



NCRLA

Stars of the Industry

AWARD NOMINATIONS



February 23, 2026
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.



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Stars of the Industry

Stars of the Industry 2026

Nominee: Charles Tolo

Employer: Parizade

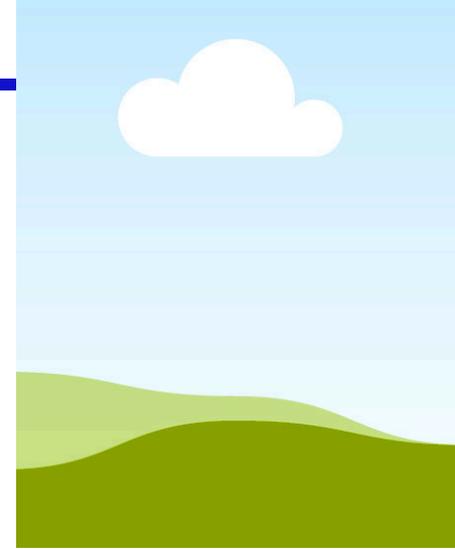
Title: Server

Location: Durham

Nominator: Muihrienne Leggat

Employer: Giorgios Hospitality Group

Title: Operations Director



Nominee’s Impact:

Charles Tolo’s impact is best understood through the voices of those who work beside him and the guests who return to Parizade again and again because of him. He is described as a “silent giant” and “a beautiful soul,” someone whose heart is defined by love, hospitality, and an unwavering commitment to others. For decades, his care for guests and teammates alike has been tireless, intentional, and deeply personal.

Charles has been part of the Giorgios Hospitality Group since 1991, beginning as a teenage dishwasher and growing into the lead waiter at Parizade, a role he has held since 2009. He does not seek leadership, yet he is consistently chosen for it because of his effectiveness, high standards, and quiet authority. As one colleague shared, “In all of my career of hospitality, he shines the brightest with his quiet, respectful mannerisms.”

Guests know Charles by name. He is the most frequently requested server, and many long-term guests plan their visits around him. He remembers names, families, anniversaries, birthdays, dietary needs, preferred drinks, and even how guests like their butter softened or their coffee heated. He never forgets a milestone, often handwriting cards years after a guest’s last visit and personally recognizing celebrations or offering condolences when needed. One nominator noted, “He never fails to write a handwritten card... even if it has been years since they visited.”

Behind the scenes, Charles sets the tone for excellence. He oversees nightly setup, ensures silverware, glassware, and stations meet exacting standards, assigns and checks side work, and is always the last to leave. He quietly supports other servers during service, filling waters, clearing plates, and assisting without drawing attention to himself. He also mentors younger staff, including hosting an annual lunch for graduating high school employees.

“Waiters cannot be trained to be like Charles,” one teammate wrote. “There is no one else like this soft-spoken man.” His care is genuine, his service instinctive, and his presence unforgettable. Charles does not just serve meals; he creates moments that stay with people for a lifetime.



Nominee:	Christopher Lovegood
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Restaurant Server
Location:	Asheville
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Nominator:	Boone Hollar
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Food & Beverage Assistant Outlets Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Christopher Lovegood’s impact has been evident since the earliest days of Soprana Rooftop Cucina. As one of the restaurant’s very first hires in October 2023, he helped establish the tone, culture, and level of service that define the guest experience today. His presence has shaped the restaurant in meaningful ways, and he continues to serve as one of its strongest ambassadors.

Chris brings genuine passion to his work and reflects Parks Hospitality Group’s core values through every interaction. He is known for his warm, bubbly demeanor and his ability to make guests feel welcome and cared for from the moment they arrive. He approaches each shift with energy and intention, consistently looking for ways to improve operations and elevate service. His initiative is steady, and he willingly steps in wherever support is needed, always with a positive, adaptable mindset.

As a peer leader, Chris plays an important role in training and coaching new team members. He leads with patience and clarity, helping others understand expectations and grow in confidence. He regularly shares thoughtful ideas to enhance the guest experience and is fully invested in the restaurant’s success.

Chris is dependable and emotionally present, someone his teammates trust and rely on. He celebrates his coworkers, participates in nearly every team event, and speaks proudly about the opportunities and culture within the organization. His passion, leadership, and commitment to hospitality have left a lasting mark on Soprana Rooftop Cucina, making him a highly deserving candidate for Restaurant Employee of the Year.



Nominee: Gergana 'Gerry' Mincheva

Employer: The Ballantyne Hotel

Title: Restaurant Server

Location: Charlotte

Nominator: Christophe Le Chatton

Employer: The Ballantyne Hotel

Title: General Manager



Nominee's Impact:

Gergana "Gerry" Mincheva's impact is deeply felt throughout The Ballantyne Hotel and especially within the Food and Beverage team she has helped anchor for the past decade. Over ten years of dedicated service, Gerry has become a true cornerstone of the operation, known for her extraordinary work ethic, gracious spirit, and genuine care for others.

From the moment she joined the Gallery Restaurant, it was clear that Gerry brought something special. She is often described as a "force of nature," someone whose presence elevates every space she works in. Over the years, she has seamlessly supported multiple areas of the department, including the hotel's beloved Afternoon Tea service. Many regular guests return specifically hoping to see her, a testament to the relationships she builds and the sense of welcome she creates. She has a rare gift for making people feel truly seen, valued, and cared for.

What sets Gerry apart most is her kindness and instinctive willingness to help. She consistently steps in without hesitation whenever someone needs support, regardless of the circumstance. Her selflessness and quiet strength have shaped the culture of the team in meaningful ways, reinforcing a spirit of collaboration, compassion, and professionalism.

