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Industry Leaders Reflect on the Annual Awards of Excellence

Nathan Outlaw, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 2001
Chef / Restaurateur at Restaurant Nathan Outlaw



I entered to test myself against other chefs to see where I stood in a bigger arena than the kitchen I was working in. At the time, being tested as opposed to being in a competition was more appealing to me.

The AAE gives young chefs the chance to prove to their mentors (and elders), and senior industry leaders just how good they can be. It also gives them a challenge and a chance to showcase themselves.

When I won the AAE I felt amazing! I'd entered the year before and didn't even get through the initial judging stage. At the time, it was the biggest achievement of my life. Receiving it at The Savoy was a very proud moment. It still makes me smile when I think about it now!

(photo by David Griffen)

The AAE gave me the confidence to enter other competitions and to apply for jobs I wouldn't have considered before. It also gave me an insight into the lives of industry leaders - that was where I wanted to be. It spurred me on to do even more.

If I had to give one piece of advice to those thinking about entering the AAE, I'd say listen carefully, watch closely, ask questions (at appropriate times!) and keep a notebook and pen with you at all times to make notes, because you'll never remember everything. Oh, and always work with a smile on your face!

In no particular order, I learnt the following from the AAE:

- 1) Taste everything – even if you don't think you'll like it!
- 2) Be aware that you can never know everything.
- 3) The calmer and more organized you are in the kitchen, the better results you'll get and the more chance you'll have of building a great team around you.

Michael Newton-Young MCA, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1989
Proprietor at Chez Moi

I entered the AAE, because Silvano didn't give me a choice!!! Of course, I did want to win the award though.

Like the MCA, the AAE is the benchmark for excellence that defines where you are at present and what you can be achieved in the future with hard work, dedication, passion and commitment. When I won the AAE I felt elated, amazed, very



proud.

Honestly, at the point that I entered the AAE I was already working for the Rouxs in a 3 Michelin star restaurant and the awards were only in their second year. My path, career was already set. However, from this experience I learnt to be the very best you can be.

Future winners should know that this award is now recognized around the world as the best of the best, and any employer would be immensely interested in anyone who has gained this award.

Youngsters today should note that this is not a job, it's a vocation. You need to dedicate yourself, be passionate and proud about your career path, work hard, work harder than anyone else, enjoy what you do and share that enjoyment with others, and pass on your knowledge and skills to others.

**Claire Clark MBE MCA, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1989
Patisserie Consultant**



I entered the AAE, because Sara Jayne Stanes said that I should! More seriously though, I entered for the prestige of the title and award. When I won the AAE I felt jubilant. I knew I had joined a very special family of chefs, who would help me achieve my goals. I had an instant support network of the most amazing chefs in the UK. The academy never left my side and supported me through the rest of my career, right up to this day. I thank them for their love, belief, support and friendship. They truly are my extended family. Without them I would never have achieved all the amazing things that I have achieved to this date.

The AAE nurtures young professionals and provides them with mentors to help them further their skills and aspirations. You must, however, work hard, be respectful, don't try to run before you can work and "you are never as good as you think", so get off your high-horse and go back to the basics and really learn your craft!

With the right people behind you, everything is achievable; you are only as good as your team. Kitchens are about teams not individuals, so train them, nurture them, share and respect. Help others as you have been helped and our industry will flourish.

**Sarah Hartnett, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1999
AAE Joint Chairman of Pastry Committee, Pastry Chef Consultant, Barry Callebaut Ambassador**

I entered the AAE, because John Williams was my boss at the time at Claridge's, and I'll be honest, it was his idea, not mine. He normally picked a few people in both pastry and main kitchen that he believed were capable of stretching to reaching the required standard. It showed confidence in us, and we didn't want to let him down. Every day we force-fed him our practice runs and he always told us how to improve and make it better; he never accepted mediocre and always encouraged us try harder.



With the wording "excellence" in the award, there is a necessity to make products of an exceptionally high standard, it drives people to improve and strive to achieve. It teaches that when you push yourself and are disciplined, you can achieve more than you know.

I felt like I was walking on air - that I'd really done something worth being proud of, and that I'd never have to see a frascati for as long as I lived!!!

Once I'd achieved the award myself, the next step was to help anyone else coming along behind that entered. It's led to me wanting to become a member of the Royal Academy and also to join the pastry committee who set the tasks for the AAE.

