

From the Other Side of the Pond

Spokane, Washington, USA

Kevin Finch, Big Table

My phone rang at 7 a.m.

“Kevin, this is Michael Quinn. I got your email asking about my work with Ark Global, and I’d love to talk. And actually I have sometime free next week. How about I fly over for a few days?”

The Start of a Conversation

Typically the response to an email out of the blue is a polite response requesting more information rather than an early morning phone conversation proposing an international trip the following week. I wasn’t quite sure how to respond and the fact that I wasn’t quite awake yet had something to do with my stammered reply: “Uh, great. It would be good to talk.”

“I’ll be in touch with more details,” Michael said cheerfully before hanging up.

Those details came several days later in the form of a message detailing when his plane would be arriving and asking if I might suggest a good hotel to stay in for five nights. Again... more immediate action rather than the long correspondence and negotiations I typically expect in establishing new friendships or business partnerships.

But then I hadn’t yet met Michael. I’d just read about him on the **Ark Global** website (www.arkglobal.org). That had led to my email asking to talk. I was intrigued by the story of his own damaging encounter with alcohol. It sounded far too much like what I was seeing happen over and over again in

my own initial work with those in the restaurant and hospitality industry here in the United States through a start-up non-profit.

Part of my motivation for creating the non-profit **Big Table** (www.big-table.com) in first place was a growing realization about how brutal the restaurant and hospitality industry could be. I saw this almost daily as a restaurant critic and food writer as I talked with chefs and owners, and it looked even worse the further down the industry pecking order you went.

Of course I had yet to hear Michael share the details of his story or the grim statistics in Britain around drug and alcohol use, but I already knew that US government statistics say that the massive restaurant industry in America has the highest rate of illicit drug use of any industry in the country and the 3rd highest rate of heavy alcohol use.

Michael Quinn on U.S. Soil

It turns out Michael has shared his story all over the world, but his last visit to the United States was while he was still a British celebrity chef and still drinking enthusiastically. He made the kitchen (and bar rounds) in Atlanta back then.

This time around he was coming not to cook or hit night spots but to talk about the rocky end of his cooking career, his near-death experience from alcohol poisoning, and the new life that has taken shape after a priest

gave him his last rites on the assumption that he had only a few more hours to live.

A Fitting Place to Start

Michael's hotel reservation was at **The Davenport Hotel** (www.thedavenporthotel.com) in the heart of downtown Spokane. Given that Michael was the chef at the London Ritz at the height of his career, it seems like the perfect spot.

The Davenport Hotel might not have the length of history of some of the storied properties in Britain, but it has been famous world-wide since Louis Davenport opened its doors in 1914.

At its opening, The Davenport Hotel became the largest private telephone branch exchange in the entire Pacific Northwest with 450 handsets. It also boasted the Northwest's largest and most complicated plumbing job with 30-miles of pipes delivering both hot and cold water to every one of its 405 rooms. It's gold-gilded lobby—restored by current owners Walt and Karen Worthy in 2002—is simply stunning.

Michael arrived the night of December 17, 2010 and the first meeting the next morning was with Matt Jensen, the Davenport's Director of Marketing, and Executive Chef Brian Franz. It took place in the Davenport lobby.

Michael Tells His Story

Three days later Michael told his story to a group that included Davenport staff, local chefs and community leaders, members of Alcoholics Anonymous, restaurant owners, and a faculty member for the local culinary school.

"I love how Michael weaves his personal story into the larger picture of the damage caused by alcohol and drugs," one of those present shared. "His sense of humor and honesty is great," said another.

I agreed and immediately began planning with Michael about a longer visit to the Northwest where he would be able to share with students at the **Inland Northwest Culinary Academy** as well as those in the hospitality program at **Washington State University**.

An Adopted Family

The other gift of the trip was time personally with Michael over meals with other chefs. Michael joined me and Chef Jim Barrett for a great restaurant review at the **Wild Sage American Bistro** (www.wildsagebistro.com). He came along with our family to the annual holiday celebration at **China Garden** where Chef Raymond Kong puts out some of his best food for regular guests at no charge. We ate "Super Crazy" burgers at Gary and Chris Swiss's local hamburger and hot dog spot, **Crazy G's** (www.crazygs.com).

Michael also came over for dinner in our home. By that time he was more than just a visitor. In fact, another guest at dinner that night asked how long we'd known each other, and was simply stunned to discover we'd first talked on the phone less than two weeks before. "It seems like you've known each other for a long time," she said.

My wife said it best: "Actually it feels like Michael is already part of the family."

Now I look forward to the phone ringing at 7 in the morning and the voice on the other end of the line saying "Hello Kevin, it's Michael Quinn." I'd be happy to introduce him to you sometime soon.