In recognition of her impact, Gerry was named Team Member of the Year in 2023, an honor that reflects the respect and admiration she has earned from both leadership and peers. She is not only an exceptional employee, but also a role model and steady presence others rely on.

Gerry represents the very best of hospitality. Her heart for service, consistency, and genuine connection make her deeply deserving of recognition as Restaurant Employee of the Year.

Nominee: Karen Lopez

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: Herons AM Captain/Server

Location: Cary

Nominator: Leah Goodnight

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: Director of Marketing



Nominee’s Impact:

Karen’s impact is defined by steady growth, genuine care for guests, and a deep commitment to her team. Over nearly 10 years at The Umstead, she has built a remarkable path grounded in grace, curiosity, and service. Beginning as a concierge with the Spa Team, she was a natural with guests from the start, quickly earning a reputation for poise, warmth, and thoughtful connection. That same presence followed her as she moved into the Herons AM dining team, where her leadership potential continued to shine.

Karen’s progression has been driven by both skill and heart. She has grown from server assistant to server and now serves as acting Captain and Trainer, frequently stepping in as a Supervisor when needed. Teammates consistently note her reliability, versatility, and willingness to support others in any role. As one nomination shared, “Karen is hard working and can fill in any position... she always has helping hands for her team,” and “we can count on her”.

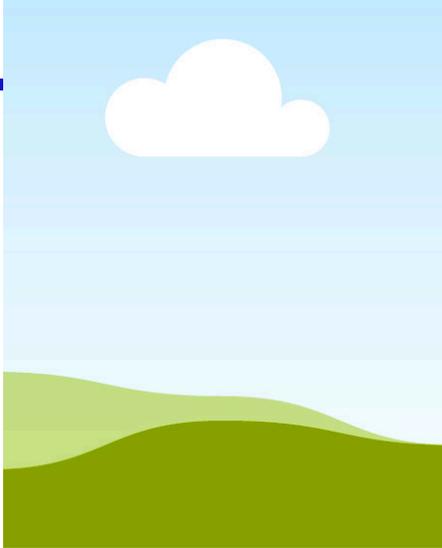
What truly distinguishes Karen is how she creates meaningful guest moments while teaching others to do the same. She leads by example, using her own ideas as training opportunities for new associates. One moment captures this perfectly: when a regular family shared that their young son, Adam, was about to become a big brother, Karen saw an opportunity to create a true “WOW” experience. Together with a newer associate, she arranged a custom menu with Adam’s name and Wild Kratts–themed coloring on the back, and surprised the parents with a congratulatory baby gift. It was thoughtful, personal, and deeply memorable.

Colleagues consistently describe Karen as cooperative, supportive, and someone who “always goes the extra mile for the guest and team,” even staying late to help coworkers after completing her own work.

Through quiet leadership, heartfelt service, and genuine mentorship, Karen exemplifies the true Umstead experience and leaves a lasting impression on everyone she serves.



Nominee:	Pearl Greenway
Employer:	BISCUITVILLE Fresh Southern
Title:	Operator
Location:	Graham
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Nominator:	Agnes Stevens
Employer:	RLF Communications
Title:	Vice President



Nominee’s Impact:

Pearl Greenway’s impact on the Biscuitville organization extends far beyond the walls of her Graham restaurant. As both a high-performing operator and a Certified Training Manager, Pearl is widely recognized as a leader who develops people, strengthens teams, and consistently puts the greater good of the organization first.

Pearl currently leads one of Biscuitville’s busiest locations, serving more than 270,000 meals annually and generating over \$3 million in sales, while maintaining exceptional People Excellence scores and one of the lowest turnover rates in the company. Team members routinely say, “People love to work with Pearl,” a reflection of the culture she has intentionally built through care, accountability, and celebration.

Her influence is multiplied through her role as a Certified Training Manager. Pearl has personally developed and launched more than 30 operators and assistant managers now leading restaurants across the brand. Her Graham location serves as a Certified Training Location, welcoming approximately 10 trainees each year to learn firsthand what high-performing leadership looks like. Pearl is known for willingly releasing her strongest managers to support the broader organization, even when it means short-term sacrifice for her own restaurant.

Pearl’s leadership style is deeply relational. She is a mentor to peers, a coach to new leaders, and a trusted guide for teens and young adults entering the workforce. Her hiring and onboarding process is intentional and values-driven, centered on Biscuitville’s core principles of authenticity, integrity, gratitude, accountability, and passion. New hires are paired with “Biscuit Buddies,” checked in on daily, and welcomed into a workplace that celebrates milestones and supports one another during difficult times.

Her manager, Wendell Williamson, shared a defining example of her leadership: “Pearl learned about a struggling location and called to let me know she was on her way. She arrived with one of her assistants and another operator. It would have been a difficult day otherwise. Pearl does not let others suffer.”

Pearl’s career journey—from a teenage food service employee to one of Biscuitville’s most trusted leaders—reflects her belief that every step matters. She leads with generosity, discipline, and heart, and her legacy is visible in the people she has developed and the culture she has created. Pearl Greenway exemplifies the very best of hospitality leadership.



