

Interview: Chef Alex Askew, Black Culinarian Alliance



Chef Alex Askew works as a freelance chef, writer, and restaurant consultant with clients in the US, Japan, Holland, and France. He has worked in food research, development, and consulting for companies like [General Mills](#), [Hilton Hotels](#), Specialty Restaurants, and a host of private clients. He has also made guest appearances on [Good Morning America](#), the [CBS Early Morning Show](#), and the [FoodNetwork](#).

In 1993, Chef Askew co-founded the [Black Culinarian Alliance](#), which is dedicated to education, awareness, and exposure for minorities within the hospitality industry; he currently serves as BCA's president. In the past several years, he credits much of his success to the development of ALS Concepts, his culinary consulting firm with a new focus on healthy eating lifestyles and nutritional choices in new menu alternatives.

He is a graduate of the [Culinary Institute of America](#), and in 2001 received a Doctorate of Foodservice from the [North American Association of Foodservice Equipment Manufacturers](#).

[Chef Askew & His Career](#) | [The Actual Work](#) | [Career / Job Info. & Advice](#) | [Education Info. & Advice](#) | [Industry Trends](#) | [Closing Remarks](#)

CHEF ASKEW & HIS CAREER

Why did you decide to pursue a career in culinary?

Well, when I was 12, my older brother was already working as a chef. This was not any ordinary restaurant; it was the "Palace," the most expensive restaurant in the world at this time (1980), directed by Master Chef Michel Fitousi. I was able to walk around the kitchen, and I just caught the fever.

Tell us about your career in the culinary field. How did you get your start? How did you end up where you are today?

I started when I was 15, through the Boces program I was attending in Long Island, New York. Boces is a special alternate career program offered to high school juniors and seniors in selected regions throughout the country. The program was a plus for me

because it offered me two years of education and exposure in the field before graduating high school.

The job was to cook for a private family after school Monday through Friday. The pay was good, too, at \$10 per hour. From there, I went to work for restaurant chains, such as TGI Fridays and Specialty Restaurants where I gathered essential knowledge about the restaurant business as a whole, including systems and controls, recipe development, grilling and sauté. More importantly, I learned speed - how to get things done quickly and efficiently.

You have stated that much of your success can be attributed to ALS Concepts. Can you tell us about the company and your involvement?

ALS is a restaurant design and development company. The beauty of it is that I'm able to use all of the knowledge that I've ascertained over the years and put it to use. In the capacity that I work, I need to be well-versed in everything from opening a restaurant to finding out what could be going wrong with an existing restaurant.

You presently work as a freelance chef, writer, and consultant. Do you find these areas all equally rewarding, or is there one area that you are particularly fond of?

They all intertwine. I find each aspect of my career to be a combination of using my present knowledge and doing research to learn something new.

You are currently vice president of the Black Culinarian Alliance. Tell us about the organization, your involvement, and how BCA has contributed to your current position in the culinary world as a whole?

The [Black Culinarian Alliance](#) is a national not-for-profit organization of foodservice and hospitality professionals, founded in 1993. The BCA is devoted to the enhancement of professional and educational opportunities for people of color within the hospitality industry. The BCA's current mission is to rectify the lack of exposure, awareness, and education that currently exists for people of color in the hospitality industry. The BCA's lifelong mission is to expand into a multi-cultural organization that will exemplify, emulate, and truly define cultural diversity, the worldly traveling of food, and the shaping of ethnic cuisines.

In order to create a greater sense of exposure, the BCA has created several annual media events. Media exposure is vital in the BCA's attempt to obtain local, national, and international recognition. The founding members of the BCA are extremely proud of being graduates of the [Culinary Institute of America](#) (CIA), and its members are extremely committed to education. The BCA holds a strong position on its responsibility to share personal and professional knowledge with the youth of our community. The BCA is committed to sponsoring hospitality scholarships, question & answer seminars, and culinary training programs.



As vice president, I assist in administrative activities such as monitoring finances, all legal issues, all funding and allocations of expenses, and talking to high school students about the opportunities in foodservice. All of this has been very helpful to me, personally, from exposure to meeting new and interesting people in the hospitality industry.

Can you explain briefly why an organization like BCA is necessary in the hospitality industry?

In 2001, opportunities are abundant for minorities within the hospitality industry - but that was not always the case. Before "diversity" became a buzzword, minorities did not have the same opportunities for positions, especially high level ones. Minority culinarians need to recognize that the road was paved for us by our forefathers, and we should be appreciative of that fact.

Also, we all know that the best jobs "never hit the paper," meaning the only people that have access to those jobs are the people that are well-networked. Being involved in an organization such as the BCA gives you access to networking circles that you ordinarily would not have access to.

Anything and everything is possible for any individual who desires it. Remember, if you are concerned that it will be a little harder to prove yourself, the answer is simple: Just Become Better!!!!

You've made guest appearances on Good Morning America, CBS Early Morning Show and the FoodNetwork. How important are these kinds of experiences to you?

Well, it does gauge how much pressure you can take. I find it to be extremely rewarding because the challenge is so great that you are forced to reach new heights of effort, control and concentration.

Is there more still that you want to accomplish in your career?

Absolutely, I want to go further into research and development; I think this would take me to a new area for growth, both professionally and personally.

THE ACTUAL WORK

You've been an Executive Chef at a number of restaurants. Describe a typical day of work in this position.

