



NCRLA

Stars of the Industry

AWARD NOMINATIONS

February 24, 2025

Sheraton Imperial Hotel RDU

Durham, NC



About

The Stars of the Industry awards gala celebrates hospitality employees at all levels who excel in service, leadership, and innovation—contributing to the industry's positive image. The gala brings together 300+ hospitality professionals and kicks off with a reception featuring emerging food and beverage trends, followed by a formal awards ceremony.



Stars of the Industry 2025





Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Riziki Mastaki

Employer: Renaissance Charlotte SouthPark

Title: Guest Service Expert

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Riziki embodies the heart of hospitality, bringing over 17 years of industry experience and an unparalleled passion for guest service. Known for her radiant energy and genuine care, she creates unforgettable experiences for every guest and teammate she interacts with. Riziki’s impact on satisfaction scores is extraordinary, with over 120 personal mentions in guest surveys over the past year. Guests frequently express their loyalty, stating they would return just to see her again.

Riziki’s efforts have been instrumental in elevating her hotel’s reputation, contributing to its rise from #22 to #2 out of 207 hotels in the market and earning the Traveler’s Choice Award for 2024. Her presence shines in TripAdvisor reviews, showcasing her role in creating emotional connections that drive guest loyalty.

Originally from Congo, Riziki’s journey reflects resilience and compassion. She volunteers with Charlotte Outreach Mission, assisting underprivileged individuals and supporting those recovering from substance abuse. Her dedication to both her work and community makes her a true embodiment of hospitality and an exceptional nominee for recognition.

Nominator: Ricky Carpentieri

Employer: Renaissance CLT
SouthPark

Title: Director of Operations



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Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Mehdi Boujoud

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: Engineering Technician

Location: Cary

Nominee's Impact:

Medhi, an engineering technician at the Umstead Hotel and Spa since 2017, is an essential behind-the-scenes contributor to the hotel's exceptional operations. Known for his eagerness to grow, Medhi consistently pursues certifications and licenses to enhance his skills and keep the luxury property in top condition. His troubleshooting expertise, willingness to learn, and dedication to working late to implement solutions make him a standout member of the engineering team.

Described by the Director of Engineering as “our most valued technician,” Medhi’s work ensures the hotel meets the highest standards of safety and functionality, providing guests with a seamless and secure experience they may not even realize depends on his efforts.

Originally from Morocco, Medhi has built a new life in the United States, bringing with him a rich linguistic ability—fluent in Arabic, French, English, and now learning Spanish. His passion for excellence and commitment to the team embody the spirit of service and continuous improvement, setting him apart as an exceptional professional worthy of recognition.

Nominator: Leah Goodnight

Employer: The Umstead Hotel

Title: Director of Marketing



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Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Michele Burgin

Employer: DoubleTree Asheville Downtown

Title: Front Desk Supervisor

Location: Asheville

Nominee’s Impact:

Michele Burgin, a dedicated team member at DoubleTree Asheville Downtown, exemplifies resilience and the true spirit of hospitality. During the devastation of Hurricane Helene, Michele faced significant personal adversity when her home became uninhabitable. Despite this, she demonstrated unwavering commitment to her role, securing a room for her family at the hotel and making herself available for all shifts to ensure guests and first responders were cared for during the crisis.

Michele’s calm demeanor and tireless efforts were critical to the hotel’s smooth operations in the storm’s aftermath. She went above and beyond to assist guests, support colleagues, and address daily challenges, creating an atmosphere of warmth and stability during a time of chaos. Her dedication profoundly impacted both the hotel’s operations and the displaced families and first responders who found refuge there.

Now on a path to recovery thanks to community and corporate support, Michele remains a shining example of perseverance and grace. Her leadership, compassion, and commitment to service set her apart, making her a deserving nominee for Lodging Employee of the Year.

Nominator: David Smith

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: General Manager



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Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Brenda Bohannon

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: Breakfast Host

Location: Burlington

Nominee’s Impact:

Brenda Bohannon, an exceptional breakfast attendant, consistently elevates the guest experience through her warm, personable nature and genuine care. From greeting guests with a bright smile to remembering regulars’ names and preferences, Brenda creates a welcoming atmosphere that feels like family. Her proactive approach and attention to detail ensure that breakfast offerings are fresh and tailored to meet guests' needs, including accommodating special requests and dietary preferences.

Brenda’s efforts are reflected in consistently high breakfast satisfaction scores, underscoring her commitment to excellence. Her ability to connect with guests on a personal level embodies the true spirit of hospitality, making each morning brighter and more enjoyable for all. Brenda’s dedication and positive impact make her a standout in her role and a deserving nominee for recognition.

Nominator: Lasha Couser
Employer: Parks Hospitality Group
Title: General Manager



Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Noel Jennings

Employer: Hyatt Place Durham Southpoint

Title: Front Desk Host

Location: Durham

Nominee’s Impact:

Noel Jennings is an exceptional front desk host whose dedication to creating memorable guest experiences sets him apart. Known for his personable, professional, and caring demeanor, Noel consistently goes above and beyond to ensure each guest's needs are met. His impact is reflected in numerous guest comments—70 of which specifically highlight his outstanding hospitality, flexibility, and ability to transform challenges into positive experiences.

A standout example of his service includes a guest remarking that Noel is “one of the most personable, charming, and professional” hotel staff members they’ve encountered globally. Beyond guest interactions, Noel’s flexibility with his schedule and eagerness to take on additional tasks demonstrate his commitment to the team and his aspirations for growth. Noel’s exceptional service, leadership potential, and genuine care for guests make him a deserving candidate for recognition.

Nominator: Matthew Smith

Employer: Hyatt Place Durham Southpoint

Title: General Manager



Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Karin Fox

Employer: Homewood Suites by Hilton AVL Tunnel Road

Title: Guest Service Agent

Location: Asheville

Nominee’s Impact:

Karin Fox, a Guest Service Agent at Homewood Suites by Hilton in Asheville, NC, exemplifies the spirit of hospitality through her unwavering dedication and selflessness. Since joining the team in September 2021, Karin has consistently gone above and beyond her role, assisting in housekeeping, breakfast service, evening socials, and even lending support to sister properties—all often without being asked.

During the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, Karin’s commitment extended far beyond her professional duties. She not only ensured her household’s safety but also supported her team and community. Karin provided assistance to her colleagues and spent her personal time delivering food and water, clearing debris, and aiding residents in need, showcasing her compassion and resilience during a crisis.

Karin’s passion for guest interaction and her tireless dedication to both her team and community highlight her as the epitome of hospitality. Her loyalty, versatility, and genuine care make her an outstanding candidate for recognition as a true Hospitality Champion.

Nominator: Michael Horvath
Employer: South AVL Hotel Assoc.
Title: Exec. Admin Assistant



Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Hadleigh Painter

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: Concierge

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Hadleigh's contributions to the organization stand out for her exemplary dedication and impact, demonstrating why she deserves recognition. From her initial role as a front desk agent, Hadleigh's ability to forge meaningful connections with guests quickly set her apart, fostering loyalty and repeat visits. Her transition into the front office leadership team was marked by her ability to earn the trust and respect of her colleagues.