Nominee: Lori Miller

Employer: Kipos Hellenic Cuisine

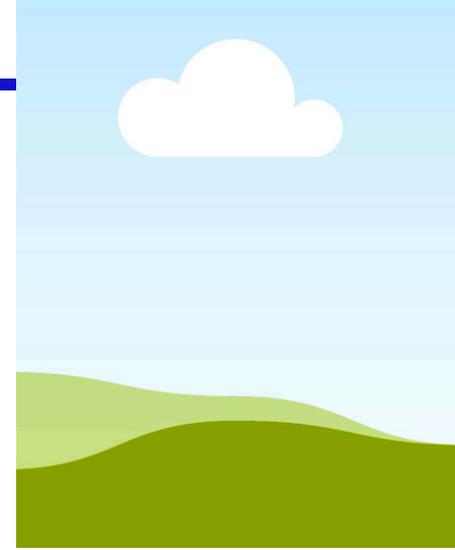
Title: General Manager

Location: Wilmington

Nominator: Muihrienne Leggat

Employer: Giorgios Hospitality Group

Title: Operations Director



Nominee's Impact:

Lori Miller's impact on Kipos Hellenic Cuisine is impossible to miss. Under her leadership, Kipos has grown into one of Wilmington's premier dining destinations, not just because of its food, but because of the culture, energy, and hospitality she brings to the restaurant every single day. Lori leads with clarity, high standards, and an infectious positivity. She shows up happy, engaged, and ready to lead, and her team knows exactly what is expected of them because she communicates with honesty, fairness, and consistency.

Lori has overseen tremendous growth, expanding Kipos from a single dining room to include two private dining spaces and a garden that has multiplied in size. What began as a restaurant has evolved into one of Wilmington's most vibrant social scenes, with the Kipos Garden Party becoming a signature experience. Through it all, Lori manages complexity with confidence, grace, and the belief that hospitality, while serious, should still be fun.

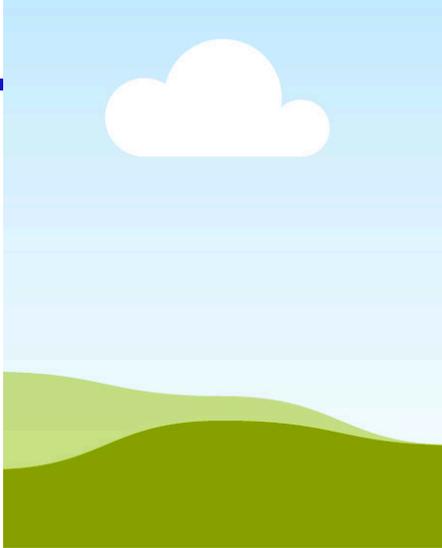
Those who work closest with her speak passionately about her leadership. Executive Chef and partner George Delidimos shared, "Lori is an exceptional general manager whose dedication and leadership elevate every aspect of Kipos... Her ability to solve problems, inspire those around her, and maintain a high standard of excellence makes her an outstanding contender for Restaurant Manager of the Year."

Lori is also a mentor and incubator for future leaders. One manager shared that when times get tough, she simply asks herself what Lori would do. Another reflected, "She is fair, fun, hardworking, and resilient... guiding, supporting, and elevating those around her."

On a personal level, Lori's hospitality leaves a lasting impression. Long before she led Kipos, she welcomed guests into a nearly closed restaurant with warmth, care, and generosity that felt like being invited into her own home. That moment revealed exactly who she is and why her leadership has transformed Kipos. Lori's influence is felt in every space she leads, and honoring her would reflect the very best of our industry.



Nominee:	Erin Macon
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Food & Beverage Operations Manager
Location:	Asheville
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Nominator:	Heather Hickman
Employer:	Parks Hospitality Group
Title:	Director of Food and Beverage



Nominee’s Impact:

Erin’s impact is felt in the steady, behind-the-scenes leadership that keeps the entire operation moving forward. As Operations Manager, she is described as the quiet force who holds the team together, leading with meticulous organization, foresight, and a genuine heart for the people around her. Excellence is not something she turns on when needed; it is a daily habit reflected in how she works and how she cares for her team.

Erin consistently goes far beyond her role, often coming in on her days off simply because she refuses to let her team feel unsupported. She thinks several steps ahead, anticipates challenges before they arise, and brings a level of care and consistency that elevates the entire operation. Her presence creates stability and confidence for those who work alongside her.

Her leadership was most powerfully demonstrated during Hurricane Helene. While uncertainty affected the entire community, Erin showed up every single day without hesitation. She coordinated meals for her team, ensured they had a safe place to stay within the hotel, organized resources, and personally checked in on staff members. In a time when nothing felt stable, she created structure, safety, and reassurance.

Beyond caring for her team, Erin extended that same compassion to the broader community. She helped coordinate free meals, supplies, and support for neighbors impacted by the storm, balancing the needs of guests, staff, and the community with calm, efficient leadership. As one nominator shared, her actions “became a lifeline for many.”

Erin leads with integrity, serves with heart, and shows up when it matters most. Her dedication to her team and community exemplifies the true spirit of hospitality and makes her deeply deserving of recognition.



Nominee: Jeremy Fox

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

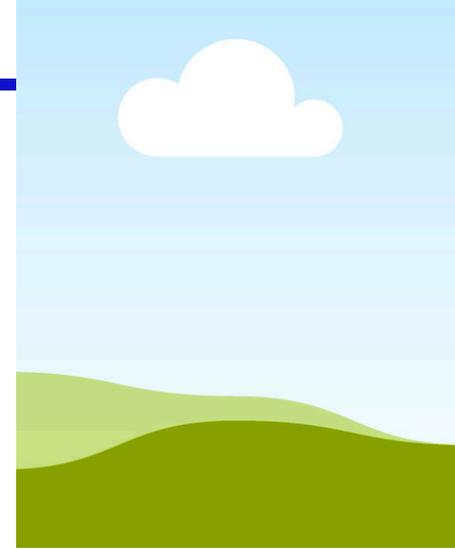
Title: Food & Beverage Director

Location: Cary

Nominator: TK Franklin

Employer: Parks Hospitality Group

Title: General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Jeremy Fox’s impact as a restaurant leader is felt immediately and consistently across our operation. He is a hands-on, deeply committed manager whose presence elevates both the guest experience and team culture every single day. Jeremy leads from the front, staying in motion and stepping wherever he is needed, whether that means supporting the front of house, troubleshooting behind the scenes, or assisting other departments across our two hotels.