If you're thinking about entering the AAE, don't be afraid to have a go, ask for help, admit you don't know everything, because people want you to succeed - they want you to achieve great things. Learn from everyone you work with, even if it's learning how not to do something, but always remember, you'll never know everything

There is nothing that will beat the satisfaction of knowing that sheer hard work and determination can see you succeed. Give it your all and, at least then, you'll never regret it. Sharing what I had learned taught me that investing in the future of the industry is one of the most important responsibilities we all share

**William Best MCA, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 2004
Executive Chef, The Don Restaurant & Bistro**



There were several reasons as I remember for entering the AAE. Firstly, the AAE seemed like the natural thing to do having completed the Specialised Chefs Course. Also, John McManus my Head Chef at the time recommended that I enter. Additionally, several other Chefs who I knew had entered and had enjoyed the experience in previous years.

I remember looking at application form and feeling like I could achieve it, which therefore helped motivate me to enter. I also believed it would enhance my C.V.

I believe the AAE is important to the hospitality industry, because it encourages young Chefs to develop and perfect their basic skills and gives an even playing field for young chefs from every background to show what they can do; it's not just about where you work, but the knowledge and training they have been given. In my opinion this is important for the industry to ensure there are chefs in the future that understand how to 'cook'.

I remember receiving the letter at work on a busy sunny Saturday morning, knowing straight away that it was from the then Academy of Culinary Arts - the frank mark gives it away. Straight away my stomach tightened and churned as I opened the letter. Then I felt so happy, as the first word I saw was 'congratulations'. I remember feeling so proud when my Chef (John McManus) asked how I had done and I told him I had got the award. At that point in my career it was my biggest achievement without a shadow of doubt.

It helped to introduce me to the industry and realise how big the catering world is, but small at the same time. I didn't know it at the time, but when I look at a C.V. today I am immediately interested in interviewing a young Chef if they have achieved or even entered the AAE; it is the mark of a committed Chef who is going to know how to cook. I am sure this must have been the same then and, therefore, without a shadow of doubt has helped me to get to where I am today.

By way of advice for those considering entering the AAE, there are several things that spring to mind. Make sure you can commit to it 100% and take the time to research the tasks; it is usually a good idea to get advice from more than one Chef. Make sure you practice the dishes, in different kitchens if you can, as this will help prepare you for the day. Don't rely on fancy equipment; I remember cooking the chocolate fondant for my final in every oven in the kitchen at work. On the day of the final when there was a queue for the combi oven, but I was confident that I could cook my fondant in the base oven (make sure you take an oven thermometer with you) - it was on time and must have been good. Take the time to plan what you are going to do; it will help you save time on the day. Finally you have to be in it to win it and most importantly enjoy it!

I did learn some different techniques that I didn't know at the time, but most importantly it helped me to believe in my cooking. I remember looking around the kitchen and seeing people doing things differently to me, which at the time was quite worrying, especially as some of those chefs worked at places that I considered to be better than where I worked. However, I stuck with what I knew and everything went to plan! Looking back I realise how important the training I'd had at Ashdown Park Hotel under John was in helping me achieve the AAE and to build a solid career path resulting in the MCA last year.

Jaxon Keedwell, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1998
Chef / Landlord, The Chequers Inn



I entered the AAE for a personal challenge - to achieve one of the best accolades in the trade for the age group.

The AAE is so important, because it encourages youngsters to strive for excellence and pushes the levels of competency.

When I found out that I won the AAE I felt overwhelmed, as well as a fantastic sense of achievement; I was very emotional. The AAE demonstrates focus and was a fantastic mark for my C.V. to show that I was at the top of my game

If you are thinking about entering the AAE you need to be able to focus and listen to your peers. Think to yourself - would you serve your dishes in a restaurant and, most importantly, taste everything you serve.

Remember that anything is possible with focus and determination. Whilst I gained my AAE the first attempt, it took two attempts for me to achieve YCYW of the year - don't give up!!

Barry Johnson, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 2002
Sessional Lecturer, The National Bakery School, London South Bank University



The AAE is such an important competition, because it gives youngsters in the hospitality industry a chance to shine outside their work environments. I entered the AAE to develop my skills and push myself at competition level. This was the first major live competition I had taken place in.

Winning was not on my mind when I entered, I was more interested in developing myself and my skills. I also wanted to prove to myself I could perform at this level. However, I was a little shocked and surprised if I'm honest to win the overall pastry prize. It was the first year this had been awarded and the scholarship prize was amazing.

