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CHAPTER 7



# THE KITCHEN

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## PROFIT MARGINS



Kitchens can be terrifying to the uninitiated. When fully in action at the height of the lunch or dinner hour, the business can be so intense that it blurs. “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen” is an old line. But for the restaurateur who is not actually a trained chef, better advice would be to observe and learn, so as not to be intimidated and, most importantly, given the run-around by a power-seeking chef. The kitchen is undoubtedly the hub of most restaurants, despite the common heartfelt cry from amateur restaurateurs: “I don’t make any money on the food, only on the bar!” How anyone can say this is mystifying, when a salad sold for \$6 often contains only 50 cents worth of material, even at retail prices. But it is a common cliché of the trade and perhaps a symptom of the amateurishness of many of its practitioners.

The wise words of the executive who once replied to a writer’s complaint that, although the world price of coffee had gone down, the price of coffee in the supermarket had gone up, may be significant in this context. “If coffee beans suddenly cost nothing,” he said, “the price of a jar of instant coffee would remain the same.” No matter how cheaply you buy your food supplies, you still won’t escape the overhead that must be financed from your income.

True, the kitchen overhead in terms of payroll and materials alone is heavier than overhead expenses of the bar. Also, some food items are much better profit items than others. But the restaurateur must take the overall view. After all, even though food profits may not be in themselves tremendous, if you don’t serve food, you don’t have a restaurant!

The two biggest bills you’ll ever have to pay, after your rent, are the meat and/or fish bill and the liquor bill. Selling cooked food at a profit takes a certain skill. But the steak priced at \$20 on the menu has usually cost the restaurateur no more than \$4. Many steakhouses are actually owned by butchers, in order to provide a heavily marked-up retail outlet for their goods.

At the more expensive end of the menu, in the area of carefully and expertly prepared special dishes, the profit margin is just as healthy. If you serve Chicken Kiev, for instance (that’s the one where, at the prick of a knife, melted butter spurts from a sewn-up chicken breast), there’s preparation time involved, and the people who do the work command full salaries—that is, their income isn’t subsidized by tips. In other words, there’s a labor cost. The profit level should be assessed carefully on a regular basis. An average 2 percent profit is generally considered the minimum. But, remember, November and December are almost invariably busier and more profitable than, say, January.

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## CHEF POWER

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For some reason, the area of food intimidates restaurant owners who are not, themselves, trained chefs. Apart from the general lack of control and confidence this attitude creates, it often leads to a dangerous psychological imbalance in the running of the business: The owner is in awe of the chef. An owner who can't do the chef's job can succumb to a ludicrous dependency. To an extent, this isn't unreasonable. If this important end of the business is well taken care of, no one can be blamed for wanting to keep a key employee happy, even if this means that the employee gets away with murder, as many chefs do.

With one telephone call, any member of staff can usually be replaced within the hour—except the chef. The new waiter, busboy, hostess, maitre d', manager, cloakroom attendant, car valet, porter, or dishwasher may not be the employee of one's dreams, but they'll help to muddle through a shift. Finding and replacing a chef can be a nightmare. "Better the devil you know . . .," the boss will say with a sigh. "At least the chef's *fast* and can get the orders out promptly." Sadly, speed of production is often a better qualification than quality.

All too often, these factors result in chefs being able to rule the roost. They'll come in drunk, go home drunker, insult the staff with dirty talk far beyond the usual harmless badinage, make enough smoke to cover a divisional river crossing, and generate enough noise to drown out even the loudest pianist or juke box. Few customers are ever likely to return for a repeat experience.

Once in a while, though, most chefs are steady, conservative people, just one will go berserk and actually attack someone. Anyone will do, no particular employee is at risk, unless it's a waiter who insists, on the customer's behalf, on getting what was ordered, or a waitress who's kept silent in the face of his filthy insults. A dreadful murder case in California some years ago involving the chef of a famous restaurant raised a few eyebrows, and had a few people wondering what kind of people lurked behind that swinging kitchen door. (It was a revelation that this prince of the skillets, who was often invited to come out and discuss the recently consumed meal with the customers, had very little money in the bank, despite a high salary, and didn't even have a driver's license.)

Bearing in mind the profusion of deadly weapons in the average kitchen, from meat cleaver to frying pan, the dangers are obvious. The optimum freak-out point for most chefs is when a dish is returned to the kitchen, either as a reject or requiring further treatment, or when an order arrives just as the chef is about to start closing up the kitchen. Many owners will insist that late arrivers be served, even though they lack the courage to go into the kitchen and

smooth the chef's feelings. Some owners have rigid last-order times, but many can't resist the opportunity to take in a bit more cash. It's what they're there for, after all. When owners are chefs, they'll sometimes volunteer to do the cooking themselves, and, if in the process they build up a clientele who insist on arriving late for that special treatment, well, it serves them right.

Ironically, the unshaven short-order cook with the bleary eye—thank goodness no longer equipped with the drooping cigarette dropping ash into the food—is just as likely to be temperamental as the brilliant young chef whose picture is in society magazines and who studied under the great prince of the kitchen, Cogliani di Medici, and is being paid \$100,000 a year plus bonuses.