What speaks most clearly to Jeremy’s leadership is the loyalty he inspires. Team members trust him, respect him, and choose to follow him. Several have moved with him from previous properties because of the way he leads: fairly, consistently, and with genuine care. Jeremy models the behavior he expects from others, and he does so without ego. There is truly no task beneath him. He has been seen plunging toilets, helping at the front desk, and even climbing into dumpsters to recover lost items for guests. His actions set a powerful tone that resonates throughout the team.

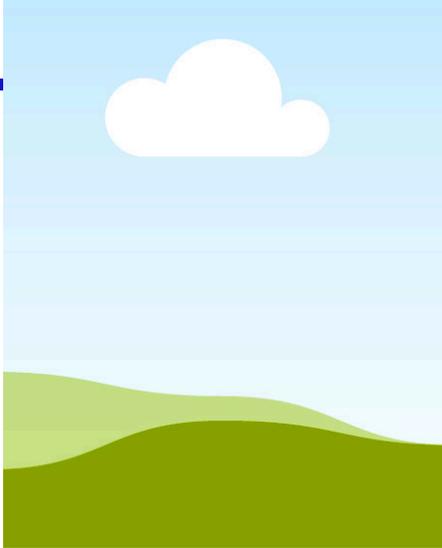
Jeremy’s versatility is another defining strength. He is often described as a “Swiss Army knife” because of his deep understanding of how all parts of the hotel and restaurant operation connect. He can step into nearly any role when needed, and he does so confidently and effectively.

Problem-solving comes naturally to Jeremy. He remains calm under pressure, thinks quickly, and always centers his decisions around guest satisfaction. Guests return because of the service culture he reinforces, and teams thrive because of the stability and support he provides.

Above all, Jeremy leads with heart. His loyalty, integrity, and work ethic make him an exceptional manager and a true example of hospitality leadership at its best.



Nominee:	Kelsey Alonso
Employer:	Persimmons Waterfront Restaurant
Title:	General Manager
Location:	New Bern
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Nominator:	Dean Quadir
Employer:	FCM Hotels
Title:	Corporate Director of Food & Beverage



Nominee’s Impact:

Kelsey Alonzo’s impact on Persimmons Waterfront Restaurant has been both immediate and transformative. Since joining as General Manager in March 2024, relocating more than 600 miles to take on the role, she quickly assessed the operation with clarity and purpose. Rather than making surface-level changes, Kelsey recognized that lasting improvement would require rebuilding culture through deeper relationships with staff, vendors, and guests.

From the start, Kelsey led with presence and intention. She begins each day by personally greeting every team member in the building and takes the time to explain not just what is changing, but why it matters and how each individual contributes to success. She is deeply hands-on in hiring, personally interviewing candidates and leading comprehensive service-oriented onboarding. This approach created trust, accountability, and alignment across the team.

Within months, the shift was unmistakable. The energy of the restaurant changed, service attitudes improved, and guests took notice. Reviews reflected higher satisfaction, repeat business increased, and by the end of her first year, the team was fully dialed in on delivering great food and great service. As one nominator noted, “It was very obvious...that a fundamental change in the culture of the Persimmons staff had occurred under Kelsey’s leadership.”

That cultural transformation delivered exceptional results. Throughout 2025, the restaurant consistently exceeded revenue forecasts, improved operational efficiency, and achieved record-high revenue and profit levels, even as others faced year-over-year declines. Kelsey’s leadership proves that “results come from people.” Her love of service is infectious, her standards are high, and her impact on staff, guests, and ownership truly reflects what it means to be a Star of the Industry.



Nominee: Sonya Gonzales

Employer: Prime Bistro & Wine Bar

Title: General Manager

Location: Morehead City

Nominator: Liza Merrell

Employer: 81 Hospitality Group

Title: Owner



Nominee's Impact:

Sonya has been an integral part of our hospitality family for more than 13 years, and watching her growth has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. She started as a server at Circa 81 and, through pure dedication, curiosity, and heart, grew into a confident leader and manager who helped shape the identity and success of Prime Bistro from the ground up.

When we opened Prime Bistro, Sonya stepped into the challenge of managing an entirely new concept with a different atmosphere and service style. She poured herself into learning every detail of what we wanted Prime to represent: elevated service, exceptional food and drink, and a welcoming culture that guests feel the moment they walk through the door. Today, Prime's strong reputation is a direct reflection of her commitment, leadership, and unwavering standards of excellence.

Sonya leads with poise, compassion, and strength. She consistently goes above and beyond for both guests and her team, and she is always the first to step in when help is needed, no matter the project or circumstance. Her growth is especially meaningful because she built it through experience and determination. Without formal training, she taught herself POS systems, financial reporting, and key performance indicators, fully buying into our vision and pushing herself to learn what she didn't yet know.

Guests regularly feel the impact of Sonya's leadership and hospitality. One recent guest shared, "Sonya and her team treated us like royalty," highlighting the personalized care, attention to detail, and memorable touches that define the Prime Bistro experience, from thoughtful birthday surprises to exceptional service throughout the evening.

Her heart for service extends far beyond the restaurant. During Hurricane Florence, while her own home was without power, Sonya worked tirelessly serving meals from the Dank Burrito food truck to people in need. She did the same during Hurricane Helene, volunteering her time in Western North Carolina. She shows up for her community and for the people around her without hesitation.