When she took on the Concierge role, Hadleigh innovatively overhauled the pre-arrival process, significantly enhancing the guest experience. Her exceptional upselling skills generated an additional \$1,000 in monthly revenue, a testament to her strategic thinking and commitment to exceeding guest expectations. Her participation in the "Elevate" program underscores her ambition and proactive approach to personal and professional growth.

Hadleigh embodies positivity, dedication, and a forward-thinking mindset, making her an invaluable asset to the team and an outstanding candidate for recognition. Her transformative contributions not only improved operations but also left lasting impressions on guests and colleagues alike.

Nominator: Christophe Le Chatton

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: General Manager



Award Category: **Lodging Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Ofeliya Gadzhiyeva

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: Room Attendant

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Ofeliya's remarkable contributions and achievements make her an outstanding candidate for the NCRLA Lodging Employee of the Year Award. Recognized as the #1 team member in the housekeeping department for several years, her excellence is not only endorsed by managers but also affirmed by colleagues, past and present, who consistently praise her dedication and impact.

She is known for her proactive support and reliability, always the first to volunteer for tasks or step in to assist other departments. Whether contributing to deep-clean projects or other initiatives, her exceptional work ethic and positivity leave a lasting impression, making her invaluable across the organization.

Ofeliya's compassion and kindness extend beyond her professional duties. She genuinely cares for her colleagues, frequently checking in on their well-being and even sharing homemade meals to foster a sense of community. Her thoughtfulness shines during pivotal moments, as she takes the lead in celebrating milestones or supporting team members through challenges, rallying the group to show love and care.

Her infectious positivity, heartfelt laughter, and unwavering commitment to going above and beyond elevate team morale and create a family-like atmosphere. Whether arriving early, staying late, or lending a helping hand, Ofeliya exemplifies teamwork, dedication, and generosity.

Ofeliya is an irreplaceable asset, embodying the highest standards of professionalism and humanity. Her unparalleled contributions and heart of gold make her richly deserving of this prestigious recognition.

Nominator: Christophe Le Chatton

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: General Manager



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Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Daniel Lotz

Employer: Washington Duke Inn & Golf Club

Title: General Manager

Location: Durham

Nominee’s Impact:

Daniel Lotz, General Manager of the Washington Duke Inn & Golf Club, has spent over two decades elevating the property into one of the region's premier lodging destinations. His exceptional leadership has fostered an environment of operational excellence, reflected in numerous accolades, including a 2024 Tripadvisor Travelers’ Choice Award and a consistent AAA Four Diamond rating for 15 consecutive years. Under his guidance, the Inn was named the #1 hotel in Durham and among the Top 20 College Town Hotels in the U.S.

In 2024, Daniel led the transformative renovation of the Inn’s signature suites and the Fairview Dining Room, blending the property’s nearly 40-year history with modern luxury. He partnered with local artisans to create a design that celebrates Durham’s culture and Duke University, completing the project on time and within budget. His efforts extended to launching innovative guest programs such as the “Dive Into Durham” Masterclass Series and immersive dining events like “Greens on the Terrace,” which have garnered extensive local media coverage and attracted new visitors.

Daniel’s commitment to his team is equally remarkable. By fostering trust and empowering his staff, he has reduced employee turnover by 4.1% in a challenging labor market. His collaborative leadership style and dedication to team development have created a supportive and motivated workplace culture.

Beyond his hotel duties, Daniel plays a vital role in the broader community. As a member of the NCRLA Foundation Board, he supports initiatives that enhance the hospitality industry, including scholarships and training programs. Daniel’s vision, innovation, and passion for service make him an exemplary leader and a deserving nominee for recognition.

Nominator: Randy Kolls
Employer: Washington Duke Inn
Title: Managing Director



Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee:	Ashley Rioux
Employer:	Courtyard Raleigh Cary Crossroads/CMC Hotels
Title:	Assistant General Manager
Location:	Cary

Nominee’s Impact:

Ashley, the Assistant General Manager at the Courtyard Raleigh Cary Crossroads, exemplifies exceptional leadership and dedication to hospitality. Over her two-year tenure, she has maintained the hotel’s #1 TripAdvisor ranking in the Cary, NC area for two consecutive years and improved Bistro Restaurant scores by an impressive 20%. Leveraging her background in food and beverage, Ashley has proven to be a versatile leader who seamlessly steps into any department, ensuring smooth operations and inspiring her team.

Ashley is known for fostering a positive and motivating work environment. She consistently celebrates team milestones, including birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays, while organizing events like the successful Trunk O Treat, which brought together local hotels and strengthened community ties. Her commitment to her associates creates a culture where they, in turn, prioritize guest satisfaction.

Beyond her property, Ashley supports three sister hotels in the Cary area, offering assistance when they face staffing or food and beverage challenges. Her tireless dedication, exceptional leadership, and focus on individual and team growth mark her as a rising star in hospitality and a future General Manager. Ashley’s impact on her team, guests, and the broader community make her an outstanding candidate for recognition.

Nominator:	Bernadette Atwater
Employer:	CMC Hotels
Title:	General Manager



Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Laurie Seymore

Employer: Residence Inn Raleigh Downtown

Title: Assistant General Manager

Location: Raleigh

Nominee's Impact:

Laurie is an extraordinary leader whose dedication, resilience, and exceptional work ethic have significantly contributed to the success of her team and property. Over more than a decade, Laurie has consistently demonstrated remarkable leadership, fostering an environment that has kept turnover among the lowest in the company and driven Guest Satisfaction Scores into the top 20% of the brand. These achievements have earned the hotel nominations for Summit Hospitality's Hotel of the Year for two consecutive years.

Laurie's capabilities were especially evident during a challenging period when both the General Manager and executive housekeeper were unavailable for extended periods. Despite these hurdles, Laurie seamlessly maintained operations and achieved key milestones, including managing significant changes in food and beverage, maintaining GSS scores, overseeing the installation of a rooftop pergola, converting the hotel's POS system, and organizing a successful New Year's Eve celebration.

Her dedication, reliability, and ability to step up in times of need are unmatched. Laurie's impact on the hotel's operations, her team, and the guest experience make her a truly deserving candidate for recognition.

Nominator: Max Houseworth

Employer: Residence Inn Raleigh
Downtown

Title: General Manager



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Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Kim Hale

Employer: Summit Hospitality Group

Title: Area Director of Sales

Location: Wilmington

Nominee’s Impact:

Kim Hale, Area Director of Sales for the Wilmington Market at Summit Hospitality Group, exemplifies excellence in leadership, dedication, and service to the hospitality industry. With over 21 years of experience, Kim’s journey from a college intern to overseeing four hotels highlights her remarkable career progression and steadfast commitment to fostering growth and success.