Winning the AAE really was a once in a lifetime opportunity. The scholarship was a trip to USA, including lunches and dinners at some of the best restaurants in San Francisco, a 15 course lunch at the now famous French Laundry and tours at Mondarvi and Opus One wineries in Napa Valley, California. I also visited New York and completed work experience in the kitchens at Restaurant Daniel and Payard Patisserie. We finished the trip with unforgettable meals at Restaurant Daniel and Jean-Georges.

The AAE most definitely helped me progress in my career. I had already worked hard in order to work at Le Manoir aux Quat Saison, but the competition helped me to progress my skills quicker and work more effectively. It also enabled me to meet fellow competitors and judges, some of which went on to be my future employers and are still good friends today.

I would encourage any young pastry chef, chef or waiter to enter this competition. It's a fantastic way to push yourself and improve your own skills. Taking part in competitions improves many different disciplines from accuracy, time keeping, working cleanly and in a more organised manner.

My experience back in 2002, along with hard work and dedication, has given me a successful and enjoyable career to date. I still love competitions and am currently the UK Pastry Open Champion and the team captain

for the UK pastry team. I have represented my country and won Gold at the European Cup 2014; I have also won numerous silver and gold medals with the Academy of Chocolate and the international chocolate awards.

Mark Sargeant, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1995
Chef / Director, Rock Salt Restaurant



At the time (1995) the AAE was the first competition that I had entered and it was a fantastic learning curve for me. I'm 100% positive that, because of my experience from the AAE, I went on to win Young chef Young waiter the following year in 1996.

Anything that encourages young individuals to better themselves and stand out from the rest is a great thing. It's a very important part of our industry and introduces people to a wider audience.

Winning the AAE was a fantastic feeling for me, especially only being 22 years old. I was in a room with most of my cooking heroes for the first time and, in particular, it was the first time I saw Marco!! I have to say at that time it was a complete career highlight. He now feels the same about seeing me!

I think the AAE gave me the confidence I needed to better myself and strive to go on and do other competitions, and apply for jobs I may not have felt I was good enough for. It's like passing your degree with a First.

My advice to others thinking about doing the AAE would be do it but enjoy it. The AAE is an important award to achieve, but nothing is worth doing unless you enjoy it and have fun. It's about pushing yourself and meeting new people in the industry; it's not always about winning.

It was a very, very long time ago now, but I'm absolutely sure that it set me up for the next 10 years. I learnt to have confidence in competitions and I also learnt how to integrate with industry VIPs - something they don't teach you at college!

Peter Vaughan, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1997
Chef / Director, Vaughan's Kitchen Bistro & Cookery School



I had been encouraged by my academy mentor, Peter Kromberg, when I was an apprentice to participate in competitions and I had taken part in a number of Salon Culinaires organised by the Craft Guild of Chefs. However, the AAE was, and is, very much seen as the ultimate challenge for a young chef to compete in and carries a high level of prestige with its history and those who work behind scenes to make it happen each year. The AAE is unique. I can't think of many other challenges that potentially allow all, or none, of the candidates to achieve the award. It is very much an inner challenge rather than an 'all out' outer competition against your fellow contestants. It took me two attempts to achieve the AAE, which in hindsight has helped me to console with young chefs who don't make it all the way the first time; I can share my own journey with them. When I did finally achieve the award, naturally there was relief and a rush of joy, but the deeper feeling was an inner sense of confidence of knowing who and

where I am in the skill level of a young chef. I had a deeper knowledge of my weaknesses and strengths, and a stronger feeling of compassion for other disappointed and exhausted faces in the group who did not achieve the award.

The AAE helped me, because I knew once I'd achieved the award that I could do it! However, it took a lot of determination and number of attempts. That's why I find it brilliant that the award is really hard to achieve, as it pushes young chefs to their limits and, in turn, raises the prestige of what the academy is all about – the training of culinary excellence. I really didn't think I was good enough to achieve the award after I stumbled at the finals the first time around. This is something I hear young chefs say if they don't win their first competition/award. I think it weeds out the wheat from the chaff and the AAE is certainly helping to raise the bar. If someone approached me who was wishing to enter the AAE I would ask them: "How well do you know yourself? What

do you want in life? How much are you prepared to work to prove that you are capable or skilled enough to achieve your true desires?" The AAE will test you to the limits of those questions, so enter and give it a go. You shouldn't have anything to prove to others, but everything to prove to your inner-self.

From the AAE I learned about limits; I have learned what I am naturally good at and what I am weak at in culinary skills. I have learned how to coach others when they are taking part in competitions. I have learned how to give and how to accept praise, as well as how to accept criticism without sulking and not to become egotistic when one wins. I have learned skills that money simply cannot buy.