Sonya is unwavering in her commitment to service, her team, and her community. Prime's growth and reputation are largely due to her dedication, and it is truly a pleasure to work alongside someone who embodies hospitality so fully, both inside and outside the restaurant.



Nominee:	Eric Hamann
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	Assistant General Manager
Location:	Charlotte
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Nominator:	Christophe Le Chatton
Employer:	The Ballantyne Hotel
Title:	General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Eric’s impact on our restaurant is so deep and far-reaching that it is difficult to capture it fully on paper. He is not just a manager; he is the person who shapes our culture, develops our people, and sets the standard for what leadership looks like every single day.

Eric is an extraordinary mentor. Every new manager and emerging leader who joins our department benefits from his patience, guidance, and genuine desire to see others succeed. He never hesitates to step in, teach, or support someone through a challenge, and his influence can be seen in the many strong leaders who have grown under his care. His knowledge of our operations, systems, and service standards is unmatched, and he leads by example in everything he does.

What truly sets Eric apart is how he shows up for people. Even on the busiest or most difficult days, he finds time to check in, encourage the team, and make sure everyone feels seen and valued. He wants people to enjoy coming to work, and that care is felt the moment he walks through the door.

Because of his leadership and impact, Eric was recently promoted to Assistant General Manager at our Dunbar restaurant, a well-earned recognition of the respect he has earned across our team.

Eric is the heart of our operation, the person everyone turns to, and the kind of leader who leaves a lasting mark on both people and performance.



Nominee: Laura Ray

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: Food & Beverage Manager

Location: Cary

Nominator: Glaziela Mendonça

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: In-Room Dining Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Laura Ray’s impact on The Umstead Hotel is deeply personal, transformational, and felt every day by both the team she leads and the guests they serve. She is the kind of Food & Beverage leader many of us wait our entire careers to work for. Her professionalism, work ethic, and compassion have reshaped the culture of the department in a way that feels genuine, human, and lasting.

What sets Laura apart is how intentionally she listens. She puts employees and guests first in a way that goes beyond policy or procedure. She works side by side with the team, teaching, guiding, and inspiring through action. She doesn’t just talk about hospitality and kindness, she lives it. Being around her has reignited passions that some of us thought were lost. One nominator shared that after reading *Unreasonable Hospitality*, it was Laura who truly showed what that mindset looks like in real life. “I didn’t think I knew anyone who could have a mindset like Will Guidara,” the nominator wrote. “Laura is that person.”

Her leadership shows up most clearly in quiet moments. After working a 12-hour day, Laura made a point to check in with every Food & Beverage team member, simply asking what she could do to help. When she learned an employee was having a particularly hard day, she stayed for hours longer, offering support and listening until that person felt better. She did not leave because the job was done; she stayed because the person mattered.

Laura is strong, thoughtful, and unafraid of the challenges of hospitality. She supports with a smile, leads with intelligence, and makes people feel heard and valued. Leaders like Laura are rare, and her presence has changed The Umstead for the better.



Nominee: Zuzana Vargova

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: Herons Restaurant AM Manager

Location: Cary

Nominator: Leah Goodnight

Employer: The Umstead Hotel & Spa

Title: Director of Marketing



Nominee's Impact:

Zuzana Vargova has been a defining presence at The Umstead Hotel and Spa since opening day nearly 19 years ago. Her journey from AM Herons server to Dining Manager reflects a career built on dedication, leadership, and an unwavering commitment to exceptional hospitality. Colleagues and guests alike describe her as “one of a kind,” a leader whose warmth, attentiveness, and professionalism elevate every experience she touches.

Zuzana is known for creating what The Umstead calls “Golden Nuggets,” thoughtful, personal touches that turn great service into unforgettable moments. Guests consistently feel seen and cared for through her intuitive approach to hospitality, while her team benefits from her steady guidance, empathy, and genuine investment in their growth. Team members regularly note how deeply she supports them, celebrates their milestones, and fosters a sense of pride and belonging within the AM Herons dining room.

One guest interaction perfectly captures her impact. While checking on a couple celebrating their 45th wedding anniversary, Zuzana learned that the husband’s favorite drink was an espresso martini, one his wife had lovingly made for him for decades. After sharing a laugh, Zuzana quietly printed the recipe for The Umstead’s signature espresso martini and gifted it to the wife so she could surprise her husband at home. It was a small, thoughtful gesture that turned a memorable evening into a lasting story.

This same care defines Zuzana’s leadership. She leads with authenticity, creates meaningful connections, and models the kind of service that cannot be scripted or taught. Her dedication to guests and her team makes her a truly deserving Stars of the Industry nominee.



Nominee:	Meggan Mendoza
Employer:	Weldon Mills Distillery
Title:	General Manager
Location:	Durham
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Nominator:	Samantha Jordan & Abigail Chavarria
Employer:	Weldon Mills Distillery
Title:	Bartender



Nominee’s Impact:

Meggan Mendoza has been a powerhouse in Durham’s hospitality community long before I ever arrived here, and in the short time I’ve been part of this industry locally, her impact has been impossible to miss. From the moment you encounter Meggan, you understand why so many people look to her as a leader and mentor.

What stands out most about Meggan is her ability to lead with both empathy and strength. She is deeply kind and understanding, yet her professionalism and authority never waver. That balance is rare. It is empowering to watch her excel in a male-dominated industry and do so with confidence, grace, and undeniable competence. She commands respect not by force, but by example.

Meggan gives everything she has to this industry and the people in it. She works incredibly long hours, supports her team through personal and professional challenges, and is often the person others turn to when they need guidance or reassurance. Even after exhausting shifts, she still finds the energy to give back to the community, including spending her own time feeding unhoused neighbors. That speaks volumes about who she is and what she believes hospitality should be.