The question arises, would a nasty chef be easier to deal with if tipped by the waiters and waitresses? The answer is, probably yes. But how many people are they supposed to take care of? They've already got to tip the bartender, the busperson, and possibly the captain. Although it's no longer common, the old hands used to tip the chef quite routinely for getting their orders out promptly and not giving them too much of a hard time. Nowadays, a bottle of beer snatched from the bar as a peace offering is more usual. On Cunard ships at one time, a waiter could not put in an order unless he first tipped the kitchen. Management looked the other way, as it continually must in the union-dominated Merchant Marine.

Although the management skills required of the restaurateur do not exceed those required of the most junior NCO in the army, few restaurateurs seem to possess them. What is worse, they don't seem to learn them. There can be no doubt that the best and most successful restaurants are run either by well-educated people who've learned the relevant skills or by people steeped in the business who just happen to have natural management ability. It's a shame, because there's rarely a requirement for more than routine common sense and diplomacy.

In order to maintain the edge of authority and reduce stressful dependency, restaurateurs, if they are to accumulate any specialist knowledge at all, would do well to address their training time to food, more than any other area of the business. Many owners will freely criticize every aspect of their operations except the sacrosanct domain of the kitchen. In comparison, everything else is easy. Some restaurateurs find dealing with people difficult. But attractive young people who can work as hosts and hostesses are easy to come by in cities, if this is the case. They tend to burn out fast in the least attractive job in a restaurant, but they're as easy to replace as a Napoleonic army after a disastrous battle.

For obvious reasons, it's not in the interests of highly paid chefs to reveal just how easy cookery is, once one becomes aware of how food is supposed to look and taste when it's done right. The trade guards its secrets jealously, but

it doesn't take much working out. With a little practice, you'll find you can even open clams.

This is not to put down the art of cookery. However, chefs themselves are notoriously skeptical about their "art" and often cite, as their favorite meal, fried eggs and french fries or a nice juicy hamburger. Some of this is probably a bit tongue in cheek, of course—they might mean farm eggs and french fries double fried in goose fat.

But too many owners are totally intimidated by kitchen problems. If they get into the subject seriously, they'll soon learn the ropes, and they'll get better results in the kitchen, too.

Bakery is a branch of cooking that takes knowledge and practice. Amateur flair and beginner's luck will get you nowhere in this department. You have to practice and get it wrong a few times before you eventually get it right. But in the end, you'll find you can do it.

It is extremely unusual for employees to be allowed to sample the whole menu in restaurants, even though they're solemnly expected to be able to describe dishes and advise customers. People who work in good-quality gourmet restaurants, and are allowed to eat what they want (which would be highly unusual), find everything tastes the same after a while.

This demonstrates the consistency of the chef's work, and is in fact to be encouraged. Regular customers will know what to expect. If you think about it, although all the tastes of home cooking are well known in most families, you really wouldn't want it any different.

Finding a reliable chef who isn't too much of a prima donna can take forever. Many restaurateurs do not embark upon their business project until and unless they have first secured the services of such a person, knowing the pitfalls awaiting them. That's another reason why you should get around, meet people, and make friends in the business. When the chef is a partner—capable, pleasant, and not too neurotic—things often go a lot better. The waiters and waitresses have to be a bit more on their toes, but they often get treated better and are less subject to stress, which makes them a better sales staff.

When hiring a chef, it's important to stress that they are only employed on probation. Some are better at job interviews than they are in the kitchen. Attitude, background, and experience should be assessed. Formal training is always a big plus.

Incidentally, one of the best chefs you can hire is an ex-serviceman. An army cook sergeant will have attended a long and rigorous course, and will be used to feeding 600 soldiers three times a day, often in adversarial conditions. True, services kitchens are well equipped and fully staffed, with extra labor on call (KP duties), but these chefs can usually take everything in stride. Nor should it be feared that such a chef will be deficient in the chic gourmet haute-cuisine

department. Inside most army chefs there's an Escoffier struggling to get out! The mundane tastes of the military are often frustrating. One sergeant shook his head wearily as he contemplated his elaborate salad bar, largely ignored, and said, "I sometimes think that if I gave them hamburgers, fried eggs and french fries three times a day, they wouldn't complain." Because of their high civilian employability, this trade is one of the most sought-after in the services.

Sadly, it must be mentioned that famous and expensive restaurants owned by the chef get mixed reports from food-writers. While often (though by no means always) praising the food and decor, they report a cold and frigid atmosphere created by unsmiling absurdly grave staff. The reason for this is almost certainly the coldly obsessive demands of the chef-owners. Recent fly-on-the-wall TV shows filmed in restaurant kitchens reveal character far removed from the genial, smiling, all-things-to-all-men celebrity chef interviewed on the late-night chat shows. In some places, the pictures of dreaded food writers and restaurant reviewers are displayed. Sometimes they may not be served. But more often, they serve the purpose of warning the staff that they're being assessed.

It can be an unhappy business, full of petty hatred and jealousy. This is almost invariably a result of personality deficiencies in the owner or manager. The brutal truth is that some unhappy restaurants do excellent business anyway. But if an owner wants to stay happy and reduce stress, then putting together an efficient crew motivated by more than the ordinary need to do a job isn't a bad idea. Also, there can be no doubt that when staff morale descends below a certain level, the effect on business can be disastrous. Customers will pick up the vibes, and they often won't endure them. Remember, customers can be prima donnas, too, and they certainly don't want to be surrounded by misery when they're out relaxing and enjoying themselves. Personality and powers of leadership are real strengths in creating restaurants that are pleasant to visit and efficient providers of food.

