

Advice for young chefs

Ken Burgin offers some valuable tips for giving up and coming chefs the skills they'll need for future success in their careers.



THE MESSAGE from young chefs is loud and clear: they want the three F's — finance, fun and a future. So what are you offering? There really are good people out there, but what they want in 2010 is very different to last century. Here are some challenges to offer young chefs to place them ahead of the pack, and to ensure they understand that a career is more than just money and short-term glamour.

Understand how a business works. Not just menu costing, but how food production fits into the total profit picture. The chef's work is a central part of the profit and loss statement, so make sure they understand what a P&L looks like and how to interpret it. Show them how significant labour costs are in Australian businesses, and techniques for smart rostering.

Develop great computer skills. Excel spreadsheets are great for costing recipes, checking menu profits and organising stocktakes. Email communicates quickly and efficiently but make sure bad spelling and punctuation don't undermine them.

Develop the ability to write a simple report. Teach them how to interpret data from a Point of Sale system and manage recipes with software, not in a little black book. Notebook computers and iPads are now part of everyday life, and smart chefs have a flash-drive on their keyring.

Gain experience with 'production' as well as 'artistry'. Fine cuisine draws high praise, but those businesses often struggle to make a profit. Can they make 500 cupcakes with the same accuracy as one perfect soufflé or a bucket of pumpkin soup? Do they have the required speed and stamina?

Learn about modern menu marketing. The real skill is designing a menu that tastes good and maximises profit through layout, pricing and clever descriptions — often called 'menu engineering'. Desserts add pleasure to a stressful world — chocolate, icecream, mousses and cakes are all important in a profitable menu. Most chefs lack experience here — it can be another competitive edge.

Become a food safety and nutrition expert. Food safety plans, HACCP and tighter OH&S rules need well-written procedures. Modern kitchens need chefs who know how to implement these rules, and train others in safe work practices. They lead by example so safe work becomes a habit for everyone in the team. And as the world gets fatter and healthier, modern chefs are asked to develop healthy recipes that are popular and full of flavour.

Keep up to date with market research. Visit trade fairs and surf the net for recipe ideas, food trends and suppliers. Keep track of professional cooking sites like eGullet.com, Chef2Chef.com and ProfitableHospitality.com.

Build up a modern CV, with digital photos as well as menus and stories. Not just dishes, but cooking methods, high-tech equipment, new products, special events and competitions. Keep the photos safe on a PC and put the best of them online using the free Flickr.com or Picasa.com photo-sharing services. Start a blog where they can show off cooking, culinary discoveries, photos and interesting links.

Travel — at home and overseas! Cooking skills and hard work are in demand everywhere, but if chefs leave it too long it's much harder to take a break. Send them off to Europe where contemporary cooking has its foundations, and remind them to do some saving.

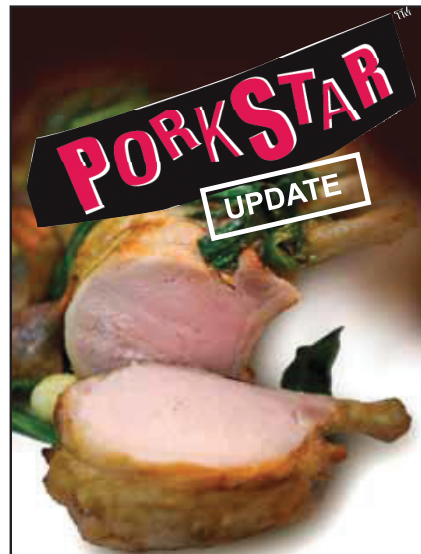
Develop people skills. When you're in charge of a team, leadership makes the difference between over-stressed or under control. Modern chefs build skills and experience with teamwork, personality types, anger management, negotiation, delegation and how to run an effective meeting. Plus all the skills of organising a mini-United Nations with their people. Young chefs are often in charge of a team before they're 25 and need to lead with confidence, not just by yelling — Gordon Ramsay is not the role model.

Speak up against unfairness and harassment. The old-fashioned kitchen with swearing, dirty jokes, booze and drugs destroyed as many careers as it created. The modern team works hard, has fun and respects others. These are the workplaces that have no trouble with staff retention.

Learn how to talk to the boss. This skill is sometimes called 'managing upwards'. Can they make a persuasive case with senior management when they need more equipment, staff changes, different work hours or even a raise?

Finally, hurry slowly. Are they being offered more than just money, and how will this job help with career development? A stable track-record with recognised businesses gives them a much stronger hand when applying for a better position or asking for a raise.

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A Meat for All Seasons

Larousse Gastronomique (the encyclopedia of food, wine and cooking) never fails to inspire. My dog-eared 1961 edition, complete with preface by Auguste Escoffier, the great 'king of cooks and cook of kings', has an additional reading list by Elizabeth David. With eleven pages devoted to pork, from andouille and andouillettes to suckling pig l'occitane, it is a detailed and blissful read. Then there's my copy of *Culinaria — European Specialties* which invariably opens to pages of sausages and cured pork — with the German entry offering a double page spread of a well endowed sow. Any way you look at it pork is a culinary star. It is the preferred, loved and most widely cooked meat in the world's great kitchens. The Crave Sydney International Food Festival saw restaurants and events consistently feature pork throughout the month. The forthcoming Melbourne Food and Wine Festival is fully porked for its duration at every dining opportunity. Customers love pork and chefs love pork. It's one of the great win-win, symbiotic culinary relationships. Last month I wrote about what made a *PorkStar*, Australian Pork's coveted badge of honour for chefs. I said how this growing legion of savvy chefs knows how to really work the versatility and beauty of pork and its potent flavour profiles and textures — and customers are loving it. It's a meat for all seasons and virtually all cuisines and cooking styles. So put some pork on the forks of your customers with your new menus and specials.



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