

If your business is cooking or if you’re cooking up a new business, it might pay for you to get to know Rob Balon. Balon, a graduate of Southern Connecticut State University, is a market research expert and food critic based in Austin. But he is well known for his business acumen and restaurant reviews far beyond the borders of Texas.

When asked how he became so successful at both, he says modestly: "I have no idea — I was in the right place at the right time."

Being in the right place at the right time appears to be a habit for Balon. A native of Orange, he was a student at Northeastern University when he met his future wife one weekend in New Haven. Shortly thereafter, he transferred to Southern, where she was a student.

His wife, Marge Connelly, who graduated in 1971 with an English degree, later became a special education teacher. He received his bachelor’s degree a year later after completing two years of study at CCSU. Today, they have two daughters who both will be enrolled in college next year in Austin.

"I enjoyed the heck out of Southern," Balon says. "I was a speech major. I had some professors who were very influential and helped me get my life ironed out."

One professor in particular was Seth Hawkins, who convinced Balon to join the Forensic/Debate Team. Balon also wrote a column for the student newspaper known as "Lefthanded Notes," explaining with a laugh that he was a bit of a campus "radical."

Following Southern, Balon and his wife attended the University of Wyoming, where they each earned their master’s degrees. And from there, Balon headed to the University of Michigan, where he received a Ph.D. in 1976 in media research. To help pay for his doctorate, Balon, at age 24, worked as a talk show host from 9 p.m. to midnight at a radio station in Toledo, an experience that continues to pay dividends.

When I got my Ph.D. from Michigan, my goal was to be a college professor, and actually I was for five years," he says. "I taught at the University of Texas, which is how we found Austin, for three years. Then I left for California and taught at California State University at Long Beach for two more years."

"During his teaching years, Balon says he was busy "exploring the possibility of marrying market research to the commercial world."

He believed that his educational background in survey design and survey research had business applications. So, when he left teaching, he returned to Austin to start Austin Trends, a company that tracked consumer confidence. After successfully building the business for six years, he sold it. That allowed him to found his current business in 1987, the Benchmark Co.

Benchmark is a market research and strategic consulting firm based in Austin. The company initially focused in broadcast and advertising, but since has branched out into technology, healthcare and hospitality. The company’s 16 full-time employees and 50 part-time staff serve a range of companies nationwide. Bloomberg Financial in New York is one of Benchmark’s biggest clients. Other Clients include Disney, Viacom and Entercom Broadcasting in Boston. "We conducted research and gathered the data to help Bloomberg focus on its radio and TV business news operations. It was a three-year project, very comprehensive," Balon explains. "We also do a lot of validating testing to see if a company’s idea will work. This is especially important in the wake of the dot.com collapse."

It was through his business that Balon came upon his second career as a food critic. His company had conducted a research project for a group of radio stations in Austin, and one of the recommendations was that the stations launch a restaurant program.

"To make a long story short, the guy we had in mind to host the show had to bow out at the very last second. Since I had a radio background and was most certainly a "foodies," I was asked to fill in. That was almost six years ago," Balon says.

A year after the radio program was launched, he began doing his reviews on local TV in Austin. The final piece to his restaurant review empire came when he established www.diningoutwithrobbalon.com. The website, which receives 400,000 visits each month, is chock full of restaurant reviews, each written by Balon.

The reviews feature restaurants across the country, not just those in Austin. For example, Balon’s review about Baldoria in New York City is now posted on the wall at the restaurant known for catering to such personalities as actor Denzel Washington, New York Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter and entertainer Mel Brooks. The New York Times even did a story about the review being posted in the restaurant.

The success of his restaurant reviews has been a pleasant surprise for Balon, who says: "I never met anyone who set out with a life goal of being a food critic. In my case it was a lifelong love of food and wine, and dining out. I was a fan of that world long before I could afford it.

"Dining Out has become a phenomenon unto itself. We're blowing everyone else away," he adds. "We are the leading website in the state of Texas for entertainment. There’s not even a close second. We have cornered the market."

Future plans call for expanding the reach of the website beyond the current market of central Texas. Balon is exploring the possibility of starting a dining out program in Las Vegas, which he says is the "most compelling" location for food lovers right now.

Baldoria says the restaurants featured in his reviews are suggested by people from all walks of life. He also finds restaurants by conducting his own research.

"I follow my nose — literally," he says. "I’m very partial to Northern Italian and Asian cuisine."

And he adds, "I’m also partial to New Haven pizza."

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**CCSU’s TECA Team Wins Regional Competition**

For the third time in four years, the CCSU TECA Team earned a first-place finish at the Eastern Regionals of the TECA (Technology Education Collegiate Association) Tech Bowl Challenge held in Virginia Beach, Va.

Twelve team members competed in the three-day event and earned the opportunity to move on to the national competition held in Nashville, Tenn., where they finished in fourth place.

Students participating in the Tech Bowl Challenge are judged on several criteria. In a quiz bowl format, participants answer questions covering technical and professional knowledge.

In addition to the Tech Bowl Challenge, CCSU placed third in the Communication Challenge, a problem-solving competition. In the event, students are given a theme and must produce a 30-second video on that theme.