



## Justin Coleman's journey to The Ordinary

Hanna Raskin

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Grace Beahm/Staff Justin Coleman is the new manager of The Ordinary on King Street. [Buy this photo](#)

Horace "Go West" Greeley may have been the nation's leading proponent of fearless ambition, but apparently none of his gumption rubbed off on a Westchester County, N.Y., sandwich shop named for the newspaper editor.

"It wasn't like a follow-your-dreams place," Justin Coleman recalls of Ye Olde Greeley Deli, the site of his first-ever restaurant job. Coleman sliced roast beef and rang up orders. "It was a real mom-and-pop place, owned by an Irish guy and his wife; nobody was super encouraging. It was a show-up-at-6:30-a.m. place."



Coleman did as told, and did so cheerfully. Friends say the 33-year old's aptitude for working hard without complaint accounts for his meteoric rise through the fine-dining ranks. Last month, Coleman was named general manager of The Ordinary, making him the welcoming face of one of the best-known restaurants in America's friendliest city.

The assignment makes sense to former high school classmate Ryan McRee, a graphic designer who palled around with Coleman for a post-college decade in New York City. "He's a very even-keeled guy," McRee says. "I've never seen him react in a negative way."

Although McRee, like most restaurant patrons, knows Coleman best as a patient listener and unpretentious dry wit, much of Coleman's work has nothing to do with friendly conversation. "That's the easiest part of the job," Coleman says of the few evening hours he spends strolling the floor of The Ordinary.

"The daily operations of the restaurant is three-quarters or more," he continues. "It's crunching

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numbers. It's hauling cases of wine. It's running to the hardware store to get a light bulb if you need it." Sitting around with fellow wine pros, sipping expensive bottles and swapping tasting notes, as customers so often imagine? "Yeah, right, I wish."

Still, Coleman says he loves every minute of it, which, in the restaurant industry, typically adds up to nearly 1,000 minutes a day. Even if his bosses back at the deli where he worked as a teen didn't bother complimenting Coleman's sandwich-making skills, their long operating hours prepared him well for a successful front-of-house career.

## Down into the cellar

When Coleman was graduating from high school, he seriously considering applying to the nearby Culinary Institute of America. But his parents, who'd honed an epicurean streak while traveling the world, agreed that the program's focus was probably too narrow.

The boy whose earliest memory involved sitting at a sushi bar and pointing at the fish that intrigued him decided he'd rather devote his time to protecting waterways than preparing the creatures found in them.

"I wanted to save the world," Coleman says of his enrollment in the University of Rhode Island, where he studied environmental economics.

But a job at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration left him feeling unfulfilled, and nostalgic for the peculiar energy of professional kitchens. His desire to make his living as a chef led him to the French Culinary Institute in SoHo (since renamed the International Culinary Center.) He envisioned owning a restaurant, so he sought out a service internship down the block at Keith McNally's Balthazar, where volunteer students were more aptly referred to as cellar rats.

Balthazar's cellar was big by any standard, but in New York City's compressed dimensions, it was gargantuan. Coleman was charged with sorting and organizing bottles, a physically demanding task. In exchange, he was permitted to attend any wine tasting at the restaurant.

"Something just sparked," he remembers. "I loved being in the cellar, I loved learning about wine labels."

## Up to the East Side

Coleman eventually worked his way onto the payroll as a low-level wine steward. (Such leaps are no longer possible since the beverage industry started putting its faith in formal training and Court of Master Sommeliers exams; Coleman allows he's likely one of the youngest wine professionals to self-teach his way into the field.) A manager, recognizing Coleman's interest and talent, in 2006 recommended him to head up the wine program at the forthcoming Morandi, McNally's first Italian restaurant.

"It was scary. Really scary," Coleman says, although his buddy McRee says he has a knack for locating and landing great opportunities. McNally wanted every Italian region represented on the by-the-glass list, which was easy enough when dealing with the Piedmont. "But when you get into Molise and Basilicata, it's like 'Where ... are we going to find a wine from these regions?'" Coleman says.

From Morandi, Coleman moved to Commerce, an independent, 70-seat restaurant where he served as "beverage director, assistant general manager and sommelier guy." Coleman credits the experience with teaching him what running a restaurant requires.

He then "jumped at an opportunity to work with Jean-Georges (Vongerichten)," one of four men on a short list of dream employers. At The Mark, he oversaw a 600-bottle list.

"The dichotomy is so weird, because here I am, trying to relate to these people getting on their jets, and I'm going to take the 3 train to Brooklyn," he says.

At the other end of Coleman's train ride were his wife, Sarah, an interior designer he'd met in college; and baby daughter Fia (named after Coleman's grandmother Florence.)

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The family lived in a 700–square–foot Prospect Heights apartment, which seemed to get increasingly smaller as Fia grew bigger. And Coleman's lengthy commute didn't leave him much time to enjoy "eating stinky cheese and sharing a bottle of wine with my wife."

With Sarah's sister already living in Columbia, "Charleston just seemed like the logical choice" for relocation.

## A future in Charleston

On the advice of a former colleague, Coleman called "the Charleston heads of state": Dick Elliott of Maverick Southern Kitchens; Steve Palmer of The Indigo Road restaurant group; and Mickey Bakst of Charleston Grill. "Everyone was really helpful to this stranger from New York calling and saying 'Can you hire me?' "

Coleman took an associate general manager position at High Cotton in April. "As short–lived as that was, it was great to come down here with a job," he says.

He then accepted his current position at The Ordinary after general manager Brooks Reitz left to pursue independent projects.

Charleston diners are perhaps a bit chummier than their New York counterparts, Coleman says, but The Ordinary otherwise feels familiar:

"It totally reminds me of Balthazar, with the exposed raw bar, and now with the ornate mirrors behind the bar," he says. "It's that bustling brasserie. And it's my job to be the most welcoming host I can possibly be."

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