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## **Career Alternatives for Attorneys: Restaurateur**

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Some lawyers love what they do. Those who don't are vocal about how much they hate their jobs. So what would the naysayers prefer to be doing professionally? Above the Law editors have heard these "dream careers" tossed around: government intelligence analyst, writer/journalist, banker (so they can keep making the bank), and — for those who want to stay in the law, but not Biglaw — assistant U.S. attorney, judge, or law school professor.

Some people are content to stay in the law but need a creative/fun outlet. It's an added bonus if that outlet also makes money. One such endeavor is to open a restaurant. (The belief that most restaurants fail in the first year is a myth, after all.)

We've written before about lawyer-turned-Subway entrepreneur Larry Feldman. But being king of a sandwich-shop franchise is not really the glamorous side of food service. The daydream version involves starting up a place with a bit more character.

For some, being laid off has been a push to tap into a culinary side. Here in New York, a first-year associate caught up in law firm layoffs used the opportunity to open a Taiwanese steamed bun cafe in the Lower East Side, called Baohaus.

Further south, in Washington, D.C., another casualty of the recession layoffs got into the eat-out business. Julie Liu, a former Katten Muchin associate, launched a restaurant in Dupont Circle last year named Scion. She was very thankful to Katten for her three-month severance: it "basically paid for Scion's kitchen equipment."

We caught up with Liu about opening a restaurant with her sister, and got some advice for other wannabe restaurateurs.



Liu is a Northwestern law grad and former Teach for America teacher. She spent almost two years in Katten's Chicago office. After being laid off last year, she moved to D.C. and opened the restaurant with her sister in June 2009. Liu originally planned to return to Biglaw but wound up landing a job at the Department of Education, so now she's in D.C. (and the restaurant biz) for good.

**ATL: How would you describe Scion?**

We are a family-owned, neighborhood restaurant that serves great food and drinks. We aim to be affordable so that both my Teach for America friends and my Biglaw friends can enjoy a good meal at Scion. Our menu ranges from a diverse selection of appetizers to \$9 burgers/paninis to \$25 Buffalo Osso Bucco. We have the same goals for our cocktails and beers. There are fancy options and affordable options.

The long-term goal is to be a place where people want to come back over and over again because of the delicious food and great drinks and don't feel like it would break the bank.

**ATL: You're working at the Department of Education and running the restaurant? How do you balance the two?**

Resilience; and being ok with the fact that I'm pretty much tired all the time.

Actually, Joanne (my sister) is basically a machine, so essentially my role is to cover her on certain nights and weekends so that she can get some sleep or attempt to have a life. Joanne went all in for Scion Restaurant. She gave up her previous career completely and handles the bulk of the work and stress that comes with opening a new restaurant. She's a CPA, so she handles all of the business and finance issues. She also is a total foodie and follows the food and wine industries very closely, so she works with the chef to create the menu and works with the bar manager on the beers and cocktails...

Joanne and I grew up in a restaurant family, which established our lack of need for sleep and ridiculous work ethic. I initially applied it towards academics (UVA then Northwestern Law) and then towards my initial careers (Teach for America and Biglaw at Katten Chicago). Now, I apply it towards Scion Restaurant, and words cannot describe how much more rewarding, motivating and fulfilling it is to see your efforts go towards your own small business. And to do it all with my sister by my side (and my parents very involved) has been an incredible experience.

When I first moved to D.C., I was offered a Biglaw job, a mid-size firm job (approx. 50 attorneys), and a job at ED (Department of Education). After less than 2 years in Biglaw, I was torn about leaving so soon, but that was mostly motivated by the fact that I still owe \$175K in student loans to NU Law and not because I wanted to be a Biglaw attorney. What I realized is that if I could find a legal job that still allowed me to work on Scion Restaurant, it'd be an ideal situation. ED was the perfect solution, and I started chasing the elusive work/life balance and the myth I've heard that you can love what you do.

**ATL: How's running a business with your sister?**

Joanne is really the brains and heart behind this entire project. She has an intense passion for the restaurant industry and often kids that I'm just her junior associate. We are each other's #1 fan,

but also each other's toughest critic. We never hesitate to speak our minds and don't hold back on our verbal spats. Growing up in a restaurant family helped because we learned that during intense moments, things get heated, but at the end of service, you have to let it go. We are constantly communicating (and not always kindly) and never hold grudges or go to bed without settling an issue. Sure, we can annoy each other, but we both agree that there is no one else we'd want to be in the trenches with for Scion Restaurant.

**ATL: What's your favorite part about it?**

My favorite part is definitely meeting the customers. Biglaw was not the environment for me. After teaching in the inner city and going to a very social law school, suddenly I was thrown into a situation where I felt very isolated. I completed assignments for hours on end sitting in an office that became very lonely. Yes, I got client interaction, but that's never the same as getting to know people on a personal level. I felt my personality starting to shrivel away and my usual social outlets had to be sacrificed for the Biglaw hours. As every Biglaw associate knows, we're anxious when we're not busy billing hours and we're exhausted when we are billing hours. A work/life balance or happy medium was impossible. In Biglaw, I began to lose a bit of my enthusiasm and spirit. I'm an extrovert and get much of my energy from interacting with other people. I missed that a lot and it's a wonderful feeling to have it back.

**ATL: Does the legal background help?**

The legal background is a huge asset. My major role is to review restaurant contracts and documents and apply for licensing and certifications. My legal training makes it easy to figure out all the steps in the process and most importantly, allows me to complete all the necessary tasks without feeling overwhelmed with all the details. We also have hired legal counsel who has extensive experience in the restaurant industry, but he bills minimal hours and simply points me in the right direction. From there, I can handle the drafting and filing for most of our paperwork.

On a social level, the legal background also helps because people love discussing my Biglaw experience and how I balance a day job along with Scion. It's a great topic of conversation when I'm working the floor of the restaurant. It also helps when I'm tapping into the Northwestern Law alumni network to set up happy hours, summer associate lunches and firm social events.

**ATL: Any tips for lawyers who want to open their own restaurant?**

This is a tough question to answer because so much of what we've learned about the restaurant industry has come from growing up in our parents' restaurant. Opening a restaurant is definitely an experience where you're learning something new every day. In the past six months, I've learned more about kitchen equipment, linen pricing and the various kinds of mixed greens than I could have ever hoped to learn.

My first tip is that anyone who wants to open a restaurant must be committed for the long haul and know that there will be a lot of sacrifice in your social life and finances before you're "living the dream." Joanne likes to kid that many of her friends are having babies and she decided to give birth to a restaurant. She loses about the same amount of sleep, if not more, and is stuck with it through the good times and bad. Of course, we hope Scion will be profitable sooner than a child would be, but we still have to love it unconditionally while it hasn't yet given back to us.

My second tip is that as with anything I do in life, you have to have a sense of humor. There's just nothing you can do when someone sends a dish back because their dog won't like the leftovers, pukes in your flowers, or bashes you on yelp.com because your cheesecake didn't taste like what their Mom used to make. Not every dish will come out perfectly and not every customer will love us. We give 110% and want everyone to leave happy, but when things go wrong, you can only laugh about it, support each other and trust that tomorrow is another day.

My final tip is to be flexible. The restaurant industry is unpredictable. You have to be willing to adapt to whatever is thrown at you and survive. We can never tell whether a week will be busy or slow, yet we still have to prepare the right amount of inventory and staff for every shift. I love meetings and agendas and plans of action, but the reality is that everything will not always go according to schedule in a restaurant. Preparation is essential in running a restaurant, but the key to success is being good under pressure and knowing how to handle things when everything goes wrong.