

James Beard Nominee: Sam Fox

Written by Interview and photos by Debby Wolvos

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The James Beard Foundation has nominated Sam Fox of locally-based Fox Restaurant Concepts once again as a candidate in the category of Outstanding Restaurateur. We sat down with Sam at North Fattoria Italiana restaurant.



AFM: Congrats on the nomination. We have lost count.

SF: It's my sixth nomination on the long list. I've never made it to the short list. It's a great honor. There are 600 voting members on the James Beard committee. It's been great to be recognized for all the hard work that my organization puts in.

AFM: You now have 12 concepts and counting, spanning six states with 3,000 employees. Did you start out with this goal in mind?

SF: No. I started out with one restaurant, then had two, then had three. The only reason I have what I have today is because all those restaurants were successful from the beginning. But I never started out thinking I wanted to run a big restaurant company. I was a restaurant manager who owned a restaurant. I feel more comfortable in a restaurant during dinner service than I do running my company.

AFM: Is it fun to come up with new concepts?

SF: Yes. That's what keeps me going. I'm fortunate that we have existing restaurant concepts that we are able to duplicate. We have a unique organization because we have people who are good at following instructions and making it happen, as well as our creative people who get to do their creative stuff.



AFM: Do you like to travel and get ideas?

SF: Absolutely. All the time. For food ideas, design ideas. I love architecture. When I have a great experience I try and remember that and convey to my team what made it a good experience. We discuss this—good, bad, what works—and we try to put this into a model.

There are a lot of moving parts into making it work. I still enjoy starting from the beginning and seeing a restaurant concept all the way through.

AFM: Do you have a favorite restaurant, or one that you are especially proud of?

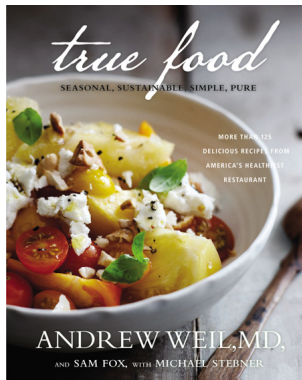
SF: I'm probably the most proud of True Food and the way that we are helping people eat in a healthier way. I get so many compliments from our guests.

AFM: Speaking of True Food, New York Times best-selling cookbook "TRUE FOOD: Seasonal, Sustainable, Simple, Pure," inspired by Phoenix-based True Food Kitchen, has been named a finalist for the prestigious "Cookbooks – Focus on Health" award from the James Beard Foundation. The True Food cookbook was also nominated by the James Beard Foundation.

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SF: Who would've thought that an idea conceived over vegan curried cauliflower soup at Dr. Weil's Tucson ranch in 2007 could turn into six thriving restaurants, a best-selling cookbook and now national recognition? We're humbled and honored by the James Beard Foundation nomination of our cookbook, TRUE FOOD. What this means is that more and more people will have the opportunity to learn about True Food Kitchen's philosophy and the anti-inflammatory diet -- knowledge that could actually positively impact their health.

AFM: Do you ever sleep?

SF: I never have a problem falling asleep. It's staying asleep that's the problem. I fall asleep, wake up three hours later, and my mind is going a million miles per hour!

AFM: Do you have a specific schedule?

SF: No. We have a lot of structure and I have to attend meetings but I do have the freedom to go where ever I'm needed.

AFM: What's your favorite kind of restaurant?

SF: I like to go to the little hole-in-the-wall places--the local mom and pop places. I rarely go back to the same spot. In Venice, California there's a restaurant named Gjolina that I love. When I'm in Brooklyn, I visit all the cool little places. New York City has outstanding restaurants. Thriving businesses. But I get the sense that the chefs in Brooklyn are doing it more for passion.

AFM: What's something we might not know about you?

SF: I let the little things bother me. I'm a detail person and I want everything to be perfect. It's hard to be perfect. I don't expect everything to be perfect. But I want to try.

AFM: What's the common theme in all of the restaurants?

SF: We do a lot of things really well—it's the whole package. We have such great talent.



AFM: What kinds of projects are in the works?

SF: We're building a fish house and oyster bar called Little Cleo's. It will be opening soon. It's going to be dinner only, really small, only 50 seats. Then we're building a restaurant in our office called The Henry at 44th and Camelback. That will be opening in the fall. We're building a fast-casual version of True Foods across the street. We're building a juice bar attached to True Food at Scottsdale Quarter. We're building all over the country—and close to closing deals from Dallas to Washington DC to Atlanta.

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AFM: Tell us about your home life.

SF: Two kids ages 8 and 6—a boy and a girl. Awesome kids, awesome wife, she lets me do my work. My kids have been out to dinner more than anyone's kids ever! We literally go out sometimes five nights per week with the kids. They eat everything. I do food tastings and my son loves to join me.

AFM: What is something you especially enjoy doing with your family?

SF: I coach my son's football. It's a favorite thing for me. Its "my football team." I love it. I travel a lot but I will make a point of catching a flight home the night before. I haven't missed a game in two years.