A somewhat over-effusive writer recently said of the Paris family-owned restaurant (or *bouchon*) Le Moissonneur, "To eat here every Saturday for the rest of your life wouldn't just make for a happy marriage—it would make mortality bearable." The chef seemed like a "heroic paragon," his children were "sweet and beautiful," and his wife "all that is best in French womanhood." Few will evoke such praise, but one can try.

One of the most dramatic true stories from the history of food is that of the seventeenth-century steward to the Prince de Condé, Francois Vatel. Though never a full-fledged chef, Vatel had once been apprenticed to a pastry cook. However, he made a name for himself as a general manager of great estates. His employer was the Treasury of France, but he was borrowed by other employers to supervise or put their households in order.

At the Prince de Condé's chateau near Chantilly, where the dessert dish

Pear Condé (pear cooked in red wine and port and served with rice) and Chantilly (sweetened whipped cream) were created, Vatel had his own apartments and servants and was allowed to wear a sword and jewels. Unfortunately, he found the chateau in a state of neglect, and the task of restoring grounds, chateau, and servants to some sort of order was enormous. He did a magnificent job, but although only in his thirties, he began to suffer from the stress. He complained that he couldn't sleep and that his head was spinning. Others thought he seemed ill.

In April of 1671, King Louis XIV came to Chantilly with his vast entourage, and Vatel had to ensure accommodation and catering. Throughout history, one reads of the dubious honor befalling those visited by kings and queens—it was often a ruinous business. Cromwell's father, for instance, was almost ruined by a royal visit, and this may have colored his future politics.

There were too many guests to be accommodated in the chateau, and they had to be housed in the neighborhood. On the first evening of the visit, the roast meat ran out and two tables received none. The elaborate and expensive fireworks display was a dismal failure.

Next day, a small order of fish arrived, and Vatel nearly had a fit when he was told that was all he'd ordered. The thought of another fiasco was intolerable. He went upstairs and stabbed himself to death with his sword.

Too late, one of his staff arrived to remind him that he had, in fact, ordered more fish from another supplier, and that it was safely on its way. As a suicide, he could not be given Christian burial and so was laid to rest in a field, without a monument.

Clearly Vatel was an early victim of front-line burnout, or simple, mind-bending stress through overwork. Perhaps he was not well organized. Perhaps he did not delegate properly, but, then, he may not have had a very good staff. Some said that if such a distinguished man could kill himself for a turbot, he'd established cooking among the noble arts. French chef Paul Bocuse echoed this sentiment when he accepted the Legion d'Honneur wearing his chef's uniform of *toque blanche*, the tall white hat, and apron.

Others, ignoring the fact that Vatel was more an administrator than a cook, said that he clearly didn't have the proper character for a chef, as he didn't know how to make the best of a bad job and rise above difficulties. The French greatly prize and admire what they call *Système D*. The "D" is for the verb *debrouiller*, to muddle through, sort things out, make the best of a bad job, and so on.

Nowadays, anyone approaching breakdown is more likely to be sent on vacation than allowed to continue, and clearly there is sometimes a case for this.

In 1998, Bernard Louiseau was one of France's most celebrated chefs and restaurant owner. His culinary group (he owned several businesses) was listed on the stock exchange, making him the only chef in the world to become a public company. On February 26, 2003, Loiseau, 52, committed suicide by

shooting himself in the head with a hunting rifle in the bedroom of his house in Saulieu, Côte d'Or, Burgundy. Long before, he'd said that if he lost a star in the Gaultmillau Guide (the rival to the better-known Michelin guide) he'd kill himself. He didn't lose a star, but he dropped from 19 to 17 in the Gaultmillau rating system of 20 possible points. This 20-point system takes into consideration flavor, texture, presentation, and smallness of food portions. A guide spokesperson said that the two points were deducted because the critic received five *haricots verts* (green beans) on his plate, instead of the customary *three*. The spokesperson avered that Loiseau had other problems. The chef's widow, Dominique, revealed that he had recently been very tired, and that he hadn't taken a holiday in years.

There was a general outcry from the restaurant industry against the tyranny of the restaurant guides. Paul Bocuse even went so far as to say that critics killed Loiseau. One glimpses the intense paranoia that occurs at the more rarefied levels of the industry. It might be observed that there are thousands of restaurants that don't feature in any restaurant guide, but do very well, thank you.

Napoleon had a love-hate relationship with food. After the successful battle of Marengo, June 14, 1800, against the Austrians in Northern Italy, his chef Dunand's foragers could only find some onions, potatoes, a scrawny chicken, four tomatoes, three eggs, a few crayfish, some garlic, and a frying pan. (Although the French army on campaign took some supplies, and cattle and pigs on the hoof, they often *foraged*, i.e., lived off the land they conquered. This strategy eventually helped to destroy them in Russia, when they were forced to retreat over country they'd denuded during the advance.)

Dunand was without his normal cooking utensils. No butter was found, but they did find some olive oil. Dunand cut up the chicken with a saber and fried it in oil with garlic and some water made more palatable with brandy from Napoleon's hip flask. A soldier offered some "emergency ration" bread. Eggs were fried in the same liquid and served on the side. Fried crayfish were put on top. Napoleon was delighted, and ordered that this dish should be served after every battle. (One assumes he meant every *victorious* battle.)

