



FoxFire Grill Manager Ryan Dukes, 28, has some big shoes to fill. But thanks to the deft guidance of his father, restaurateur and Vista Life President Bill Dukes, he is making his own footprint in the family business.

Call it the ultimate compliment, but ever since Ryan tagged along with his dad to the Longhorn's restaurant that he owned and managed in Charlotte, he has wanted to be in the restaurant business.

The elder Dukes obliged him, assigning his son jobs in which he would learn the business from the bottom up: washing dishes, helping prepare food, and serving customers first in the Longhorn's restaurant in Charlotte and later at Dukes' popular Blue Marlin restaurant in Columbia's Vista.

"I always thought it would be neat to do something with Ryan, but I never pushed him or his brother, Matthew, because it's a very demanding business," Bill Dukes says.

In 2004, when Bill Dukes expanded his restaurant business and opened the FoxFire Grill on Bower Parkway in Harbison, he looked no further for a manager than Ryan, who had already earned an associate degree in culinary arts from Johnson and Wales University in Charleston and was a semester away from graduating with a bachelor's degree in food service management.

Father and son readily point out that the dual position of manager and owner's son did not come with executive privileges. In fact, it was just the opposite as Ryan juggled classes during the week with over-time hours every weekend for five months.

"As the owner's son, I felt, and still feel, that I have to work harder and longer," Ryan says. "I would get out of class on Thursday, jump in the car and drive to Columbia, where I would work basically all weekend. Then I'd get up early Monday and drive back to school. It was grueling, but it was great experience because I was applying what I learned in class."

The varied elements of the restaurant business — long hours, weekend work, food preparation, managing kitchen and wait staff, and meeting the demands of fickle customers — add up to a very different dynamic from the 9:00 to 5:00 office environment. It is a milieu that is fast-paced and offers no second chances to get it right, something that Bill Dukes understands from his 30-year career in the business.

"In a restaurant, something is happening every minute. I've got a gut feeling for what is going to happen. I see things as a customer. When customers come in, I have to be their advocate. I'm always seeing opportunities for doing things better."

All the more reason for father and son to see eye to eye.

Both agree that seeing eye to eye has sometimes meant going toe to toe.

Says Ryan: "We've had our moments, but we always reconcile our differences. Expectations are higher, but the rewards are higher."

Says Bill Dukes: "We've had our challenges, and we've butted heads, but through it all we respect each other. When you're family, you've got to be able to talk business. It doesn't have to be a corporate board meeting, but you can't separate the two."

Knowing that heightened expectations for family members can create pressure and tension, Bill Dukes said

that after searching for a workable organizational structure, he recently hired an operations director.

"In a family business, you're going to have higher expectations for family members. I think it works best to have that family member report to someone else and keep them accountable in a very constructive way."

Bill Dukes also says he recommends that people work for someone else before joining a family business.

"That way they can learn the business from someone else. It's easier to let someone else teach them the ropes."

For more than three years Ryan Dukes worked at Magnolia's in Charleston where he learned the intricacies of running a fine-dining restaurant. But he says the most valuable lessons are those he learned from his father.

"From my father, I learned a management style of being humble and I learned how to treat people. I don't expect someone to do something that I can't or won't do," he says. "I started in the kitchen, I can fix toilets. He also taught me to be humble when someone comes into our restaurant and enjoys a good meal."

Looking back over the last two years, Bill Dukes reflects on working with his son.

"You can talk about it, and you can visualize it, but until you're really there, you don't know quite what to expect. We've had our ups and downs, but I know Ryan has gotten the equivalent of a Ph.D. in the business. He's well prepared, and he's stronger."

Then he lobs that ultimate compliment right back at his son.

"Even if he weren't family, I would have him in my business." ■

The Delicious Team of Ryan and Bill Dukes

BY MARGARET LAMB