

Secret kitchen business

You may not be a trained chef but you can still make a big difference to efficiency and profits by taking more control of your business, writes **Ken Burgin**.



‘Commercial strength stove, fryers and microwaves are needed to get food out quickly, and nothing frustrates staff more than poorly maintained equipment.’

YOU MAY not be a trained chef, but if you apply organising skills to the key areas of kitchen management, you will make a powerful difference to efficiency and profits. And even if you never chop and dice like an expert, you’ll move with confidence in that shiny white and stainless steel room. Here’s some tips for taking more control.

Start with the ordering systems. Make sure it’s done from standard printed lists (no sticky diaries or scraps of paper). Set re-order levels to ensure enough is on hand for three to four day’s supply—usually plenty unless deliveries are a prob-

lem. Compare orders with invoices and let your staff know you’re aware of stock levels.

Check deliveries and storage. This is where expensive mistakes often happen. Treat food supplies with the same care you do alcohol. Have good heavy-duty scales available for checking weights, install locks on store rooms and label the shelves.

Delivery people are always in a hurry so have your rules about signatures and delivery times up on the wall and also printed on the invoice. Is there enough cold-storage so stock is not piled up where it will be lost, pilfered or damaged?

Make sure recipes are written down and costed. It’s a laborious task and needs patience—chefs are usually right when they say they’re too busy. It can be a good project for a junior member of staff who has more time and enthusiasm for it. Or it could be a task for an administration person. They can take the chef’s scribbled notes and turn them into tidy forms. Photos can also be taken and connected to the recipe cards, one by one.

New dishes should be presented to you fully costed, first for testing then for possible placement on the menu. Electronic scales for the kitchen are another essential tool for cost control, and it’s easy for you to check portion weights and do the costing of expensive steaks and seafood. Make sure you buy costing scales (like they use in a deli) not just ones that give a weight.

Organise the work-flow. Observation can tell you whether staff have

the capacity to do the job properly and if equipment needs to be arranged. Watch them working when it’s busy.

Just because people have worked there for a long time doesn’t mean they take the shortest route between A and B. You’re outside view of ‘time and motion’ can be invaluable. If you find there’s a need for extra shelves or benches to make the work quicker, get them.

Provide equipment that can do the job. And that is also in good repair. Commercial strength stoves, fryers and microwaves are needed to get food out quickly, and nothing frustrates staff more than poorly maintained equipment. Don’t give them an excuse for dragging the chain.

Use technology. Modern point-of-sale systems will print the food order in the kitchen and save an enormous amount of time. They also help you track what’s selling (and what’s not). Online ordering is useful, and allows you to keep track of orders and current prices. Organise computer access for the chef and make sure she can do a web search and update a spreadsheet.

Check figures every week. The quickest way to find out food costs is to compare purchases (from delivery invoices) against sales. This gives you a ‘close enough’ figure and identifies problems quickly. It is also valuable to know per-head sales, and the strike-rate. For example how many customers order coffee, a side dish or dessert?

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We've just lost two good staff to a super-cool new café. How can I stop the brain drain?

The recession is over. It's good news, but also bad news with staff availability. Start-ups are very attractive for some people—all that shiny equipment and fresh paint. What has become 'uncool' about your place? Is it still as fresh in spirit and appearance as when they joined? Busy venues always need lots of renewal. How can you update with short training sessions, new uniforms, clever Facebook promotions or a menu refresh?

We're just had a nasty review posted on our Google Local Business listing. Can we remove it?

It's unlikely to be taken down, but it can be 'diluted'. First, add your own response, not of outrage but showing that you're always trying to improve—people know there are two sides to these stories. There's also space for business information in a Google listing, so add quotes from friendly customers and some testimonials. Chances are you also have fans of the business who have never shared their opinions.

The nursing home in our town wants to tender out the catering. Is this a good opportunity?

Aged care foodservice is very different to café and restaurant cooking. Food safety requirements are very strict because you're feeding a vulnerable group of people. You will also be serving meals that may look and feel very different, as well as normal but quite small portions. The per-head budget you have for a whole day may be just a few dollars, so the margin you can expect will also be small.

The council has told us to remove the tables and chairs in front of our café because they don't have planning permission. Can they do this?

Absolutely. It's their space, not yours. Obtain a copy of their regulations and application forms. There's usually a fee per square metre, but it's money well spent as it adds great visual impact. Also check your insurance and the permitted areas under your liquor license. It's time for negotiation and a request for 'forgiveness'. And it's a great opportunity for expansion, especially if you're on the sunny side of the street.

I'm embarrassed by our email system—different email accounts, different computers and nothing is co-ordinated. Help.