Back in Paris, he requested the dish one day. Dunand obliged, but thought crayfish and chicken, though acceptable after a busy day on the battlefield, an absurd culinary combination. He served the dish without the fish, adding mushrooms, and imaginatively substituting white wine for water. Napoleon, a superstitious Corsican, complained bitterly that this would bring bad luck, and crayfish had to be found in a hurry.

On the rare occasions that one encounters Chicken Marengo today, the crayfish are usually omitted and the signature is merely fried eggs on the side of chicken pieces fried in garlic. It should not be thought that Napoleon was much of a *foodie*. He used to gobble his meals, often disdaining cutlery and eating with

his fingers. Wine didn't interest him much. He liked Chambertin, but usually watered, and carried a flask of brandy in the field. Often he ate his food so quickly that he would have violent indigestion and sometimes even vomited—hence, presumably, the traditional pictures of Napoleon with one hand nursing a sore stomach.

The British Duke of Wellington, Napoleon's archenemy, was no more interested in food. His Spanish assistant during the Peninsular War said that he never wanted to hear these words again: "Cold meat and red wine." That was Wellington's invariable reply when, after a day's march, he was asked what he'd like for dinner.

## KITCHEN STAFF



A polite letter to a grand hotel or restaurant will usually secure a tour of the kitchens. There you may see a full brigade of chefs of various ranks. Some say that the Paris restaurant Maxim's invented the system, but it probably evolved naturally.

You'll meet the apprentices and cooks of varying rank from the various *parties* (departments). The fish chef, the sauce chef, the butcher, the baker, the *hors d'oeuvre*, the *garde manger* (in charge of the larder), the *communard* (in charge of feeding the brigade), and the *chef tournant*, who is skilled enough to take over any job in the kitchen at a moment's notice. The *chef adjoint* is the second-in-command, and the *chef de cuisine* is the commanding officer.

In a grand hotel or restaurant, the *chef de cuisine* is someone who hires, fires, and spends up to \$100,000 a day on food. Yes, this means he's in line for kickbacks. It's an accepted perk of the profession. A legal precedent was set years ago in Boston when a judge ruled that while kickbacks were OK, if they were in the form of cash they should be declared and taxed, just like tips!

You'll be amazed what a genial and easy-going bunch the cooks in these establishments usually are. Most of these highly paid pros despise temperament and talk a lot of teamwork and dedication. Like theater professionals, they never lose sight of their goal—to fill the restaurant's seats. Their responsibilities, and the occasional intensity of effort required, preclude prima donna fits. You'll see no baseball hats worn backward and no precious designer stubble.

Contrary to what TV would have us believe, many top chefs could easily pass as accountants or doctors.

Kitchens generate a lot of waste and dirt. Cleanliness is imposed by law, and a health inspector can close a restaurant instantly. A bang up-to-date modern kitchen will be built like a gigantic shower room, with slightly sloping

floors and a drain in the middle, so that the whole place can be literally hosed down. A useful piece of equipment is the “steam wand” a device that enables hot steam to be brought to bear on greasy surfaces.

A typical kitchen crew for a restaurant that seats up to 150 people would consist of a chef (probably the highest paid person in the place) and two helpers. One of these may enjoy the title of salad maker, the other will be the dishwasher. Both will be required to carry out various duties in the course of their shift. The dishwasher will be required to run occasional errands, and, in places too small to employ a busperson, clean up mishaps in the dining room. The salad maker may have to do anything from cutting strawberries to opening clams. It’s a good idea to instill a daily routine so that everything gets done automatically, but this shouldn’t be done in such a way as to suggest that, outside the regular tasks, nothing else needs to be done. Though most employees will smilingly oblige the boss, you can’t always be there. The cry of “It’s not my job!” is the last thing the chef or manager wants to hear in any of the mild emergencies that inevitably occur in the course of a day.

In some places the power of the chef is such that many odd jobs are sloughed off onto the waiters and waitresses, from making up their own salads to whipping the cream.

The kitchen crew arrives early in the day in order to set up (or prep), not just for the day, but for the evening dinner shift as well. Sometimes they’ll have to prepare food for a special that won’t actually be featured for a couple of days. At around 5 P.M., they are relieved by the night crew, whose chef may be less skilled, and thus worse paid, and who only has to dish up that which has been prepared earlier by the day chef. Of course, where, as is hoped, both lunch *and* dinner become very busy affairs, this routine may have to be varied. But patterns of business soon assert themselves. Except in busy travel and tourist areas, there’s usually a calm patch in the afternoon when the restaurant can recuperate and various tasks can be accomplished.

Sometimes a state of mutual hatred exists between the two crews. Most commonly, the bone of contention is simply that the job that should have been done has not been done. Once more, it’s the job of the owner or manager to mediate and make sure that the show goes on.

## DECIDING ON THE MENU



The menu is something the owner and chef work out between them. It will conform to the standard repertoire of cooking with individual touches. These may be provided by local produce and tastes or some special skill of the chef.

When you're inspired to experiment, you can feature a dish as a special. Then, if it's a success, you can make it a regular item.