Simon King, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 2000
Director of Operations, JKS Restaurants



The AAE is such a wonderful opportunity to meet new people, learn new skills and see how you can perform under pressure. The competition is extremely important to the hospitality industry, because it demonstrates the skills and knowledge required for the industry and nurtures the stars of tomorrow.

When I achieved the AAE I was absolutely ecstatic; it was great to get recognised by your peers! The AAE definitely helped me begin my career, as it provides a brilliant opportunity for networking and enhancing your CV (I was granted a visa to work in New York and having the AAE award and being a member of the academy really made a difference when applying for the job).

I would advise youngsters to be inquisitive, work hard, be patient, don't forget the basics and have fun! There's always more you can learn, there is always more you can give and you should be very proud of being a part of such a great industry. Oh, and being front of house rocks!!

William Curley MCA, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1996
Owner, William Curley Patisserie Chocolatier



Although I achieved the AAE many years ago now it was at the time, and I believe even more now, that it is the highest accolade available to young chefs, pastry chefs and service. It is clearly an accolade that a young person should want to achieve and it was important for me to gain this award. For me, one of the most important aspects of the industry is developing young people. The AAE gives recognition to the training of young people and an affirmation of the high standards reached.

I was absolutely thrilled when I won the AAE. It is a wonderful accolade to have on your CV and for me it symbolises a level that enables you to continue to the next stage of your career. Achieving the award gave me more confidence and self-belief to continue shaping my career as a patissier. If you're thinking about entering the AAE – enter it! Put in plenty of time and dedication, and do not be afraid to ask for help. Ideally look for support from your employer. It is such a diverse accolade; it tests many of the aspects of your craft. This helps to evolve your career path by forcing you to assess your ability and achieve near perfection in even the simplest of tasks. I have learnt that no matter how much we achieve, we are all still learning, there is no finishing line in our craft.

Adam Pierson, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 2002
Executive Sous Chef, Claridge's

I knew that the AAE is a true test of classic cookery techniques and gaining the award wasn't easily achieved, so I really wanted to enter the competition. The AAE always includes elements of cookery or ingredients that academicians feel so passionately about and that young chefs should understand and have the opportunity to gain experience with. The AAE raises the profile of a career in hospitality, especially when friends and family hear who was judging the competition, and the awards dinner truly celebrates the success



of those achieving great standards in their profession. Participating in the AAE was a great form of education; the dishes and pressure the competition creates help to develop instinct and the ability to react to problems and adjust your cooking.

Absolutely enter the AAE – it makes you question what you do and the results you achieve, try and find an experienced cook or chef that can help mentor you through the tasks during practicing – the feedback at this stage is pure gold. Certainly, for me, the experience of going to the French laundry, Moldavi vineyards and experiencing New York opened my mind and this was the first time I'd eaten in so many renowned restaurants. Ultimately the AAE made me appreciate our classical culinary techniques and understand just how important the basic principles are that form the basis of a chef's training.

Stefano Borella, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 1997
Pastry Chef / Teacher, La Cucina Caldesi Cookery School, Caldesi Restaurants



I was encouraged to enter the AAE by the Executive Chef and Pastry Chef at Churchill Intercontinental, as well as colleagues who had previously entered. The AAE is very important, because it gives young people the experience in competing to high standards; it also helps with career development and progression. Achieving the AAE was one of my best life experiences, especially after three attempts; I was very proud.

The AAE gave me an idea of what other pastry departments were doing, awareness of other skills, standard setting, so that you are aware of what levels you need to achieve. I would advise young people to enter the AAE, as it is great experience and if you at first do not succeed try again! I have certainly learnt from the AAE that tenacity and hard work pay off!

Alistair Birt, Annual Awards of Excellence Winner 2009
Head Pastry Chef, Harrods



I entered the AAE, as I saw it as an extremely prodigious accolade that I wanted to achieve. I also wanted to test and push myself and my abilities. It sets a bench mark of quality in the industry that you must strive towards as a young chef, as I am still.

When I achieved the AAE I was over the moon and very happy, but also extremely relieved that I didn't have to do it again, something I would have had to do for myself until I achieved it. I did not expect to be the overall winner, it came as a big surprise; I remember that there was some great products be created. It was the cherry on the top.

The AAE gave me confidence in myself and my abilities. It was great to meet other young chefs in the industry and to start a network of your own. You must always push yourself and be ambitious with your career and enjoy your work.

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