Many small businesses have an 'email swamp', which also means there are customers and suppliers who think you're ignoring them. A great alternative is to move your email from Outlook onto a web-based system like Google Apps. You can access your account from any web browser and allow different people to access it. This is different to Gmail, which offers a Gmail address and is for personal use. Google Apps manages the email in your business name eg info@yourbusiness.com and can handle more than one email address. It's free, and easy to set up.

Ken Burgin is a leading hospitality industry consultant. For more visit profitablehospitality.com.

Shape up or ship out

Are the staff in our cafes and restaurants a little sartorially challenged? Indeed they are, writes our columnist S. Scoffer.

YOUR correspondent isn't exactly renowned for his sartorial elegance. He has yet to win Best Dressed at any event. Threadbare t-shirts, trackie-daks and well-worn runners are his preferred daily garb.

That's not to say, however, that he can't scrub up well when the occasion demands. He'll don a suit and tie, slip his feet into polished leatherwear to blend in with the best if that is what is appropriate.

It's all a matter of horses for courses, of what best suits the occasion and what coincides with the expectations of one's host.

Sadly, such considerations are being taken into account less and less; what would once have been considered fairly formal and "dressy" occasions are being attended by invitees who seem to be attired in a rag-bag of clothing hastily garnered from the nearest op shop or charity bin.

It's good to see some degree of informality in the approach to dress. After all, we do not need to be swathed in a dinner suit or full length gown and pearls to enjoy a night at the opera or wear jacket and tie to chew and sip at even the swankiest of restaurants.

But there is a limit—such as the podgy men who saunter through theatre foyers in cardie and sandals looking as if they've just put the remote aside and struggled up off the couch in the next room.

And then there are our cafes and restaurants. But often it's the staff, not the customers, who have abandoned all semblance of an appropriate dress code.

What is going on here? I'm all for casual dining. The demise of the strict three-course menu couldn't come soon enough. The concept of grazing caught on about three decades later than needed. Dishes to share have brought the fun and conviviality back into dining. These have all been long overdue developments that have gone to the very heart of hospitality – the gathering of people at a table to share food and wine.

But does this welcome informality have to extend to the waiting staff and—in those places with open kitchens—to those who prepare our customers' meals?

In seeking to escape the confines of a uniform, today's hospitality workers have adopted a uniformity of their own that seems to consist of lank and untidy hair, unshaven faces, sloppy tops, shredded jeans and half-covered feet. Even in the most casual of cafes, the clientele seems to have a cleaner, neater appearance than those who cook and serve their food.

Oddly, the change to the ultra casual has

coincided with a great advance in the range of working wear available to the catering trade. Snazzy outfits feature strongly in the catalogues of foodservice supply firms. Designers have gone berserk in creating outfits that are light years away from the once universal all-black, all-white or half and half outfits that were the limits of staff dress-wear. The racks are crowded with a vast range of colourful hats, jackets, trousers and aprons and many places also offer a design-your-own option to further increase the available choices.

Why then do we foist upon our customers this army of the unkempt? Where is the attraction in sloppy looking floor and kitchen staff? Maybe it's a misguided managerial attempt to appeal to that younger demographic that dresses in similar fashion and thinks casual dining means it's okay to put their feet up on the restaurant's chairs. Whatever happened to presenting a smart look to entice the punters in?

Casual is not a synonym for grotty. Informal does not equate with grubby.

And on a practical point, customers need to be able to identify and differentiate the people serving them and not have to hazard a guess from which scruffy individual they should try to attract attention.

Beyond this, however, there's the wider and more important issue of hygiene. If the staff look as if they don't give a jot for their personal appearance, what does this say about your restaurant overall?

You may be the cleanest dining room this side of a decontamination chamber, but if your staff look unwashed then it is their appearance that will form the first impression – and possibly set people walking on to some smarter looking place down the street.

Strangely, despite the plethora of rules that exist to ensure health and cleanliness in all foodservice outlets, there seems to be an increasing disregard of even the most basic standards. The major area of concern is the amount of hair of staff that's allowed to flow freely, uncontrolled by hats, caps or ties.

Paying detailed attention to what is on the plate is a sure way of winning and keeping customers. But continual thought to who is dishing it up and presenting it comes a very close second. As the old saying goes: shape up or ship out. See you at the laundromat.

S. Scoffer

shelfspace



1 Boon for busy kitchen. From Cerebos Food Service comes the new Essential Cuisine range of stocks and jus that are new to the Australian market but already receiving the thumbs up from some of New Zealand's top chefs. The premium quality range of stocks uses the slow reduction method to ensure flavour optimisation and contains 100 per cent natural ingredients, with no added salt, sugar, MSG, or artificial flavouring. They're also 99 per cent fat free and completely gluten free. For more see Cerebos Food Service on 1300 365 865.