Ease of production must be borne in mind at all times. If the chef turns out a particular dish that is a bit fussy and time-consuming but is always a sell-out, then there's obviously a case for featuring it. But you don't make work. There's enough to do just attending to the basics.

You should constantly review the menu. Some owners do this very consciously by doing a breakdown of what's ordered every day. If you sell 40 chicken potpies, but only 3 barbecued porks, then you might consider dropping the less popular item.

Also, you should be aware of what gets eaten heartily and what gets left on the plate. Hopefully, the servers will tell you this, but some may not notice. A conscientious owner or manager will draw up a list of what dishes have been sold every day, and consider any changes that suggest themselves. Sometimes the size of portions needs to be changed. The wonderful science of portion control is all about how much you give for the money. Given the current pre-occupation with obesity, the operative word here is *less*.

The menu is a good sales tool. There's something engaging about a menu that looks as if it was composed that very day in the light of what was the best food available. With a computer, this is easy to achieve. Make appropriate changes, print, and make copies. Customers often ask for menus to take home, so it's a good idea to have a supply available, with the restaurant's telephone number and general info included.

## Menu Changes

It's important that the waiters and waitresses learn instantly those items that have run out. If word of mouth doesn't work, then you should have a blackboard outside the kitchen to list the items no longer available. Otherwise, busy servers might find themselves making wasted trips and apologizing to customers. They hate this, as it lessens their psychological control over the scene—and not infrequently takes the edge off their tip, too.

## Food Quality

Restaurant haters complain that restaurant food is rarely as good as home cooking. This is generally true. Cooking a meal for two or three people, under no great pressure, with a knowledge of how people like their food and with a natural wish to please, is entirely a different task from cooking for hundreds of customers. The chance of finding a used bandage, fingernail, or cigarette butt in your chicken potpie is clearly quite small at home. In a restaurant where

many people have had their hands in the preparation of a hundred pies, with regular interruption, obviously the scope for horror is greater. And, inevitably, some of those pies will contain tastier meat than others.

One might expect that a commercial chef with nothing else to do but prepare food, unlike many a working parent with children, would turn out *better* food. In some restaurants, usually the more expensive ones, this is sometimes the case. Expensive restaurants hire more staff in order to increase quality. In the average restaurant, the chef hardly has time to sit down during the entire shift.

Customers sometimes complain about limited menus (hamburger, cheeseburger, baconburger, chopped sirloin, steak, flounder stuffed with crab, eggs of any style, etc.). However, it's irritating to go to a restaurant for lunch only to find that it doesn't feature a standard item like steak, french fries, and salad, but are crowded with chi-chi items. An ideal menu should be like a popular symphony concert program, offering the possibility of a familiar and tuneful overture, a war-horse symphony, or concerto by one of the great composers, something from the less-played repertoire, and perhaps a lightweight, jolly finale. In other words, something for everyone.

Customers learn what to avoid. *Fried* often means deep-fried in a thick, tasteless batter that hides the protein within. *Pan-fried*, by the way, is not a redundant expression—it means fried in a pan as opposed to deep-fried. Duck is often a disaster—to get it right just takes too much time and attention. Pastry dishes, rather a challenge for the domestic cook, are often phony, ready-made tasteless pie crusts inserted on top of separately prepared mini-stews. *Baked on the premises* in many cases ought to read “Faked on the premises.” “Flounder stuffed with crabmeat” is another phony description of a deep-frozen favorite that finds a home on many a mediocre menu. Few buy twice. A common and depressing customer's motto is, “I only order the things the restaurant is least likely to get wrong.”

Even the most hard-bitten restaurant hater, however, cannot deny that some things are done better in restaurants and would be hard to cook at home. Steak and prime rib, for instance, require more heat than is comfortably generated in a small apartment or house—hence the popularity of the backyard barbecue. Also, the quality of meat supplied to restaurants is generally superior to that obtained in supermarkets or even the ordinary butcher's shop.

The quality of food depends on two factors: the skill with which it's prepared, and the basic quality of the foodstuffs used. To this might be added the perception of novelty factor. Food cooked by someone you don't know has the advantage of a different and original touch. Though mom's sure touch will always be the best, a change will often refresh the palate and perhaps make mom's food taste even better when next sampled. It need hardly be added, though that “hunger is the best sauce.” The most demanding gourmet will not disdain the yacht-club-bar hamburger after a cold morning's sailing.

Many chefs lean heavily on cream, a clever move because most American homes don't use it a lot, especially since people have become aware of fat and cholesterol. When real whipped cream (as opposed to the commonly used aerosol stuff, which would be put to better use for shaving) is added to strawberries or good chocolate cake, a glimpse of heaven may be vouchsafed. Heavy cream can be added to soup with good effect, too.

The simple addition of a pinch of curry powder, paprika, dill, bay leaves, or some other herb or condiment, can transform a dish from the banal to the superb. Soup with a pinch of curry becomes *madrilène*, and so on.

So far as mechanical devices go, after the fierce and instantly applied fire of the restaurant stove, the blender is probably the most useful tool. It can be used, for instance, to whip up really tasty desserts quickly.