To me, Meggan is more than a manager. She is a true leader and a mentor, not just to me, but to countless others across Durham’s service industry. She teaches with patience, intelligence, and genuine care. She is approachable, thoughtful, and deeply invested in helping others grow.

I genuinely believe that anyone who has met Meggan would say the same. She sets the standard for what leadership in hospitality should look like, and our industry is better because of her.



Nominee:	Ashley Harrell
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Owner
Location:	Emerald Isle
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Nominator:	Maria Joana Anderson and 6 Other Nominations
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Manager



Nominee's Impact:

Ashley Harrell's impact on her team, her guests, and her community is extraordinary and far-reaching. Those of us who nominated her consistently describe a leader whose compassion, resilience, and generosity have reshaped what hospitality looks like in practice. Working for Ashley is often described as a complete shift from the transactional, cost-cutting culture many of us experienced elsewhere in the industry. She leads with heart, invests deeply in her people, and believes that success means lifting others along the way.

Ashley's journey informs everything she does. After losing everything during the 2008 market crash, she and her family started over from nothing, living in a tent and later a camper while selling dresses out of a shipping container. Through determination and grit, she rebuilt and went on to create multiple thriving businesses. That lived experience fuels her empathy. She listens, mentors, and supports her team in tangible ways, from flexible scheduling and mental health days to sharing clothing and essentials. As one nominator shared, "She values her staff in ways I have never seen from a boss."

One of the most powerful examples of Ashley's leadership came during the local "sign wars" trend. While others used their marquees for playful messages, Ashley used Gaffer's sign to shine a light on children being denied hot lunches due to unpaid school lunch debt. She spoke plainly and passionately, saying, "No child should ever feel ashamed for being hungry." That single act sparked a countywide response. Within days, donations poured in, ultimately raising more than \$35,000 and completely erasing school lunch debt for every student in Carteret County. What began as a lighthearted trend became a movement rooted in empathy and action.

Her commitment to service extends even further. After a devastating hurricane destroyed Ocracoke and Gaffer's original location, Ashley, having lost everything herself, vowed to give back once she rebuilt. She continues to travel and work alongside Mercy Chefs to feed disaster-stricken communities and remains deeply engaged in local giving, from scholarships to year-round fundraising.

Ashley leads by example through hands-on service, required community service tied to staff trips, and constant presence in her restaurants. Her authenticity, work ethic, and care for others have earned deep loyalty and admiration. To those of us who nominated her, Ashley Harrell is not just a successful restaurateur, she is the definition of servant leadership and a truly deserving Restaurateur of the Year.



Nominee:	Douglas Rodriguez
Employer:	Niko's Greek Taverna
Title:	Executive Chef
Location:	Durham
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Nominator:	Negin Naseri
Employer:	Giorgios Hospitality Group
Title:	Marketing Director



Nominee's Impact:

Chef Douglas has made an extraordinary impact on Nikos, not only through his culinary talent, but through the way he leads, mentors, and connects with people. His leadership has been central to positioning Nikos as a regional standout and earning recognition in the MICHELIN Guide, yet what impresses me most is how deeply his influence reaches beyond the kitchen.

As Executive Chef, Douglas brings Greek cuisine to life with authenticity, creativity, and respect for tradition. Every dish reflects intention and story, and guests consistently comment on the balance, precision, and emotional resonance of the food. Many mention specific plates that “exceeded expectations” or defined their entire dining experience. His close collaboration with the front-of-house team ensures that what leaves the kitchen translates seamlessly to the guest, creating a unified and elevated experience.

Douglas leads with calm focus and integrity. New team members regularly describe him as patient, supportive, and inspiring. He invests time in training, shares knowledge openly, and builds confidence in those around him. Even during the busiest services, his steady presence and high standards set the tone for consistency and excellence.

One moment perfectly captures who he is. During a busy service, a guest shared that Nikos was the final stop on a milestone birthday trip and their first chance to experience true Greek hospitality. Douglas stepped out of the kitchen, listened to their story, and personally prepared an off-menu dish inspired by his own childhood. He presented it tableside, explaining its meaning and origin. The guest later said it was “the most heartfelt gesture I’ve ever received in a restaurant.”

That instinct to create meaningful, personal connections defines Douglas’s leadership. He is a culture-builder, a storyteller, and a true ambassador of hospitality whose impact is felt by guests, team members, and the broader culinary community alike.



Nominee: Christopher Prieto

Employer: Prime Barbecue

Title: Owner/Pitmaster

Location: Knightdale

Nominator: Jennifer Noble Kelly

Employer: JNK Public Relations

Title: Founder/Publicist



Nominee's Impact:

Christopher Prieto's impact on North Carolina's hospitality and culinary landscape is both profound and far-reaching. From the moment he opened Prime Barbecue in Knightdale in early 2020, it was clear that this was not simply another restaurant, but a destination built on craft, heritage, and genuine hospitality. In a remarkably short period of time, Prime Barbecue earned national recognition, including a Michelin Bib Gourmand and placement in the first historic Michelin Guide to the American South, alongside honors from Southern Living, the News & Observer, and Texas Monthly.

What makes Christopher truly exceptional is that his accolades are matched by substance. His barbecue is the result of decades of dedication, beginning with childhood memories in Texas and evolving through years of competitive excellence. His resume includes championships on the professional barbecue circuit, a perfect 180 brisket score, Master Certified Barbecue Judge credentials, and appearances on national television. Yet, despite this success, he leads with humility, living by his mantra to "stay humble and stay hungry."

