



**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**

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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**

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**Nominee:** Chris Lovegood

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**Employer:** Parks Hospitality Group

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**Title:** Restaurant Server

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**Location:** Asheville

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### **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



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

**Nominee:** Tiphannie Drakeford

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**Employer:** Biscuitville

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**Title:** Shift Leader

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**Location:** Greensboro

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### **Nominee's Impact:**

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**Nominator:** Alon Vanterpool

**Employer:** Biscuitville

**Title:** Shift Leader



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## 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



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# 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



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## 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



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## 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



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

**Nominee:** Oksana Kravcenko

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**Employer:** Ballantyne Hotel

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**Title:** Executive Pastry Chef

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**Location:** Charlotte

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### **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



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

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**Nominee:** Justin Raupp

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**Employer:** Prime Barbecue

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**Title:** General Manager

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**Location:** Knightdale

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### **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



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

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**Nominee:** Bruce Conyers

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**Employer:** Biscuitville

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**Title:** Restaurant Operator

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**Location:** Greensboro

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### **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.



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# 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



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

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**Nominee:** Boone Hollar

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**Employer:** Parks Hospitality Group

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**Title:** F&B Assistant Outlets Manager

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**Location:** Asheville

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### **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



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

**Nominee:** Ruben Gonzalez

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**Employer:** Tar Heel Capital - Wendy's

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**Title:** General Manager

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**Location:** Shelby

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### **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



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

**Nominee:** Erickson Alessi

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**Employer:** Built on Hospitality/The Goodyear House

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**Title:** Director of Operations

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**Location:** Charlotte

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### **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



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

**Nominee:** Peter Layshock

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**Employer:** The Umstead Hotel & Spa

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**Title:** Stewarding Manager

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**Location:** Cary

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### **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



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## Award Category: **Restaurateur of the Year**

**Nominee:** Jaffer & Zoe Kovic

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**Employer:** Dilworth Tasting Room

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**Title:** Owners

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**Location:** Charlotte

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### **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



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## Award Category: **Restaurateur of the Year**

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**Nominee:** Matt Kelly

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**Employer:** MK Hospitality

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**Title:** Owner

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**Location:** Durham

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### **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



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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



**Stars of the Industry 2025**



## 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



**NCRLA**

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