## Food Sources

When “great” restaurants are written up and gushed over by the media—an event usually caused by the restaurant's public relations firm, not the excitement of the editorial staff—sooner or later there will be a reference to the heroic owner or chef getting up at 4 A.M. in order to go to the food markets to select the very best items for the esteemed customers. This scenario has its origins in France, where there really are food markets that open very early, often full of housewives, restaurateurs, and excellent food. They are well worth a visit when in France, if you can stand the sight of pigs' heads on sticks or blinded rabbits at the crack of dawn.

In terms of validity, it's about on a par with the common whine of the sincere and dedicated please-use-me-as-your-ego doormat restaurateur: “I treat my customers like guests in my own home!” Except that they get a bill.

It's true that there are markets that open at unearthly hours in major U.S. cities, and that it's often a case of first come, first served. They are all worth a visit. Considerable savings can be made, but that 4 A.M. reveille—often undertaken by a willing spouse while the exhausted owner who closed the restaurant the previous evening snores on—can be a serious strain on individuals, not to mention marriages. The necessity to attend the food markets has long passed. Food wholesalers, sometimes called *purveyors*, have longstanding business arrangements with producers who provide them with all kinds of food, from swordfish to radishes, of best—and lesser—quality.

Consequently, if you are in the hands of a good supplier, there really shouldn't be a problem in this area, and you needn't lose any sleep. This doesn't mean you should lose sight of quality control. Most wholesalers are ordinary business people, and they want to keep their customers. But the world is full of wise guys, and if some purveyors (or their delivery staff) see you as a sucker, they won't give you an even break. All incoming goods should be checked

carefully against the invoice. If you fail to do it once, you may become a *mark*. In many restaurants the highly polished scales in the basement are regularly used to check quantities. One paranoid owner, briefing his manager before taking off on vacation, was heard to say, “Oh, yeah, the lobsters. They come in on Tuesdays. Reject a couple, whether there’s anything wrong with them or not. Send them back. Keep the bastards on their toes!” This won’t usually be necessary. Purveyors value their clients.

This only affects the gourmet end of the market, but some foods are also genuinely in short supply, and not only white truffles. Only 2 percent of steers qualifies as *prime*. Each prime steer provides about 30 pounds of beef. One steakhouse owner, when questioned about expansion, complained, “I don’t know if I can get enough heavy prime to do more.” Some foods are, of course, seasonal. With modern shipping and growing techniques, however, almost everything is always available.

In passing, you should insist that your suppliers deliver the goods at reasonable times, preferably before the commencement of business. Diners in silk and satin, lips poised to consume a *Bonne-Bouche* or to deliver a *bon mot*, don’t want their restaurant experience spoiled by the sight and sounds of food being delivered.

## Phoney Foods

“All that glitters is not gold” runs the proverb. Looking for better profits, food suppliers have come up with some ingenious methods and substances.

Most foods have to meet a legal definition set down by the FDA. This is what brings about such wondrous items as a product called *pork & beans*. When the can is opened, a square 1/2-inch of pork fat can be seen floating on the beans, which may themselves be of mixed ancestry. This makes it, legally, pork and beans! One might also quibble at the can marked *spaghetti and meatballs*, which contains but *one* meatball, and that heavily laced with filler. Where is Ralph Nader when we really need him?

*Fresh fish* is defined as that which emerged from the waters no more than five days ago. Clearly, this definition doesn’t cover those solid chunks that emerge from the deep freeze. But there’s nothing to stop you from calling your salmon special the “Catch of the Day.”

Veterans of Economics 101 will recall that, whenever a product becomes prohibitively expensive or in short and uncertain supply, substitutes will emerge—hence, plastic for rubber, and polyester for cotton and silk. The food industry has its share of alternatives, too. Atlantic pollack is treated, shaped, and flavored to resemble crabmeat, lobster, and even scallops. When you see a “Lobster Crab Sandwich” for \$8.50 on the menu, the one thing you can be

sure of is that you aren't getting crab or lobster. And "stuffed with crabmeat" is usually a joke. Often it's a case of the substance being a mere shadow of the description.

Though purists may quite rightly object to this, the small print of the law allows considerable leeway of definition, and it would require both the wisdom of Solomon and millions of dollars in lawyer's fees to make small points. It is a fact of life that the definitions of certain foods are much looser than would be permitted in, say, aircraft safety regulations.

Often the genuine article, real ham, or real crabmeat, is prohibitively expensive for your price range. Sometimes you have to settle for acceptable rather than the best. A good chef will still manage to produce appetizing food. Indeed, one of the definitions of a *good chef* in France is one who makes the very best of available ingredients.

However, the currently popular substitutes for expensive shellfish are much cheaper, of good quality, and certainly the happiest compromise by far in this league. Few can afford Beluga caviar, but salmon caviar is delicious. Bill Buckley once observed that if peanut butter cost the same as caviar, sales wouldn't be affected. Everyone will have their favorites, good and bad. The truth is that many manufactured foods are so good and attractive in price that even a chef with the purest motives will be a fool not to use them. Canned consommé or beef broth can be mixed with other ingredients to great effect, and those little beef or chicken stock cubes can work wonders, too. Although *real* mayonnaise is a delight to the connoisseur, it's a pain in the neck to make and is actually a bit exotic for the average American taste. Most Americans far prefer bottled mayo.

It's possible that many old folks may recall with amusement the disgust with which many postwar youngsters greeted fresh eggs, after having known only the powdered variety.