Kim’s impact extends far beyond her sales expertise. Her hands-on leadership and team-oriented approach make her a key operations leader who inspires and uplifts those around her. She is known for going above and beyond, from mentoring future hospitality leaders to ensuring every guest experience is flawless—even stepping in to clean and prepare spaces herself when needed. Her dedication drives market-leading results in occupancy, ADR, and overall revenue, while her warmth and positivity cultivate high morale and loyalty among both her team and clients.

A devoted wife and mother, Kim balances her professional achievements with a vibrant personal life, embodying the spirit of hospitality in all she does. Her unwavering dedication, mentorship, and passion for the industry make Kim a deserving nominee for the NCRLA Stars of the Industry Award for Lodging Manager of the Year.

Nominator: Desiree Zoppe & Andrew Strickland

Employer: Summit Hospitality

Title: General Manager



Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Bernadette Atwater

Employer: Courtyard Raleigh Cary Crossroads/CMC Hotels

Title: General Manager

Location: Cary

Nominee’s Impact:

Bernadette Atwater, General Manager of the Courtyard Raleigh Cary/Crossroads, exemplifies exceptional leadership, innovation, and dedication to her team and guests. A “boomerang” with CMC Hotels, Bernadette began her career as a hostess in 1995, climbed the ranks to general manager, and returned in 2009 after a brief hiatus. Her remarkable career includes opening the Fairfield Inn & Suites Raleigh Durham Airport – Brier Creek with zero Marriott inspection addendums—an extraordinary achievement.

Bernadette’s personable and supportive management style fosters loyalty, community, and professional growth. She has mentored at least seven employees from hourly positions to management roles and inspires her team through thoughtful recognition and engagement, such as team celebrations and creative initiatives like pumpkin decorating contests, which have since been adopted company-wide. Her leadership is reflected in her team’s unwavering dedication, with many staff members following her to new properties.

Under Bernadette’s guidance, the Courtyard Raleigh Cary/Crossroads has earned top accolades, including the 2022 Silver Circle and 2023 Gold Circle awards, ranking in the top 10% of guest satisfaction. The hotel maintains a 5-star average on TripAdvisor and is ranked #1 among 23 hotels in Cary. It has also been chosen for high-profile opportunities, such as hosting NFL commercial shoots, piloting upgraded market concepts, and serving as a regional training location for food and beverage staff.

Bernadette’s ability to make work enjoyable for her team, elevate guest experiences, and achieve operational excellence has solidified her impact on CMC Hotels and the broader hospitality industry. She is a true champion for her team and a deserving nominee for recognition.

Nominator: Jovan Dockmanovich
Employer: CMC Hotels
Title: Executive VP



Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Fouad El Fakiri

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: Regional Chief Engineer

Location: Cary

Nominee’s Impact:

Fouad exemplifies the Parks culture through his positivity, hands-on leadership, and unwavering dedication to excellence. Over his 10-year journey with Parks, Fouad has risen from an hourly team member to a leadership role, demonstrating relentless commitment to growth and a passion for supporting his team. His collaborative approach fosters strong cross-departmental relationships, especially with Housekeeping, resulting in exceptional teamwork and operational success.

Fouad is a champion of hiring and mentoring, often giving opportunities to individuals with no prior experience and guiding them toward successful careers. His resourcefulness and creativity shine in his ability to tackle challenges, often finding solutions without relying on outside vendors. His meticulous attention to detail and pride in enhancing the property ensure every aspect is maintained to the highest standard.

Fouad’s energy, care for people, and passion for his work have made a lasting impact on his team and the property, setting a benchmark for excellence. His contributions embody the very best of hospitality leadership, making him a deserving candidate for this recognition.

Nominator: Nicole Ebersole

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: Regional GM



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Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Jack Benton

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: Area Director of Sales

Location: Asheville

Nominee’s Impact:

Jack Benton, Area Director of Sales for the DoubleTree by Hilton and Embassy Suites Asheville Downtown, exemplifies exceptional leadership, resilience, and dedication to his team, properties, and community. Tasked with building a dual-property sales team and achieving pre-sell goals for the newly opened Embassy Suites while growing market share for DoubleTree, Jack surpassed expectations through clear communication, unwavering support, and a collaborative approach. His positivity and “we can do this” spirit inspire his team and create an atmosphere of excellence.

Jack’s leadership was truly tested during Hurricane Helene, which brought devastation to Western North Carolina. As the storm disrupted lives and infrastructure, Jack’s decisive actions ensured both properties remained operational and became critical hubs for disaster response. Collaborating with city officials, first responders, and FEMA, Jack secured accommodations for emergency personnel and relief workers, sustaining operations and supporting the community during an unprecedented crisis.

Under his direction, essential services, such as running water and internet, were restored to the properties well ahead of the wider community, enabling them to serve as shelters and operational centers for recovery efforts. Jack’s tireless commitment extended to his staff, ensuring they retained employment and received support during the uncertainty.

Jack’s efforts have not only sustained his team and hotels but also had a profound impact on the Asheville community, embodying the essence of hospitality leadership. His resourcefulness, dedication, and ability to rise above challenges make him a deserving nominee for Lodging Manager of the Year.

Nominator:

Chris Hardy/David Smith

Employer:

Parks Hospitality Group

Title:

VP, GM



Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Holden Ballard

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: Front Desk Manager

Location: Asheville

Nominee's Impact:

Holden Ballard, Front Desk Manager, exemplifies exceptional leadership, resilience, and dedication to hospitality. In just six months in his role, Holden faced the immense challenge of Hurricane Helene's devastation in Asheville, rising to the occasion with unwavering professionalism and grace.

During the crisis, Holden worked tirelessly at the front desk for an incredible 24 hours straight, ensuring guests and associates received the care and accommodations they needed as essential services like power, water, and communication were disrupted. His calm demeanor, positive attitude, and ability to foster meaningful relationships provided a vital sense of community and comfort for those sheltering at the hotel.

Serving as the unofficial Front-of-House Ambassador, Holden embodied the spirit of hospitality and resilience, maintaining the hotel's operations and morale under extraordinary pressure. His efforts not only supported recovery but left a lasting impression on guests and colleagues alike.

Holden's dedication, natural leadership, and poise under pressure highlight his immense potential and make him a deserving nominee for Lodging Manager of the Year. His contributions during Hurricane Helene showcase the very best of hospitality leadership.

Nominator: David Smith

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: General Manager



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Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Silfo Guzmán

Employer: AC Hotel Raleigh Downtown

Title: Hotel Manager

Location: Raleigh

Nominee’s Impact:

Silfo Guzman, General Manager of the AC Hotel Raleigh Downtown, exemplifies exceptional leadership, resilience, and commitment to hospitality. Joining the team during the challenges of the pandemic in 2021, Silfo played a pivotal role in successfully opening the hotel despite supply chain disruptions and staffing shortages. His positive work ethic, empowerment of his team, and ability to foster collaboration created an environment that thrives on achievement and communication.

Silfo’s resourcefulness and determination are legendary, highlighted by his efforts to secure a Marriott-required oven essential for the hotel’s opening. Faced with logistical obstacles, including a flat tire during transport, Silfo personally ensured the equipment arrived on time, preventing delays and enabling the hotel’s successful launch.

