

# From cook to research & development chef

by Heidi Riley

Career Profile - Culinary

From his first restaurant job during high school to becoming the Research and Development Chef for Canada's Smartest Kitchen, **Chef Allan Williams** has always been passionate about the culinary arts. "I love what I do, and I wouldn't change much in my career path," says Allan.

Allan is originally from Pictou, Nova Scotia. When in high school, he delivered pizzas for a restaurant. He began to help the cook during the busy times, and found he enjoyed working in the kitchen.

"I originally wanted to teach, and was leaning towards teaching industrial arts," says Allan. "I started to like the restaurant thing, and the idea of being able to travel for work. My dad said everybody in the world has to eat, so you're going to have a job no matter where you go." Allan did some research about the career and decided to take the one-year Holland College culinary program in 1991.

After graduating from Holland College, he was sent on an OJT to a restaurant in Stratford Ontario. He worked under a classically French trained chef. "I thought it would be fun to work there, but I absolutely hated it at the time," says Allan. "The chef yelled at me every single day. He was pushing my buttons to see if I would break. He was a little guy, but I knew he was looking down at me. I wanted to quit, but I was too stubborn.

"On my last day of work, I could have said anything I wanted to him. But I didn't want to burn any bridges. He admitted he was hard on me. Looking back I am glad that I went to work there. I did learn quite a bit about food and people."

## Moving back to get ahead

While working as a chef in Vancouver, Allan still held onto his goal of teaching. He realized that his resumé needed some high volume cooking. He took a job at a new restaurant, and went from his previous position as executive chef to being a line cook. "Sometimes you have to take a step backwards in order to get ahead. Six months later, I was offered a sous chef position, which gave me management experience at a much larger establishment."

## Networking helps to find jobs

After four years of working in Vancouver, he wanted to come back to PEI. "My long-term goal was still to teach. My short-term goal was to work at a reputable restaurant. I contacted the person I had worked for in Summerside, and he offered me the sous chef position at *Seasons in Thyme* Restaurant."

His employer started a company which sold lobster-flavoured oil, which was his introduction to food product development.



**Research and Development Chef Allan Williams works in Canada's Smartest Kitchen, a new food development initiative from Holland College's Culinary Institute of Canada.**

"This was a very a different part of the food service industry, and I found it very interesting," says Allan.

As he explored ways to achieve his goals, Allan became a member of the **PEI Chef's Association** to get to know chefs and college instructors. He submitted his resumé to the college and was hired 18 months later. "I got to my long-term goal in eight years. It really does work to plan your life according to your long-term goal."

## Working at Canada's Smartest Kitchen

Allan has worked for the Culinary Institute for almost 10 years. He was an instructor there for more than three years. Then he began to work in food product development in partnership with the Food Technology Centre. He also helped plan and design Canada's Smartest Kitchen.

"I bring the chef's perspective to food product development.

"In product development, we try to preserve food without the use of chemicals. Moisture, oxygen, and temperature can make the quality of food deteriorate. Eliminating one or more of these factors can make the product last longer. That's where the science comes in."

## A new goal

Allan's new goal is to learn more about blending the culinary arts with the science of food. He has taken short courses at the University of Guelph, and is planning to earn a Bachelor of Science in Culinology from Southwest Minnesota State University.

## Setting goals

"When I was teaching, I told my culinary students to set personal and professional goals," says Allan.

"Your **short-term goal** should be to get good marks, graduate, and work under a certified chef.

Your **medium-term goal** should be to earn your Red Seal Journeyman's ticket, which allows you to work around the world.

Your **long-term goal** is to follow your dreams. Every decision you make should get you closer to your end goal."

## About the industry

"Working in a kitchen can be very hot," says Allan. "You can get burned or you can cut yourself. It's a very physical job, with a great deal of lifting. You are constantly on your feet.

"Chefs are by nature very competitive, trying to outdo the competition down the street. The people in the kitchen are all working towards a common goal, but there can be personality clashes. You need to be able to communicate well and get along with the people who you spend 8 to 12 hours a day with."

"I loved working in a restaurant. When the customers are happy and the staff are all charged up, that's part of the satisfaction. It can be mentally draining and difficult when things don't go right, but the job is definitely rewarding."

## Wages and salaries

According to [www.labourmarketinformation.ca](http://www.labourmarketinformation.ca), wages for chefs on PEI range from \$10.35 to \$19.95 per hour. Wages for college and other vocational instructors are listed at \$17.00 to \$34.80.

## Job opportunities for chefs

"There are a lot of opportunities for chefs," says Allan. "There are many more employers looking for our students than we have students. The restaurant scene has crazy hours. If you are looking for a chef's position with more regular hours, there are many opportunities for institutional cooking in hospitals and government facilities."

## Traveling is a great way to learn

"I always tell students that travel is education. When you travel, you see different styles, preferences, and trends of how people eat. However, chefs who take on a new employee like to see commitment. If they get a resumé which shows movement to a new job every six months, they think the applicant will leave by the time they are trained to where the chef wants them to be. I tell students to commit to a minimum of one year. That's what I did."