There are many yarns told about the things used in certain foods. Kangaroo meat was found in hamburger meat in New York several years ago, and the tall story industry seems to date from that time, though it's most likely cyclic. Very few meats are an effective substitute for beef, and most of the stories are urban myths. A favorite myth is the one about the discovery of a skinned corpse in the street that later turned out to be that of a chimpanzee. Investigation revealed that it had died in a local zoo and had fallen out of the truck that was delivering it to a hamburger factory, in keeping with a longstanding arrangement for the disposal of dead animals. Horsemeat, quite commonly eaten in Belgium and France (and definitely not "worth a detour," as they say in the *Michelin Good Food Guide*), is too sweet to pass muster.

Although most of these stories are nonsense, anyone who sees frankfurters being made will think twice before eating another.

Canned ham is meat from a pig, but it is often made up of scraps that have been pounded, shaped, colored, and flavored to give it a farmyard look. This is called *formed* meat. The process is also applied to turkey and chicken. *Formed* must appear on labels in stores, but it's invariably in the tiniest letters imaginable.

Some restaurateurs, notably the quick-turnover kind, are quite unscrupulous about the food they use. What they describe as veal is really pork, and what they call calf's liver is steer liver. In some states, this is actually permitted by law.

When you immerse yourself in trade magazines, you will be amazed at the ingenious devices and foods that exist to enable you to quickly serve food that gives the impression of having been cooked with tender, loving care over a long period of time. They vary from the acceptable to the ghastly.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. But the truth is that the American consumer often happily accepts food even the English would disdain, let alone the French. Speed is, of course, the enemy of good eating, but it's here to stay, and it won't go away. Restaurateurs must come to terms with it.

Readers may be irritated by the regular references to France and the French, as though they were the supreme arbiters of all things gastronomic. It's simply an easy frame of reference. Undeniably, the restaurant industry has its roots in France, though gastronomy almost certainly originates in Italy. Things have changed. Spain has become a gastronomic destination. One well-known writer recently observed that one could get better food in Noosa Heads, Australia, than in Paris. But France provides the traditions against which newcomers are judged.

## FOOD AND TASTE



“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are,” and, “He who invents a new dish will have rendered humanity a greater service than the scientist who discovers a planet,” are the words of the French gourmet Brillat-Savarin from his entertaining book *The Physiology of Taste*. In the real world of the restaurant, imaginative cooking can be a waste of time. Generally, many American customers like their food cooked in nationally standard ways. Visual pleasure—great cartwheels of tomato and onion and liberal garnishing with dawn-chopped parsley served on huge and strangely shaped plates—can be as conducive to enjoyment as actual taste. Often a chef will devise an intriguing dish that will get the thumbs down from management because it is simply too different, challenging, or strong in taste. Steak and kidney pudding and even quite mild curry dishes are viewed with great dubiety by some, although in general the

dining public is becoming much more adventurous, as is demonstrated by the number of ethnic restaurants.

Moving upscale, many restaurants bite off more than they can chew, requiring their chefs to lay on dishes they barely understand that fail abysmally. A young woman of 25 astonished her gourmet uncle by pulling a face at the mention of roast duck. She'd had it twice, each time in a restaurant (full marks for an adventurous spirit!), and had found it rubbery, greasy, and horrible. She was almost certainly correct, because for some reason, many restaurants have taken to serving roast duck in an abominable way. The bird is roasted and cooled. When the kitchen staff get an order, they extract a cooked bird from the refrigerator, "nuke" it (i.e., heat it in the microwave oven), and serve it. It is invariably a disaster. The fat that should have been removed by the application of salt and fierce heat lingers whitely beneath the soggy skin.

Duck is a dish that requires time, care, and attention, and many restaurants simply aren't up to it. This situation is partly what leads to unadventurous tastes. Customers, often on a budget, learn that if they stray from the straight and narrow path of steaks and hamburgers, the chances of disappointment are high. That is why you can sit in a restaurant with 30 entrées on the menu and observe the patrons eating a limited variety of hamburgers and pasta dishes.

Why the industry should shoot for novelty when what the majority want is ordinary, traditional food, cooked at its best, is a mystery. It may be part of that merchandising philosophy that insists on change for the sake of change, which is seen, often pointlessly, in every area of consumerism. Surely the sensible attitude for a restaurateur is, "If you can't do it right, don't do it."

A current obsession in the world of food is with salt and monosodium glutamate, usually referred to as MSG. A small minority are allergic to MSG and suffer when they, perhaps inadvertently, ingest it. This happens because an allergic person's autonomic nervous system causes the heart to speed up, and blood pressure to fall. After a medical study showed that some patients with high blood pressure reacted favorably to lowered sodium intake, the media became so shrill in its condemnation of this vital element of life (Roman soldiers were partly paid with salt, hence the expression, "He's worth his salt") that avoidance of it became fashionable. From using far too much, many chefs went to the other extreme of using none at all, and many restaurants, especially Chinese restaurants, are quite strident in their declaration that they use no MSG.

The two substances work differently. Salt doesn't "bring out" the flavor of food. It stimulates the taste buds. Everyone has different levels of sensitivity in this respect, which is why some people like more salt than others. Consequently, no cook can predict the salt requirement of the consumer, so it's probably best to use a minimum because, just as you can cook a steak a bit *more*, but not *less*, you can add salt to a dish, but you can't take it out once the dish has been cooked and served. For people who must reduce their salt intake (you must

have some or you'll die, because without salt/sodium your body can't absorb water), MSG is a happy alternative.