Under his leadership, the AC Hotel Raleigh Downtown has consistently ranked among the top 15 of 121 AC Marriott properties for guest satisfaction. By its second year, the hotel surpassed ownership expectations and continues to exceed goals in guest service and operational excellence. Silfo’s drive for continuous improvement, from personally recruiting team members to identifying opportunities for growth, has been instrumental in the hotel’s success.

Silfo Guzman’s unwavering dedication, innovative problem-solving, and passion for creating exceptional guest experiences make him a standout candidate for Lodging Manager of the Year. His ability to inspire and deliver results sets a high standard for the industry.

Nominator: Pete Byers
Employer: Summit Hospitality
Title: Area Manager



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Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Mijan Sarwar

Employer: Sheraton Four Seasons Greensboro

Title: Director of Rooms

Location: Greensboro

Nominee’s Impact:

Mijan Sarwar has been an invaluable part of the Sheraton Greensboro Koury Convention Center for over 21 years, demonstrating unwavering dedication and exceptional leadership. As Director of Rooms, he achieved remarkable results this past year, including a 9% increase in Gross Operating Profit and a \$2.7 million improvement in Rooms Division profits, while maintaining an impressively low 3% turnover rate. Under his guidance, the hotel achieved the #2 ranking for guest satisfaction among North American Downtown Sheraton Hotels, all without renovations in over a decade.

Mijan’s leadership is hands-on and compassionate, fostering a family-like atmosphere among the hotel’s 500 employees. He leads by example, regularly staying late and working seven days a week to support his team, ensuring their success and the smooth operation of the hotel. His dedication extends beyond the workplace, as demonstrated by his care for an employee who tragically passed away, ensuring their family was contacted and supported in their time of need.

Mijan’s ability to balance operational excellence with genuine care for his team sets him apart, making him an exemplary leader and deserving of recognition.

Nominator: Tim Peters

Employer: Sheraton Greensboro

Title: General Manager



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Award Category: **Lodging Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Kevin Leonard

Employer: Basecamp Lodging LLC.

Title: Management Team

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Kevin Leonard is an exceptional leader whose integrity, kindness, and innovative approach have left a lasting impact on both his team and the hospitality industry. As a mentor, Kevin’s unwavering support and guidance have helped those around him overcome challenges and achieve their goals. His leadership is characterized by empathy and respect, creating a culture of care that extends beyond the workplace.

Kevin's dedication to fostering strong relationships is evident in his personal approach to leadership, such as taking the time to check on team members during challenging moments, offering the support and encouragement needed to uplift them. His ability to balance strength and compassion inspires those he works with, reinforcing a workplace culture rooted in positivity and mutual respect.

Under Kevin's leadership, his company has thrived through innovative strategies and his ability to motivate and inspire. Beyond his professional accomplishments, Kevin demonstrates his commitment to the community, serving as the "house dad" at his son’s ballet school, a reflection of his hospitality and genuine care for others.

Kevin Leonard embodies the spirit of the Stars of the Industry Award through his exceptional contributions, leadership, and dedication. His kindness and impactful leadership make him a deserving nominee for the Hospitality Supplier of the Year award.

Nominator: Ann Saxman
Employer: Basecamp Lodging LLC
Title: Innkeeper



Award Category: **Lodging Operator of the Year**

Nominee: Pete Byers

Employer: Summit Hospitality Group

Title: Regional Director of Operations

Location: Raleigh

Nominee’s Impact:

Pete Byers is an exceptional leader whose decades-long career in hospitality exemplifies operational excellence, community engagement, and mentorship. With nearly a decade of service at Summit Hospitality Group, Pete has been instrumental in the success of multiple properties, including the AC Hotel Raleigh Downtown and The Willard Restaurant. Recently transitioning to Regional Director of Operations for the Downtown Raleigh Market, Pete’s leadership continues to drive outstanding results and successful openings.

Pete’s influence extends beyond operations. As a passionate community leader, he dedicates his time to organizations such as Duke Children’s Hospital, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Frankie Lemmon School, reflecting his deep commitment to service and philanthropy. His leadership style is characterized by mentorship and empowerment, fostering a supportive culture where team members thrive professionally and personally.

A proud North Carolina native, Pete’s impact on the industry and his community is profound. His expertise, integrity, and dedication to making a difference make him a deserving nominee for NCRLA’s Lodging Operator of the Year award.

Nominator: Andrew Strickland

Employer: Summit Hospitality

Title: Corp. Director of Sales



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Award Category: **Lodging Operator of the Year**

Nominee: Jim Gratton

Employer: Marriott International

Title: Area General Manager

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Jim has been a dedicated leader within Marriott International for over 21 years, bringing extensive experience and impactful leadership to the hospitality industry. As Area General Manager since 2019, he oversees 625 rooms across three premier properties in Charlotte—Marriott SouthPark, Renaissance SouthPark, and AC Hotel SouthPark. Before this role, Jim served as Area Director in the Greater Philadelphia Area, managing 20 Marriott Select hotels with an annual revenue of \$150 million, showcasing his ability to lead at scale and deliver results.

Jim’s influence extends beyond operational excellence. He is a committed mentor, shaping the next generation of hospitality leaders through his work at Marriott and his involvement with the James Madison University Hart School of Hospitality, Sport, and Recreation Management program, his alma mater. His dedication to the industry is further demonstrated by his service on the Board of Directors for the North Carolina Restaurant & Lodging Association since 2023.

Jim’s exceptional leadership, commitment to mentorship, and contributions to advancing the hospitality industry set him apart as a deserving candidate for recognition. His impact is felt not only within the properties he manages but across the broader community of hospitality professionals.

Nominator: Chris Mackey

Employer: NCRLA

Title: VP of Communications



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Award Category: **Restaurant Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Edgar Aguilar

Employer: Charlotte Marriott SouthPark

Title: Banquet Chef

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Edgar Aguilar is the cornerstone of culinary excellence at the Marriott SouthPark, exemplifying dedication, professionalism, and an unwavering commitment to his team and guests. With 22 years of service, Edgar consistently leads by example, tackling everything from intricate event preparation to executing large-scale banquets with a calm and solution-oriented approach. His actions, rather than words, inspire his team and ensure the seamless success of every event.

Edgar’s exceptional contributions have directly resulted in the Marriott SouthPark’s Banquet Food Quality score achieving a perfect 100 in six of the past 12 months, a testament to his drive and meticulous attention to detail. Recently named the SouthPark complex’s Associate of the Month for September, Edgar is recognized not only for his culinary skills but also for his reliability, teamwork, and compassion.

Originally from Guatemala and a Charlotte resident for over 30 years, Edgar takes immense pride in his work and his role as a mentor to his colleagues. His passion for excellence and genuine care for others make him an integral part of the Marriott SouthPark team and a deserving nominee for Lodging/Restaurant Associate of the Year. Edgar’s contributions set the standard for hospitality and leave a lasting impression on everyone he serves.

