, I would have periods of being clean, but then I'd relapse.

I was living in my mom's basement at the time—I overdosed again, and they found me. I was in a hospital in Chicago, and a guy showed up in my room one day and asked me one question:

He said, "Are you done?"

I was like, "Who are you?"

He said, "I'm just here to find out if you're done or not."

I said, "Yeah, man, I'm done."

He asked, "Are you willing to do whatever it takes?"

I said, "I am."

He said, "All right. You get out of here in two days. I've got a train ticket for you. You're going to South Carolina, to a treatment center, and you're going to get clean."

I knew I didn't want to continue as I had been. I knew I was going to end up dead if something didn't change drastically.

So I took the offer, and it turned out to be the best decision of my life. That's how I moved to Florence—to enter a treatment center. My mom got me into the program. It was a recovery community. I put everything I had into not ending up back where I was. At that point, I was 33 years old, with nothing but a suitcase.

I got there, spent about two weeks in utter misery going through withdrawal. Shortly after I was physically able to navigate day-to-day life, they discovered I was a chef and offered me the chance to run the kitchen in exchange for covering my treatment costs. I ran the kitchen there for six months, and they paid for my stay.

Working in that kitchen gave me more than just treatment—it gave me purpose. I wasn't just attending classes and meetings, then going back to my room. People depended on me. I felt dependable again. I spent about eight months at the rehab center. When I left, I got an apartment in town and ended up at Ruby Tuesday's because I needed a job, and they were hiring. They treated me well, but I wasn't growing, felt stagnant, and eventually relapsed.

I overdosed and ended up in the hospital here in Florence. When I got out, I knew something had to change. That's when I had the opportunity to interview at Town Hall. I spoke to the chef, and he said, "Yeah, I'll give you a chance—but you've got to start at the bottom."

I said, "Whatever I gotta do."

I worked at the bottom for about a year and a half. Shortly after, a new chef arrived. I told her I wanted the sous chef position, which was open. I poured everything I had into this restaurant and that goal, and I got the position. Chef Kelly was great and taught me a lot.

I spent two years as sous chef, and then she moved on. I had a few discussions with the director of operations about becoming the chef, and in 2021, they gave me my shot.

I've been addiction free now for eight years.

Meeting my wife definitely played a major part of my success and where I've gotten to today. She helped me navigate my way through learning how to lead people in my role, and supported me in ways I could never have expected. Meeting her was a pivotal point in my life.

I love the creativity of the kitchen, the adrenaline rush from a busy night, the camaraderie. I like to nourish people—there's nothing better than making something for someone and watching their eyes light up or seeing them take that first bite, exchange looks, and nod appreciatively. It's rewarding.

We try really hard to give everyone that experience. One of our founder's mottos is, "Everybody has a seat at our table." It doesn't matter what walk of life you come from—you're welcome here. Everyone deserves good food and equal treatment, whether they're ordering a cheeseburger or a ribeye.

What we do here involves local ingredients, Southern classics, and a new twist. I support local farmers and the local economy as much as possible. I take from the community to give back.

I want people to come in, sit down, and feel as comfortable as if they're having dinner at home—to leave feeling special.”

—Ryan Dalton, Town Hall