2 Do you have protection? Ansell's Polar Bear glove is made from an engineered-yarn core and a high strength outer wrap. It offers protection from cuts, while the extended anti-shrink cuff gives added comfort for shift-long productivity. Designed for either primary protection or used as a liner under another glove, Polar Bear offers excellent dexterity

with light duty cut protection. This results in a cut resistant glove that Ansell claims is more cost-effective than chain mesh designs. Major benefits for productivity include a seamless construction to avoid hand irritation, a liner for comfort, and a reversible design so it can be worn on either hand. For more go to ansell.com.au

3 Who ate all the pies? Herbert Adams' latest addition to its gourmet range is a Beef and Mushroom Pie. It's a combination of beef pieces and chopped mushrooms, encrusted in golden flaky pastry. It joins flavours including King Island Beef, Chilli Con Carne, Creamy Chicken and Leek, and Traditional Shepherd's Pie. For more see patties.com.au

4 No more broken glasses? The new Handi-Tray is a uniquely designed beverage serving tray that supports several key ergonomic features

and aims at making tray service easier and safer for staff with its increased stability. The 13 inch by 13 inch tray includes an opening around the perimeter that allows users to slide their hand underneath the tray when rested on a table or flat surface. In addition, a hand impression on the bottom of the tray allows both left- and right-handed users to maintain centre of balance at all times. For more head to jbisi.com

5 Yellowglen adds new sweet white bubbly. Yellowglen has unveiled the latest addition to its vintage range. Vintage Bella Bianco is a sweet white bubbly and is the sister to Yellowglen Vintage Bella, the fastest growing Rosé in the sparkling category. With fruit sourced from premium vineyards in South Eastern Australia, Bella Bianco's palate is luscious and full, but tempered with fresh, crisp acidity and citrus flavours. For more go to yellowglen.com.au

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JUNE

13-15 Fine Food New Zealand; Fine Food heads to New Zealand for the first time with this inaugural event. See finefoodnz.co.nz

21-23 FSA Expo FoodService and Bakery Australia, Sydney; Giant foodservice and bakery event. See foodserviceaustralia.com.au

JULY

15-18 Hospitality + Hospitality Furnishings, Melbourne; This is a feature of Furnitex the show that is only about furniture—the latest furniture designs, fabrics and finishes from local and international manufacturers for residential and commercial hospitality markets. See furnitex.com.au/

SEPTEMBER

13-16 Fine Food Australia, Melbourne:The



Bakers will test their skills at FSA Expo in Sydney this month.

largest trade event for the hospitality industry, this giant four day event this year returns to Melbourne. More than 1,000 exhibitors are expected to be there again to showcase their latest food, beverage and hospitality products and equipment to a predicted 25,000 plus

industry visitors. See foodaustralia.com.au

21-22 The Sydney BarShow; This two day day trade event caters for the Australian bar industry. As well as the exhibitor line up, there are international and local speakers in the Bartender Magazine Mixology Theatre, experts sharing their knowledge in the Bar Talks and Tasting Theatre and the chance to sample exotic elixirs in Smugglers Den. And you can get tropical at the new innovation for the show, The Rum Shack. See barshow.com.au

OCTOBER

2-3 Irresistible Gluten Free Show, Melbourne; Thousands of visitors are expected to attend this two day show which is one of a series being held around the country showcasing an exciting range of gluten free products. See glutenfreefoodshow.com.au

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Work on the menu's 'profit strength'.

A good menu has a variety of items that are both profitable and popular. Check the dollar-profit margin on each dish rather than just working on percentages. Identify the fast (and slow) sellers. Make sure you have a good range of desserts and grazing

items. A profitable menu should aim for overall food-costs of 25 per cent or less.

Employ truly competent kitchen leaders. This means staff who are good at getting the best from a team, knowledgeable about food issues, strong, fast, able to train staff quickly, reliable with numbers and happy to report to you regularly. They're

around, and looking for a good place to work.

Play dumb (to be smart). Cooking is just another manufacturing trade. Ask lots of questions and watch how the process works. Learn about it online, and compare it with the operation of a well-organised bar or even a trade that's not in hospitality.

If you put just a few of these prac-

tices in place you will notice an immediate improvement in efficiency and profits. Implement them all and the results will astound you.

Ken Burgin is a leading hospitality industry consultant. For more information Ken and his business Profitable Hospitality visit profitablehospitality.com or call 1800 001 353.

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