



Earlier this year, Betsy Alger was named the first-ever chairwoman of the New Jersey Restaurant Association (NJRA). An acclaimed restaurateur, Alger is the first woman to head the NJRA in its 66-year history.

Alger's foodservice career in 1983, when she and husband Jim Black opened The Frog and The Peach in New Brunswick, New Jersey. In its 25 years on the scene, The Frog and The Peach has received accolades from the press (*New York Times*, *Gourmet*, *Zagat*, and *Wine Spectator* to name a few) and from those within the industry.

In addition to her role with the NJRA, Alger is also an active member with several other industry organizations, including Women Chefs and Restaurateurs and Slow Foods USA. But, according to Alger, it is her involvement with a non-foodservice organization that will be of the most use to her in her new position: "The group that I am currently most involved with is the Woman Presidents' Organization (WPO). This is not a foodservice industry group, [but] women who run our own

A Conversation with New Jersey Restaurant Association Chairwoman Betsy Alger

companies. . . . In my WPO chapter this year, a group of 12, three of us are chairing our respective industry associations. I expect that we will be sharing of places where we are stuck and things that are going well, and this is sure to enhance my role as a leader."

Following are a few other assertions Alger has regarding her new role with NJRA:

Santé: How does it feel to be the first woman elected chairwoman of the New Jersey Restaurant Association? Do you feel there are more eyes – and more pressure – on you than a male chair?

Betsy Alger: Long ago, the NJRA had the reputation of being sort of an all-boys club; a golf/cigars/Scotch-on-the-rocks sort of clique. It's not that, and if there is any vestige of that still lingering around I suspect that having a woman chair will help to dispel it. I'm not sure if there are more [eyes on me] than with a new male chair; I think for any who have held this position, the eyes of the membership – or at least of the Board – are on that person for the first couple of months . . . Any pressure I am feeling thus far has been the kind that motivates. Mostly what I've been experiencing has been support and respect from those in my industry, including colleagues, vendors, and staff.

Santé: What do you consider your largest goal as NJRA chairwoman?

BA: My largest goal is to promote the New Jersey Restaurant Association. We want the NJRA be regarded as *the* association representing the restaurant and hospitality industry in the state. That's one of my responsibilities which arose out of our

2007 Strategic Planning session. To be *the* association means, to me, that member restaurants get value, non-member restaurants realize they are missing something by not being a member, legislators respect our industry and access our expertise when crafting legislation that affects us, the public sees restaurants as cornerstones in their communities, and our employees understand that the jobs they hold are skilled, respected positions.

We've come up with the term "Get Smart" as the catch phrase for professional development opportunities offered through the NJRA. As somewhat of a professional development junkie, I'm committed that our meetings and communications provide a chance for each and every NJRA member to learn new things on an ongoing basis. It's our job to keep abreast of change and trends in our industry, issues like energy and the environment, sourcing locally-produced ingredients, technology, food safety, and regulatory issues, among others An intention of mine [on the legislative front] is that the association be consulted by legislators as they craft legislation that impacts business in New Jersey. With regard to our guests . . . I'm concerned that, as an industry, we're not always portrayed in the best light; we're blamed for people being overweight and unhealthy. That our kitchens are staffed with professionals trained in safe food handling techniques; that we are aware of trends and voluntarily switch to trans-fat-free oils; that we support charities, kid sports teams, arts organizations, etc. – all of that gets lost. I see reaching the community as important We really are the good guys and it's time to let them all know.

Santé: Before taking the position as chairwoman, you were on the NJRA board for eight years. How do you feel that experience has prepared you for your new role?

BA: The bylaws of the NJRA are carefully crafted to assure that those serving on the executive board have had experience serving on the board of directors before taking on an executive position. All of that is preparation for stepping up to the position of chairperson.

During my time on the board, I've served on every committee and chaired most of them. I'm comfortable running meetings and speaking in front of a group That's not to

say that that the jump from the vice chair position to the chair position was not a big step, because it is. . . . In stepping up, I've seen how my organization skills need to expand. The number of e-mails – and emails that require action – has increased as have the requests for meetings. Managing my schedule and my e-mails is one area where I will grow this year.

Santé: And what about your roles at The Frog and the Peach restaurant – how do you think your time as executive chef and owner has prepared you for your most recent title?

BA: I have been around long enough to see a lot and to have trained and inspired many in my industry. Having a restaurant that has consistently been held in high regard has provided me with the credibility to represent my industry. . . . As an entrepreneur, you need to develop a thick skin, you need to learn from your mistakes and not be afraid to make them. I think having that entrepreneurial backbone is good preparation. In addition, the teamwork that's involved in running a business [as well as] the financial skills/ understanding necessary to run a business are all transferable to other endeavors.

Santé: You seem to have a sense of humor about things – like naming your restaurant after a comedy sketch. How do you think that attitude will help you as you in this new position?

BA: I'm a driven, hard working, detail-oriented person, and what makes all of that worthwhile – the payoff – is having fun doing it. I like to kick-off my shoes and enjoy life. The NJRA has a staff handling day-to-day administration, but it's truly run by committee, and the committees consist of members whose participation is voluntary. Bringing a sense of humor is what keeps people playing in this arena. I think I can bring a combination of "get the job done with pride" and lightness.