At Prime Barbecue, Christopher's leadership is felt in every detail, from custom-built smokers and scratch-made sides to the way heritage and storytelling are woven into each dish. His Puerto Rican roots, Texas training, and North Carolina home come together in food that feels both personal and inclusive. Guests consistently experience



Nominee:	Clarke Merrell
Employer:	Prime Bistro & Wine Bar
Title:	Owner
Location:	Morehead City
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Nominator:	Sonya Gonzales
Employer:	Prime Bistro & Wine Bar
Title:	General Manager



Nominee's Impact:

Clarke Merrell is the first person who comes to mind when I think about what it truly means to be Restaurateur of the Year. His impact reaches far beyond the walls of his restaurants and into the heart of the communities he serves. Clarke leads with integrity, generosity, and a deep sense of responsibility for both his team and his neighbors.

What sets Clarke apart is how intentionally he invests in people. He builds his teams by fostering growth, collaboration, and a culture rooted in genuine hospitality. His restaurants reflect his values, from strong local partnerships to thoughtful sourcing, whether that means showcasing fresh catch from Blue Ocean or supporting producers like Marshallberg Farm. Every decision reflects his belief that restaurants should strengthen the communities around them.

Clarke's commitment to service is especially evident in moments of crisis. After Hurricane Florence, when many were still without power or basic resources, Clarke and a small team immediately put his food truck to work. For an entire week, he provided hot meals to anyone who needed one, no questions asked. When Hurricane Helene devastated Western North Carolina, Clarke again acted without hesitation, loading up the truck with Thanksgiving burritos and heading straight to the mountains to serve those impacted.

These actions were not done for recognition; they were instinctive responses from someone who believes hospitality is about showing up when it matters most. Clarke consistently gives back through charitable efforts, support for local schools and businesses, and hands-on service during times of need.

His leadership, compassion, and unwavering dedication to making a positive impact define his work. Clarke Merrell represents the very best of our industry and is deeply deserving of this honor.



Nominee: April Moon Harper

Employer: Sunny Point Cafe

Title: Owner

Location: Asheville

Nominator: Michelle Alexander

Employer: Sunny Point Cafe

Title: General Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

For more than two decades, April Harper has been the heart and driving force behind Sunny Point Café, and her impact on our restaurant, our team, and our community is profound. As the leader of a high-volume, independent, farm-to-table breakfast and brunch restaurant, she has built a business that balances financial strength with genuine care for people. Her leadership is steady, thoughtful, and grounded in deep respect for both the craft and the individuals who make the restaurant what it is.

April leads by example. She is calm, present, and endlessly supportive, even in the most challenging moments. During the COVID-19 pandemic and again during Hurricane Helene, she navigated uncertainty with integrity and resolve. When Hurricane Helene devastated Asheville and left many without homes, power, or water, April opened the restaurant to the community and served free breakfast and lunch every day. The line stretched down the street, and those meals became a source of comfort and hope for countless neighbors during an incredibly difficult time.

Her commitment to community extends far beyond emergencies. Each month, she highlights a local nonprofit in the restaurant and donates a portion of the funds collected. She regularly provides food and gift cards to local schools and organizations and supports local farmers through intentional sourcing. Guests return not only for the food, but for the sense of belonging she has cultivated.

Michelle Alexander, who has managed at Sunny Point Café for 16 years, shared this personal reflection:

“I have worked closely with April through some of the hardest moments in our restaurant’s history. In every situation, she leads with calm, integrity, and compassion. During Hurricane Helene, watching her open the restaurant and serve our community for free was incredibly powerful. Our staff felt honored to be part of that work, and even now, people still talk about those meals. I can say with absolute confidence that we are proud and grateful to work under her leadership.”

April Harper’s vision, resilience, and humanity have shaped Sunny Point Café into a cornerstone of Asheville’s food community and make her truly deserving of recognition.



Nominee:	William Dissen
Employer:	The Market Place Restaurant
Title:	Chef & Owner
Location:	Asheville
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Nominator:	Erin Mitchell
Employer:	Intellisound
Title:	Director



Nominee’s Impact:

For decades, Chef William Dissen and The Market Place Restaurant have stood as a defining force in Asheville’s dining scene and a national leader in sustainable hospitality. For more than 46 years, the restaurant has helped shape the farm-to-table movement across the South, and under Chef Dissen’s leadership, it has continually pushed the boundaries of what responsible, community-centered dining can look like.

Chef Dissen has built one of the “greenest” restaurants in America through intentional, values-driven decisions. The Market Place operates with solar power, recycled and reused building materials, a zero-waste kitchen, water-powered HVAC and refrigeration systems, and a deep commitment to sourcing ingredients from farms within 100 miles of the restaurant. Sustainability is not a talking point here; it is the foundation of every decision.

That commitment became even more evident during Hurricane Helene. While the restaurant was closed for more than 70 days due to lack of clean water, Chef Dissen and his team focused outward, feeding thousands of people in need across the community. At the same time, he worked tirelessly to advocate for recovery, engaging local, state, and federal leaders to push for aid and resources to help Asheville rebuild. One testimonial notes that Chef Dissen “selflessly fed thousands of people in his community” and was “instrumental in the comeback of his city.”

Even amid this crisis, The Market Place and Chef Dissen were recognized by the James Beard Foundation as among the nation’s most outstanding restaurants and chefs, underscoring a rare ability to uphold excellence during profound hardship.

Chef William Dissen leads with humility, purpose, and an unwavering belief that food can be a force for good. His impact extends far beyond the kitchen, making The Market Place Restaurant a true reflection of what Restaurant of the Year represents.