Nominator: Wes Bartlett

Employer: CLT Marriott SouthPark

Title: Director of Operations



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Award Category: **Restaurant Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Chris Lovegood

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: Restaurant Server

Location: Asheville

Nominee’s Impact:

Chris Lovegood embodies Parks’ core value of passion, consistently creating memorable guest experiences with his warm and bubbly demeanor. His genuine love for hospitality shines through in every interaction, and his dedication to improving processes and enhancing the guest experience has made a significant impact on the team and the restaurant.

As a natural leader, Chris takes initiative to train and mentor new employees, setting them up for success with clear guidance and growth opportunities. His adaptability is unmatched, as he seamlessly steps into any role that needs support, always maintaining a positive attitude and prioritizing the guest experience.

Chris’s reliability and proactive approach set him apart. He is fully engaged and frequently celebrates his colleagues’ achievements, fostering a supportive and uplifting team culture. His commitment extends beyond daily operations, as he actively participates in company events, representing the Parks brand with professionalism and pride.

Chris Lovegood’s passion, leadership, and dedication inspire his peers and elevate the entire team, making him a deserving nominee for the Restaurant Employee of the Year award. His contributions are a testament to the values and excellence of the Parks family.

Nominator: Boone Hollar
Employer: Parks Hospitality Group
Title: F&B Assistant Outlets Manager



Award Category: **Restaurant Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Tiphannie Drakeford

Employer: Biscuitville

Title: Shift Leader

Location: Greensboro

Nominee’s Impact:

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Nominator: Alon Vanterpool

Employer: Biscuitville

Title: Shift Leader



Stars of the Industry 2025



Award Category: **Restaurant Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Gina Aiello

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: Restaurant Server

Location: Charlotte

Nominee's Impact:

Gina exemplifies the qualities of an exceptional hospitality professional, making her a standout candidate for the NCRLA Restaurant Employee of the Year Award. With extensive experience in the service industry, Gina pairs her expertise with a collaborative and positive attitude, earning her the admiration of both guests and colleagues.

Her background as a nurse in California informs her approach to customer service, bringing a nurturing and instinctive attentiveness to guest interactions. She ensures that every individual feels genuinely cared for, providing not just excellent service but also a heartfelt hospitality experience. This unique ability to combine professionalism with warmth distinguishes her in the industry.

Gina's punctuality and professionalism set a high standard for the team. Her thoughtful and adaptable communication style enhances guest satisfaction, and her unmatched attention to detail ensures a seamless and memorable dining experience. She tackles challenges head-on, consistently going above and beyond to resolve issues and guarantee every guest leaves happy, no matter the circumstances.

Gina's dedication to creating exceptional guest experiences, coupled with her work ethic and natural warmth, make her an invaluable asset to her team. Her consistent excellence, nurturing demeanor, and ability to elevate every interaction embody the highest standards of the hospitality industry, making her truly deserving of this prestigious recognition.

Nominator: Christophe Le Chatton

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: General Manager



Stars of the Industry 2025



Award Category: **Restaurant Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Michael Recker

Employer: Chai Pani

Title: Server/Bartender

Location: Asheville

Nominee’s Impact:

Michael’s exceptional career in hospitality and his unwavering commitment to serving others make him an outstanding candidate for recognition. With a rich history in Asheville’s culinary scene, Michael has held pivotal roles, from Sous Chef at Copper Crown to Assistant General Manager at Benne on Eagle, a restaurant that garnered national acclaim as one of TIME Magazine's Top 100 Places and home to James Beard-nominated chefs. In each role, Michael’s dedication to hospitality has positively impacted colleagues and guests alike.

Currently serving and bartending at the James Beard Award-winning Chai Pani, Michael has quickly distinguished himself. Within just two months, he was entrusted with training new servers to elevate the restaurant’s service standards and was tapped for a management role. His ability to inspire and lead others underscores his natural talent for fostering growth and excellence.

Michael’s impact extends beyond the workplace into the broader Asheville community. In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, which devastated the region, Michael volunteered his culinary expertise to feed thousands through a partnership with World Central Kitchen. At a time when 90% of the back-of-house team was unavailable, he stepped in, providing critical support and bringing a sense of humor and levity to difficult days marked by trauma and uncertainty.

What truly sets Michael apart is his steadfast reliability and selflessness. He consistently “shows up,” whether to mentor colleagues, deliver exceptional service, or support his community in times of crisis. Michael’s ability to combine professional excellence with compassion and resilience makes him a shining example of what hospitality represents, making him more than deserving of this honor.

Nominator: Chelsea Deming

Employer: Rhubarb

Title: Director of Operations



Stars of the Industry 2025



Award Category: **Restaurant Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Serena Ortiz

Employer: Grandover Resort

Title: AM Lead Cook

Location: Greensboro

Nominee’s Impact:

Serena Ortiz embodies the spirit of excellence, leadership, and dedication, making her an exemplary candidate for recognition as a Hospitality Champion. With over 23 years at Grandover Resort, Serena has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to her role, the team, and the guests she serves. Rising from prep cook to Lead Cook for the Banquet Kitchen's morning team, Serena is renowned for her unmatched work ethic, culinary expertise, and leadership.

Serena's ability to perform under pressure is extraordinary. Whether managing a breakfast service for over 300 guests single-handedly or crafting a precise wedding tasting for four, her grace and precision shine through. Her foresight and adaptability ensure that she always has a backup plan for unexpected challenges, accommodating guests with dietary restrictions or last-minute needs effortlessly. Her contributions are a cornerstone of Grandover Resort's reputation for exceptional hospitality.

Beyond her technical skills, Serena’s leadership sets her apart. She is a patient and understanding mentor, fostering a supportive environment for new team members and building a strong community of culinarians. Her positive attitude and genuine joy in her work uplift everyone around her, creating a sense of family within the kitchen.

Her dedication extends beyond her immediate responsibilities. During the Wyndham Golf Championship, Serena stepped in to assist another property amid a staff shortage caused by a COVID-19 outbreak. Despite already completing a busy morning shift, she led a team to help execute a banquet for over 1,500 guests, epitomizing her reliability and team spirit.

Serena’s roots in Oaxaca, Mexico—known as the culinary heart of the country—are a testament to her passion for cuisine and her cultural pride. Her love for cooking, especially dishes like chilaquiles, reflects her authenticity and connection to her heritage.

Serena Ortiz is not just a talented chef but a remarkable leader and teammate whose tireless efforts have profoundly impacted her community and colleagues. Her humility, dedication, and extraordinary contributions make her more than deserving of this prestigious honor.

Nominator: Patrick O’Dawe

Employer: Koury Corp.

Title: Executive Chef



Award Category: **Restaurant Employee of the Year**

Nominee: Leon McGowan

Employer: Goodwinds Restaurant

Title: Chef

Location: Rodanthe

Nominee’s Impact:

Leon is the driving force behind the restaurant's success, exemplifying steadfast leadership and inspiring his team to perform at their best. With a calm yet strong demeanor, Leon fosters a supportive and dynamic environment in the back of the house, enabling his team to consistently deliver exceptional results.