That varies on what type of restaurant, but typically you would start work with some administrative things such as checking what was ordered and what was received; checking to make sure all the staff is present and accounted for; checking on the menu

items and specials of the day; and making sure there is the mis en place for each item. And, looking for any potential problem that may arise.

What are some of the challenges you face as a culinary consultant?

It is sometimes frustrating to train people to do certain tasks so that they can get the job done, and then get some resistance. Also, being a consultant is fixing the problem as quickly as possible, so you are never a permanent fixture - sometimes, you are even a distraction for the client and employees.

Do you still spend much in the kitchen?

Yeah, I'm always eager to get my hands dirty; I still think it is a lot of fun.

How has your experience with food research enhanced your abilities in the consulting field?

You're able to problem solve a lot of things because you've already done a lot homework about different problems with different solutions.

Chefs can distinguish themselves through certifications, like Master Chef. What kinds of credentials are important for culinary consultants to pursue?

There are a lot of certifications out there, but the most important thing is the knowledge that you pursue. Everyone with sincere interest should look into becoming a master chef. Yes, it is very hard - but if you study hard, anything is possible.

CAREER / JOB INFORMATION & ADVICE

What are the best ways for graduating culinary students to find a job?

Networking is important, as well as having good grades, so the school can help place you. Every time there a function, tradeshow, food show or anything of that nature, you should be eager to talk to people and tell them what your interests are. I find it easy to first ask people what they do, (most people love to talk about themselves) then tell them about myself - it seems to always work.

What advice can you give to those who would like to branch off into culinary consulting?

Learn as much as you can about everything in the business; it will come handy when you make the transition.



How much are culinary consultants generally paid? How about those at the top of the profession?

The salary range varies, but generally \$40,000 to \$80,000. At the top of the profession, I've known people that have made \$250,000.

What career advice can you give to chefs wanting to make a name for themselves and stand out from the crowd?

Constantly challenge yourself, and put yourself out there by doing fundraising events. Fundraisers show that you are interested in the common good of mankind by volunteering your time and resources; with that in mind, people are going to be more interested in you because they already know that you unselfishly care.

How is the job market right now? How do you think it will be in the next five years? 10 years?

Well, obviously because of the economy there is a brief slowdown presently, but the industry is always growing. Everyone has to eat!!

EDUCATION INFORMATION & ADVICE

Tell us about your culinary education. What did you like and dislike about it?

At CIA, you had to be well-disciplined to get everything done on time. I liked the fact that there was so much information to learn - that part was cool. But I think that there should have been more support groups for students, especially minority students.

You had six years of prior restaurant experience before any formal culinary education, yet you decided to attend CIA. In your opinion, does experience without formal education have its limits?

When you've already worked in the field, as I did, I think you are able to absorb more information at school because you don't have to learn the basics - school and training are the foundation elements that are needed for professional growth.



Askew (center) with Leah Chase (left) of New Orleans' Dooky Chase Restaurant and Sylvia Wood, restaurant owner in Harlem, New York

Do you know of any schools that offer coursework, certificates, or a degree of some kind in culinary consulting? If not, what's the best educational path to pursue?

No, I don't know of any schools that offer culinary consulting. But I would think that the best educational path

would be to go to a very diversified school (as far as the number of different subjects offered) to learn all the options.

Based on what you hear in the industry, what do you think are the five most respected and prestigious culinary schools in the world that really make a difference for their graduates?

- [The Art Institutes](#)
- [Culinary Institute of America](#)
- [Baltimore International College](#)
- [French Culinary Institute](#)
- [Hudson County Community College](#)
- [Monroe College](#)
- [The Institute of Culinary Education](#)
- [The Culinary Academy of Long Island](#)

What is right and wrong with culinary education in America?

I think the whole process may be too commercial. Sometimes, I find that people are able to graduate who don't even have the basic skills they were suppose to learn. These basis skills should be mandatory upon gradation.

Is there a major difference in the industry between graduating from a prestigious culinary school and graduating from a college with a culinary program?

It depends how reputable the program is. Honestly, the decision is usually up to the student about how much he/she is going to learn and apply. Take a good look at the curriculum and whether it has the elements for a solid education.

INDUSTRY TRENDS

What are some trends that you see in the field of culinary arts that might help prospective students?

Learn as many different cuisines as possible, whether they are classical or new age. A growing trend is fusion, which is a blending together of all different elements from different cultures.

Do feel there is a growing interest in health and nutrition as it pertains to food, and do you see evidence that the industry and the culinary education community are changing to meet such an interest?

Health is here to stay, with that in mind knowing aspects of food that are centered around health conscious individuals will be commonplace within the next few years. Everyone

needs to be aware of that situation. The industry is not as quickly as I believe is needed, although Johnson & Wales has a solid Nutrition program.

How has advancing technology and the Internet affected the culinary profession?

All the information is there you just have to look for it. And just about anything can be done with technology.

CLOSING REMARKS

Is there anything else you can tell us about yourself, your career, or the profession that would be interesting or helpful to others aspiring to enter and succeed as a chef?

I think it's important for people, especially people of color, to understand that the hospitality industry is a \$500 billion industry...the largest employer next to the government.

Anything is possible. Hospitality has degrees of expertise equivalent to that of a doctor or a lawyer, and the salary to go with it.



If you have any questions for Chef Askew related to this interview, please contact him at CHEFIACA@aol.com.

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