Nominee:	Ashley Harrell
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Owner
Location:	Emerald Isle
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Nominator:	Maria Joana Anderson and 6 Other Nominations
Employer:	Gaffer's Restaurant
Title:	Manager



Nominee's Impact:

Ashley Harrell's impact on her team, her guests, and her community is extraordinary and far-reaching. Those of us who nominated her consistently describe a leader whose compassion, resilience, and generosity have reshaped what hospitality looks like in practice. Working for Ashley is often described as a complete shift from the transactional, cost-cutting culture many of us experienced elsewhere in the industry. She leads with heart, invests deeply in her people, and believes that success means lifting others along the way.

Ashley's journey informs everything she does. After losing everything during the 2008 market crash, she and her family started over from nothing, living in a tent and later a camper while selling dresses out of a shipping container. Through determination and grit, she rebuilt and went on to create multiple thriving businesses. That lived experience fuels her empathy. She listens, mentors, and supports her team in tangible ways, from flexible scheduling and mental health days to sharing clothing and essentials. As one nominator shared, "She values her staff in ways I have never seen from a boss."

One of the most powerful examples of Ashley's leadership came during the local "sign wars" trend. While others used their marquees for playful messages, Ashley used Gaffer's sign to shine a light on children being denied hot lunches due to unpaid school lunch debt. She spoke plainly and passionately, saying, "No child should ever feel ashamed for being hungry." That single act sparked a countywide response. Within days, donations poured in, ultimately raising more than \$35,000 and completely erasing school lunch debt for every student in Carteret County. What began as a lighthearted trend became a movement rooted in empathy and action.

Her commitment to service extends even further. After a devastating hurricane destroyed Ocracoke and Gaffer's original location, Ashley, having lost everything herself, vowed to give back once she rebuilt. She continues to travel and work alongside Mercy Chefs to feed disaster-stricken communities and remains deeply engaged in local giving, from scholarships to year-round fundraising.

Ashley leads by example through hands-on service, required community service tied to staff trips, and constant presence in her restaurants. Her authenticity, work ethic, and care for others have earned deep loyalty and admiration. To those of us who nominated her, Ashley Harrell is not just a successful restaurateur, she is the definition of servant leadership and a truly deserving Restaurateur of the Year.



Nominee:	Ranbir Bakhshi
Employer:	Alpaca Chicken
Title:	Co-Owner
Location:	Raleigh
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Nominator:	Allie Nelson
Employer:	Tabletop Media Group
Title:	PR Manager



Nominee’s Impact:

Ranbir Bakhshi’s impact is defined by a deep belief that hospitality extends well beyond food service and into meaningful, sustained community care. Those of us who work with and alongside him see his leadership reflected not only in how his restaurants operate, but in how they show up for the communities they serve. As a co-owner of Alpaca Chicken, a minority- and veteran-owned business, Ranbir consistently uses his platform to uplift others and turn good intentions into lasting action.

One of the most meaningful examples of his leadership is Alpaca Chicken’s annual Hispanic Heritage Month fundraiser, which Ranbir leads with purpose and heart. This initiative is not symbolic; it is carefully aligned with organizations that are deeply rooted in community impact. This year, the fundraiser supported Casa Azul de Wilson, an organization dedicated to empowering Latin youth through education, leadership development, and cultural enrichment. By choosing this partner, Ranbir ensured the effort created real, tangible benefits for local families and young people.

Ranbir also believes community service should be shared and inclusive. To that end, he introduced a company-wide store decorating contest tied to the fundraiser, giving team members at every location the opportunity to participate creatively. This approach fostered pride, collaboration, and a sense of ownership, reinforcing the idea that giving back is a collective responsibility.

His commitment continues throughout the year. During the holidays, Ranbir led a partnership with A Note in the Pocket to address clothing insecurity for children across North Carolina. Through this effort, Alpaca Chicken helped provide essential clothing so children could face the winter months with dignity and confidence.

Ranbir does not view service as a one-time effort, but as part of who he is and how his company operates. His leadership demonstrates how hospitality can be a powerful force for good, making him a deserving embodiment of service to the community.



Nominee: Dean Neff

Employer: Seabird

Title: Owner/Chef

Location: Wilmington

Nominator: Jennifer Noble Kelly

Employer: JNK Public Relations

Title: Founder/Publicist



Nominee’s Impact:

Chef Dean Neff’s impact reaches far beyond his kitchens and into the very fabric of North Carolina’s coastal communities. Those of us who nominated him see a leader whose work is grounded in deep respect for the land, the water, and the people who depend on both. Through Seabird and Zora’s Market & Kitchen, he has created not just exceptional dining experiences, but lasting community institutions that nourish livelihoods, preserve heritage, and educate the public.

At Seabird, Chef Neff models what true boat-to-table hospitality looks like. His daily-changing menus, built around direct relationships with local fishers, farmers, and foragers, provide an economic lifeline for North Carolina producers. As one nominator shared, this is “not merely a business model; it’s an economic lifeline” that sustains coastal livelihoods while teaching diners about the value of responsibly sourced seafood.

His commitment to community preservation was powerfully demonstrated when he stepped in to steward Zora’s Market & Kitchen, Wilmington’s oldest seafood market. Rather than allowing a beloved neighborhood institution to disappear, he ensured its survival for the families who have relied on it for generations, even reinstating food stamp access to meet community needs. This act reflected a belief that hospitality is about service, not recognition.

Beyond his restaurants, Chef Neff serves tirelessly on behalf of the broader community, supporting the North Carolina Oyster Trail, addressing food insecurity through the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, and contributing his expertise to public health and environmental stewardship. His generosity is often quiet, but always consistent.

Through mentorship, advocacy, and selfless leadership, Chef Dean Neff exemplifies the spirit of service that strengthens entire communities and leaves a legacy far greater than any single restaurant.