As a leader, Leon’s ability to guide and motivate his team stands out. His steady presence creates a sense of stability and confidence, empowering his colleagues to tackle challenges with a “heroic energy” that translates into seamless operations and high-quality output. Whether managing daily responsibilities or navigating unforeseen obstacles, Leon leads by example, setting a standard of excellence that inspires those around him.

Leon's impact goes beyond operational success; his leadership shapes a cohesive and motivated team that contributes to the restaurant's overall achievements. His dedication, resilience, and unwavering commitment to his role make him an indispensable part of the team and a deserving candidate for recognition.

Nominator: Kristal Willis
Employer: Goodwinds Restaurant
Title: General Manager



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Oksana Kravcenko

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: Executive Pastry Chef

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Oksana Kravcenko exemplifies exceptional leadership, innovation, and passion, making her an ideal candidate for NCRLA Restaurant Manager of the Year. As the leader of The Ballantyne’s pastry department, Oksana consistently elevates guest experiences through her unparalleled ability to craft desserts that seamlessly blend elegance and extraordinary flavor. Every creation is more than a dish—it is an unforgettable experience, embodying the highest standards of quality and care.

Oksana’s relentless drive for innovation sets her apart. Even after more than a year in her role, she continues to surprise and inspire her colleagues by refining her craft and pushing the boundaries of excellence. This unwavering commitment to improvement demonstrates her passion for her work and her dedication to delivering something new and exciting every day.

A cornerstone of Oksana’s success is her leadership and mentorship. She invests significant time and energy into the growth of her team, fostering a cohesive and highly skilled group. Her guidance extends beyond her immediate staff, as she also supports local interns, helping to cultivate the next generation of culinary talent. Her ability to inspire and nurture others ensures that her influence extends far beyond her own kitchen.

Oksana’s contributions are integral to The Ballantyne’s guest experience. Her pastry kitchen touches nearly every aspect of the hotel’s service, from bespoke desserts for VIPs to delightful cookies for spa guests. Her meticulous attention to detail ensures that every request, no matter how small, meets her exacting standards of excellence.

Oksana’s limitless potential, culinary brilliance, and ability to lead with humility and enthusiasm make her a vital asset to The Ballantyne and a shining example of what exceptional leadership looks like. Her dedication to her craft, her team, and the guests she serves makes her more than deserving of this prestigious recognition.

Nominator: Christophe Le Chatton
Employer: Ballantyne Hotel
Title: General Manager



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Justin Raupp

Employer: Prime Barbecue

Title: General Manager

Location: Knightdale

Nominee's Impact:

Justin is a remarkable leader and a cornerstone of Prime Barbecue's success. A U.S. Army Veteran and Wounded Warrior, Justin transitioned into the hospitality industry after taking a barbecue class through the Wounded Warrior Project in 2014. With no prior restaurant experience, he became an essential part of the team, helping launch Prime Barbecue's catering operations and later opening the restaurant during the pandemic in May 2020.

Justin's extraordinary dedication and leadership were on full display during the restaurant's opening, where he single-handedly managed trimming, fire control, ordering, staff hiring, and quality assurance, even sleeping in the pitroom to ensure barbecue quality and meet guest demand. His ability to remain focused under pressure has been critical to the restaurant's ability to navigate challenges and achieve national recognition, including features in Southern Living and Texas Monthly.

In addition to operational excellence, Justin has a vision for creating exceptional guest experiences. His leadership was instrumental in executing large-scale projects such as the Pinehurst Barbecue Festival and the U.S. Open catering contract, where his team served up to 1,000 guests daily. His marketing expertise has elevated the Prime Barbecue brand on a national stage, and his servant-leader mentality inspires his team to reach new heights.

Justin's humility, heart for hospitality, and unmatched determination make him an invaluable leader. His ability to see a need and create impactful solutions exemplifies the highest standards of the industry. As a trusted advisor in all business decisions and a mentor to his team, Justin is the blueprint for exceptional leadership and is highly deserving of this recognition.

Nominator: Jennifer Kelly

Employer: JNK Public Relations

Title: Founder



Stars of the Industry 2025



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Bruce Conyers

Employer: Biscuitville

Title: Restaurant Operator

Location: Greensboro

Nominee's Impact:

Bruce Conyers is a remarkable leader whose decades-long career with Biscuitville Fresh Southern® exemplifies excellence, dedication, and compassion. Honored during Black History Month in 2023 as a notable Black community leader, Bruce's impact within the organization and beyond is profound.

Beginning his journey at Biscuitville as a Shift Leader in 1981 after serving in the U.S. Army, Bruce quickly rose through the ranks, earning the prestigious Operator of the Year Award in both 2001 and 2002. Now the Operator of Biscuitville's Huffman Mill Road location in Burlington, Bruce leads one of the top-performing restaurants among more than 80 Biscuitville locations across three states. Generating over \$3 million in annual revenue within just 8.5 hours of daily operations, his location's consistent success reflects his effective leadership style.

Bruce's ability to inspire loyalty and camaraderie among his team is unparalleled. More than half of his 30-40 team members have worked under his leadership for 15 years or more—a testament to the positive, supportive environment he fosters. Leading by example, Bruce is hands-on in every aspect of the business, teaching his team how to excel and empowering them to take ownership of their roles. His compassionate approach ensures that team members' needs are met, whether through schedule adjustments or personal support, while also holding them accountable for high performance.

Beyond operational success, Bruce's contributions extend to innovation and community impact. He originated the idea for Biscuitville's "Breakfast After Dark," a decade-long fundraising event that supported local charities. His warm, guest-focused management style is evident daily as he engages directly with customers, ensuring every experience exceeds expectations.

Outside of work, Bruce's generosity shines through. Along with his wife, Tamera, he has two children, recently adopted his niece, and opens his home to foster children in need, exemplifying the same compassion and care he brings to his professional life.

Bruce's leadership, heart, and unwavering dedication make him a cornerstone of Biscuitville's success and a shining example of what it means to lead with integrity, empathy, and excellence. He is deeply deserving of this recognition.

Nominator: Alon Vanterpool
Employer: Biscuitville
Title: Internal Comms Dir.



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Jonathan Shuler

Employer: Dilworth Tasting Room

Title: Culinary Director

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Chef Jonathan Shuler is a visionary culinary leader redefining the Charlotte dining scene with his creativity, skill, and passion. As Culinary Director of Dilworth Tasting Room (DTR), Chef Jon brings together classical training, diverse experiences, and a commitment to crafting dishes that evoke comfort and community while pushing the boundaries of innovation.

Chef Jon’s culinary creations, such as sofrito chicken empanadas and dukkah-crusted tuna, exemplify his ability to blend traditional and modern flavors. These dishes, praised for their balance of comfort and sophistication, consistently delight guests and highlight his mastery of cultural fusion, seamlessly integrating Puerto Rican and Croatian influences under the guidance of DTR’s owners, Zoe and Jaffer Kovic.

