Four Devoted Friends Cook Up a Recipe for Success

by Barbara Steinberger

Standing left to right: Garrick Campbell, Raymond Bell, Martin John; seated: G. Dexton Campbell
At Hotep’s Restaurant and Lounge in downtown Hartford, the menu features dishes made with callaloo and ackee; the decor includes busts of Nefertiti and Ramses; and the owners are focused, determined, and inseparable.

It all makes for an eclectic—and successful—mix for four University of Hartford alumni who developed a deep friendship during their undergraduate years at Ward College of Technology and made a commitment to go into business together.

The four friends—brothers Garrick Campbell ’90 and G. Dexton Campbell ’92, Raymond Bell ’89, and Martin John ’92—all earned bachelor’s degrees from the University in electronic engineering technology. John also earned a master’s degree in professional accounting from the University in 1994. They opened Hotep’s last June to glowing reviews from customers, restaurant critics, and boosters of downtown Hartford.

The restaurant is a tribute to multiculturalism, with cuisine, decor, staff, and music from all over the world. The menu has strong Caribbean and South American influences, as the Campbells and Bell are all from Jamaica and John is from Guyana.

In keeping with its global theme, the restaurant’s name and its pyramid-shaped logo pay homage to ancient Egypt, a society that placed great value on bringing together many different cultures. The restaurant is named after Imhotep, an Egyptian physician, priest, and sage who lived around 2650 B.C., and who is credited with building the first pyramid. The four University alumni became fascinated with Imhotep and ancient Egypt when they studied African history with Hartt Prof. Jackie McLean.

Visitors to Hotep’s are greeted by a yellow, pyramid-shaped awning over the front door. Inside, busts of ancient Egyptians and handmade pottery from Central and South America, Asia, and Africa make it clear that this is not your ordinary downtown eatery. A private dining area is separated from the rest of the restaurant by gauzy white curtains that evoke images of warm tropical nights.

Customers get their first taste of Hotep’s eclectic cuisine right after being seated, when they are welcomed with warm bread accompanied by spreads of mango, guava, and hummus. Reading the menu is an educational experience, with definitions of exotic foods printed along the sides and bottom of each page. Never heard of callaloo? A quick glance at the menu reveals that it is a Caribbean-style spinach. Further study of the menu shows that ackee is the Jamaican national fruit, yucca is a South American root vegetable, and chayot is a Caribbean-style vegetable.

For an appetizer, diners at Hotep’s may try such interesting fare as a cured cod, plantain, and callaloo spring roll. Entrees range from such traditional favorites as filet mignon to more unusual dishes like yucca-crusted grouper. Hotep’s most popular entree is cedarwood-roasted mango and mustard-glazed salmon.

Customers dine to the lively strains of recorded Brazilian music, reggae, Motown, jazz, and a variety of other musical genres; and they are served by a staff that represents virtually all corners of the world. The staff is headed by executive chef Carlton Rogers, who is from Guyana, and restaurant manager Didier Voisin, who hails from France. On Wednesday nights, Hotep’s features live jazz performed by two Hartt School alumni, Dave Davis and Clifford Jarvis.

While multiculturalism is one quality that gives Hotep’s its unique identity, so too is the deep affection and respect that the restaurant’s owners have for each other. The Campbell brothers, Bell, and John say they cannot imagine a time when they will not be working together.

“We don’t consider [running the restaurant] in the realm of work because we consider ourselves family,” Garrick Campbell said. “It’s always pleasurable. We enjoy being around each other.”

The foursome’s first joint venture was an investment club in the mid-1990s. The friends pooled and invested their money in order to raise capital for their next business venture and to gain experience working together.

Next came an entrepreneurial experiment called Roller Jam, in which they would rent a roller skating rink for a night and open it up to local college students for a giant roller skating party. The friends didn’t make any money on their three Roller Jams, but they gained invaluable experience in such areas as negotiating, advertising, dealing with liability insurance, and handling a variety of other business issues.

“It really taught us the fundamentals of running a business,” Bell said. “They soon put that knowledge to use by forming Pyramid Holding Company, Inc., which is the parent company of Hotep’s, and thereafter, they began the three-year process of getting Hotep’s off the ground.

Each of the four friends has a demanding full-time career in addition to his managerial duties at Hotep’s and executive responsibilities for Pyramid Holding Company. Dexton Campbell, who is Pyramid’s chief operations officer, works as a financial consultant for Travelers Life & Annuity and is working toward a master’s degree in finance at Sacred Heart University. Bell, the company’s chief technology officer, holds an M.B.A. from the University of Connecticut and is a senior engineer for Southern New England Telephone’s wireless division. John, Pyramid’s chief financial officer, works as a manager in the audit practice of Pricewaterhouse-Coopers.

continued on next page