His professional journey underscores his dedication to excellence. A graduate of The Chef’s Academy, Chef Jon honed his skills through staging in Michelin-starred kitchens, bringing a world-class perspective to DTR. Starting when the company operated a single location, Chef Jon redefined the menu and elevated the dining experience. His talent and leadership caught the owners’ attention, positioning him to lead the launch of two additional restaurants and rise to Culinary Director.

Chef Jon’s impact extends beyond the kitchen. A natural mentor, he fosters growth within his team, creating a culture of collaboration and innovation. His commitment to his craft and to memorable guest experiences sets him apart as a rising star in the hospitality industry. Chef Jon is not only shaping the future of DTR but also establishing himself as a leading figure in the Charlotte culinary scene, making him richly deserving of this recognition.

Nominator: Mandy Idol
Employer: Indigo Collective Group
Title: Owner



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Eric Hamann

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: Restaurant Manager

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Eric Hamann is an outstanding leader whose dedication, expertise, and mentorship have made him an invaluable part of his organization. His ability to tackle challenges head-on, particularly with point-of-sale systems, sets him apart as a reliable problem-solver. Whether addressing technical glitches or facilitating effective communication across departments, Eric's collaborative approach ensures seamless operations and consistently positive outcomes.

With many years of experience, Eric has witnessed and adapted to the company’s evolving needs, consistently demonstrating resilience and a positive attitude. His productivity and efficiency are unmatched, and his focus on achieving the best results has made him the go-to person for resolving complex issues.

What truly distinguishes Eric is his approachability and commitment to supporting his team. He is not only a mentor but also a trusted resource for employees at all levels. A shining example of this is the impact he had on Arlexis Brea, a former restaurant supervisor and now HR Manager. Arlexis credits her success to Eric’s patient guidance during her early days as a supervisor. He went above and beyond, arriving early to teach her critical skills, such as navigating the Micros system, with patience and care.

Eric’s leadership is defined by his attentiveness to both employees and customers, fostering an environment of trust and growth. His ability to mentor, solve problems, and lead with empathy makes him a standout in the hospitality industry and richly deserving of recognition as NCRLA Manager of the Year.

Nominator: Christophe Le Chatton

Employer: Ballantyne Hotel

Title: General Manager



Stars of the Industry 2025



Award Category: Restaurant Manager of the Year

Nominee: Boone Hollar

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: F&B Assistant Outlets Manager

Location: Asheville

Nominee’s Impact:

Boone Hollar is an exemplary leader in the hospitality industry, making an indelible impact as the restaurant manager at Embassy Suites Asheville Downtown. His professionalism, strong communication skills, and exceptional decision-making set him apart, but it is his unwavering dedication to his team and guests that truly distinguishes him.

Boone's leadership is grounded in fostering meaningful relationships and a positive work environment. He takes time to meet individually with team members, offering mentorship and guidance that supports both personal and professional growth. His approachable demeanor and genuine care have earned him the trust and respect of his staff. Even in challenging situations, Boone handles difficult conversations and decisions with professionalism and tact, ensuring his team feels supported.

His innovative initiatives have significantly enhanced team morale and guest experiences. For example, Boone implemented a Polaroid photo project during the opening of Soprana Rooftop Cucina, creating a sense of camaraderie and pride among staff. He also organized a Thanksgiving potluck to provide comfort and joy for team members away from their families, particularly after the impact of Hurricane Helene. His ability to connect with his team on a personal level has created a collaborative and inspiring workplace culture.

Boone’s creativity extends to guest engagement, launching successful events like trivia nights and providing board games to encourage longer stays. His unique cocktails and mocktails, such as the “Froot Loops” cocktail and adult root beer float, have delighted patrons and added a memorable touch to special events. His focus on operational excellence is evident in his role retraining the host team at Soprana, where his efforts led to significant improvements in service scores and guest satisfaction.

What truly sets Boone apart is his infectious positivity, sense of humor, and ability to find silver linings even during tough times. He has built a workplace culture that emphasizes collaboration, creativity, and excellence. Boone is not only an exceptional manager but also a role model whose contributions have elevated his team, his guests, and the hospitality industry as a whole. Boone Hollar exemplifies the very best of what this industry offers and is a truly deserving candidate for NCRLA’s Restaurant Manager of the Year.

Nominator: Brian Sherwood

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: F&B Director



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Ruben Gonzalez

Employer: Tar Heel Capital - Wendy's

Title: General Manager

Location: Shelby

Nominee's Impact:

Ruben Gonzalez is an outstanding leader and role model in the QSR industry. As General Manager of the busiest Wendy's in the Carolinas and one of the highest-volume locations in the Southeast, Ruben has grown sales year over year while maintaining a standard of excellence. His leadership, marked by professionalism and respect, fosters a collaborative and high-performing team.

Ruben prioritizes exceeding guest expectations, creating a welcoming environment for all, including mobile-order guests and delivery drivers, who often receive small gestures like complimentary Frosties. His efforts have helped generate over \$500,000 in mobile sales in the past year. He emphasizes training and team development, promoting his entire management team from within and ensuring his staff are well-prepared to succeed.

Committed to community engagement, Ruben organizes events like Kids' Night and leads top fundraising efforts for the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. His compassion and leadership shone during the tragic loss of his Assistant General Manager, as he supported the grieving family and team with care and empathy.

Recognized as one of Wendy's top 200 General Managers globally, Ruben exemplifies excellence in operations, guest service, and community involvement, making him highly deserving of recognition.

Nominator: Tad Dolbier

Employer: Tar Heel Capital

Title: CEO



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Erickson Alessi

Employer: Built on Hospitality/The Goodyear House

Title: Director of Operations

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

Erickson Alessi is a visionary leader whose dedication, creativity, and operational excellence make him a standout in the hospitality industry. As Director of Operations for Built on Hospitality and a driving force at The Goodyear House, Erickson has consistently raised the bar for guest experiences, team performance, and organizational growth.

Erickson’s contributions include developing streamlined operational systems that improve efficiency and enhance guest satisfaction. At The Goodyear House, he has fostered a culture of accountability and excellence, mentoring staff to take ownership of their roles and inspiring confidence across the organization. His leadership during a challenging sales slump earlier this year exemplifies his ability to turn adversity into opportunity. By hosting team workshops, emphasizing personalized guest interactions, and collaborating on new menu and beverage concepts, Erickson helped boost sales, improve guest satisfaction, and elevate team morale.

His commitment to quality and consistency is reflected in every guest interaction, and his innovative mindset has driven creative event programming and new menu offerings that have strengthened the restaurant’s reputation. Beyond operations, Erickson actively supports and mentors staff at all levels, while building partnerships within the local hospitality community to champion industry-wide excellence.

Erickson Alessi’s ability to lead with vision, inspire teams, and deliver exceptional results positions him as a true leader in hospitality and a deserving candidate for recognition.

Nominator: Sean Potter
Employer: Built On Hospitality
Title: Founder



Stars of the Industry 2025



Award Category: **Restaurant Manager of the Year**

Nominee: Peter Layshock

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: Stewarding Manager

Location: Cary

Nominee’s Impact:

Peter has demonstrated exceptional dedication, leadership, and positivity in his role at The Umstead Hotel and Spa, making him a vital part of its success. Starting as a Steward in 2021, Peter’s strong work ethic and commitment to excellence earned him swift promotions to Supervisor, Chief Steward, and now Manager. His progression reflects his ability to excel in the challenging and essential role of stewarding within the hotel’s prestigious Forbes 5-star restaurant and multiple outlets.

Peter’s leadership ensures the seamless care of the hotel’s glassware and plates, critical to maintaining the property’s high standards. Despite being in a behind-the-scenes role, his impact is deeply felt. He leads by example, frequently stepping into demanding tasks during busy shifts, and his words of encouragement uplift his team. As one Sous Chef noted, Peter’s positivity and acknowledgment during stressful moments inspire those around him and keep the energy of the kitchen upbeat.

In 2022, Peter’s contributions were formally recognized when he received The Umstead’s Shining Star Manager Award for embodying the organization’s core values of respect and a positive attitude. His infectious outlook not only motivates his team but also ensures operational excellence, making him an invaluable asset to the hotel.

Peter’s dedication, leadership, and ability to foster a supportive and high-performing environment set him apart, making him highly deserving of recognition.

Nominator: Leah Goodnight
Employer: The Umstead Hotel
Title: Director of Marketing



Award Category: **Restaurateur of the Year**

Nominee: Jaffer & Zoe Kovic

Employer: Dilworth Tasting Room

Title: Owners

Location: Charlotte

Nominee's Impact:

Zoe and Jaffer Kovic are trailblazers in Charlotte's restaurant and hospitality scene, deserving of recognition as Restaurateurs of the Year. With over two decades of combined experience, they have transformed Dilworth Tasting Room (DTR) from a quaint wine retail shop into a premier dining destination with three locations across Charlotte's most vibrant neighborhoods: Dilworth, SouthPark, and Plaza Midwood. Their ability to blend elevated culinary experiences with a warm, approachable ambiance has cemented their reputation as leaders in the local culinary landscape.

Zoe and Jaffer's commitment to quality and innovation shines through in every aspect of DTR. Their curated wine lists, creative cocktail programs, and globally inspired menus, including standout dishes like Prosciutto and Brie Flatbread and Truffle Gnocchi, consistently delight guests. Their efforts are reflected in glowing reviews that highlight both the food and the welcoming atmosphere they have cultivated, making DTR a top choice for date nights, group gatherings, and special occasions.

What truly sets Zoe and Jaffer apart is their dedication to hospitality and their team. They foster a culture of creativity, collaboration, and growth, as noted by José Alejandro Ibanez, their Bar Program Director, who praises their passion and leadership. Their ability to inspire and develop their team ensures that every guest experience reflects the highest standards of excellence.

Through resilience and vision, including navigating the challenges of the pandemic, they have continued to expand their brand while staying deeply rooted in the community. Their restaurants serve not only as dining destinations but as hubs of hospitality, innovation, and inclusivity. Zoe and Jaffer's outstanding contributions to the Charlotte dining scene exemplify the best of restaurateur leadership, making them truly deserving of this honor.

Nominator: Mandy Idol

Employer: Indigo Collective Group

Title: Owner



Stars of the Industry 2025



Award Category: **Restaurateur of the Year**

Nominee: Matt Kelly

Employer: MK Hospitality

Title: Owner

Location: Durham

Nominee's Impact:

Matt Kelly is a transformative leader who has played a pivotal role in establishing Durham as one of North Carolina's most popular dining destinations. Known for his servant heart and family-oriented leadership, Matt exemplifies a culture of care and creativity that resonates throughout his restaurant establishments. Guests are welcomed with warmth and professionalism, a reflection of the values Matt instills in his team.

Beyond his success in the restaurant industry, Matt is deeply committed to his community. He brings innovative thinking and heartfelt dedication to supporting local charities, particularly those addressing causes he is passionate about, such as providing housing for cancer patients receiving treatment at Duke. His impact extends far beyond Durham, touching lives across the state through his leadership and philanthropy.

Matt Kelly's ability to combine visionary leadership, community engagement, and an unwavering commitment to excellence makes him a true blessing to the Durham community and beyond. His contributions to the restaurant industry and his compassionate service to others set him apart as a leader deserving of recognition.

Nominator: Steve Griffin

Employer: Insurance People

Title: President



Stars of the Industry 2025

Award Category: **Ken Conrad Award for Service to the Community**



Nominee: Tryon Distributing

Employer: Tryon Distributing

Title: Director of Culture and Communications

Location: Charlotte

Nominee’s Impact:

For nearly 40 years, Tryon Distributing has demonstrated a deep commitment to supporting local communities and the hospitality industry. Following the devastation of Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina, Tryon Distributing played a vital role in relief efforts by establishing a multi-day supply and food distribution center as part of the Polk County disaster relief network. Their team provided free lunches for hundreds of residents and access to essential services like showers and laundry facilities, offering crucial support to families in need.

In addition to disaster relief, Tryon Distributing has shown unwavering support for hospitality workers over the past two years. They have donated 100% of the proceeds from their annual Tryon Charity Golf Classic to the NC Hospitality Worker Relief Fund, providing critical aid to struggling hospitality employees. As Ed Johnston, President of Tryon, stated, “Hospitality workers aren’t just our customers; they are our friends and colleagues, and truly the backbone of our entire industry.”

Tryon Distributing’s actions exemplify the power of businesses working hand-in-hand with communities to create meaningful impact, making them a deserving nominee for recognition.

Nominator: Chris Mackey

Employer: NCRLA

Title: VP of Communications



Award Category: **Ken Conrad Award for Service to the Community**

Nominee: Dean Neff

Employer: Seabird

Title: Owner/Chef

Location: Wilmington

Nominee’s Impact:

Chef Dean Neff, owner of Seabird in Wilmington, NC, exemplifies community service and culinary excellence. As a James Beard Foundation “Outstanding Chef” Finalist, Neff is recognized for his high standards and leadership.

Since opening Seabird in 2021, Neff has prioritized local hunger relief, sustainable seafood, and hospitality industry support. He serves on the Food Bank of Central and Eastern NC council, raising nearly \$15K through creative fundraising. He supports the North Side Food Coop, Wilmington Warming Shelter, and GLOW (Girls Leadership Academy of Wilmington).

Neff’s partnerships with national groups like Southern Smoke and The Giving Kitchen have raised significant funds and provided direct aid to hospitality workers. He is also a strong advocate for sustainable seafood through the NC Oyster Trail and other initiatives.

Dean Neff’s impactful leadership and unwavering commitment to his community make him an exceptional candidate for the Ken Conrad Award for Service to the Community.

Nominator: Jennifer Kelly

Employer: JNK Public Relations

Title: Founder



Stars of the Industry 2025