MSG is an amino acid that occurs naturally in most protein and provides the intrinsically savory taste of meat, cheese, and some vegetables. Commercially manufactured MSG (Accent is a well-known brand) is a white crystal, made from fermenting vegetable starches. Thus, it is no more unnatural or natural than, say, yogurt, alcohol, or soy sauce. In addition to stimulating the taste buds in the same way salt does, MSG expands the availability of flavor by chemically linking with related substances in the food.

Only a small amount is needed to be effective, and it is virtually tasteless in itself. Large amounts of MSG are used in many cheap manufactured foods to increase perception of flavor where little exists naturally. A similar dosage of salt would render the food inedible.

Many serious chefs will not disdain using a tiny amount of MSG in order to enhance flavor and savoriness. In blind tastings, between 87 percent and 95 percent of the tasters selected dishes containing MSG as being the most flavorful.

Why, then, are so many people vehemently against MSG, often claiming that they can taste it? Some people talk of the "Chinese restaurant syndrome," blaming it for all sorts of ills from asthma to headaches and general upsets. When MSG is used in large amounts, the taste buds become so sensitive that hitherto unnoticed food flavors are revealed. People mistakenly think they're tasting MSG, but really they are tasting its results.

Tests conducted by the Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives, which advises the World Health Organization, have found no link between MSG and these reactions. However, it is conceded that if one were to eat a large bowl of restaurant soup, which is often loaded with MSG to boost the flavor of weak stock, on an empty stomach, one might feel ill. Soup is quickly digested, and if there's anything wrong with it, the results will soon be apparent. Too much salt, or indeed anything else in the soup, might equally make one feel unwell.

When you consider the extensive lineup of available taste improvers—ketchup, steak sauce, pepper sauce, raw onion, and malt vinegar—MSG appears as a happy alternative because its mission is to enhance food rather than to disguise it. Yes, it does contain some sodium, but only about a third as much as salt, and a little MSG goes a long way, so one need only use small amounts of it.

Preservative sulfites can also affect a small percentage of people. Many are allergic to one or other of the hundreds of chemical ingredients occurring naturally in red wine. The Australian wine industry has been researching exactly what it is that makes red wine a no-no for so many people—it's got to be one or more of the histamines—but haven't yet discovered the answer. Some people find they can tolerate red wine made from the pinot noir grape, but not others. Allergy to shellfish is not uncommon. Shellfish allergy can induce mild epileptic attacks.

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## DANGERS



The most dangerous place in the world is—home. That's where most accidents occur. And within the home, the kitchen is the center of danger—flood, fire, and fumes are possible threats. The same applies to restaurants.

Fire is an ever-present threat, given the great heat required to cook for large numbers. Consequently, all kitchens must be equipped with fire extinguishers. Staff must know where they are, and they must be checked regularly to make sure they're serviceable. Fire-proof blankets are useful items, too. Experienced staff will take kitchen fires in stride—a pan blazes, they throw a blanket, end of fire, on with the job.

Seating capacity in restaurants, rigorously imposed by the Fire Service, is determined by how efficiently the place can be evacuated should fire break out. Of course, the law doesn't condone fire risks and premises are regularly inspected, but a day-to-day awareness of the risks is essential. The fire authorities have more authority in some areas than the police, and will close a restaurant at a moment's notice if they detect a serious fire hazard. Big fire tragedies have passed into American folklore.

When a restaurant is busy the chance of cooking burns, or scalds, increases. Upon receiving such an injury the casualty should put the damaged area under cold water immediately, and hold it there for several minutes. Plunging a burned hand into ice will be even more efficacious. There used to be much dispute as to the best treatment for such accidents, but the discussion is long over. This is the drill.

Naturally, a comprehensive First Aid box is an essential piece of equipment.

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## COMPUTERS



Most restaurants these days have computers. The cash register is often a sort of computer, and there is usually an all-purpose computer in the office. It might only be a PC or laptop, but either is very useful. Computers' main function is for inventory. By diligently entering every order to the kitchen, and every delivery, it's possible to keep close control. If no order for food is released from the kitchen until it's been registered on the computer, then the chances of servers pocketing the diner's money is greatly reduced.

However, one shouldn't be too reverential. Before computers, many a small restaurateur would carry the whole inventory in his head without difficulty. There is also a danger that service will be so computer-oriented that servers

lose touch with reality. It's not uncommon in the dopier kind of restaurant for a customer to have second thoughts and order an extra creamed spinach on the side, only to be told, "Sorry, sir, I can't get into the computer right now." That is absurd—and it happens. Someone must have the authority to bypass the computer.

There are all sorts of programs especially dedicated to the restaurant industry, and the gurus will welcome the challenge of devising one especially for your operation. You can use it to make a client database. Some restaurants will even record at which table a customer sat so that when next they make a reservation, the employee taking the reservation can ask, "Your usual table?" which adds a nice personal touch. Making people feel special is an important part of the restaurateur's business.

The Internet is useful for finding recipes and suppliers, and placing orders. As in retail stores, it's possible to program a computer to automatically place an order when the inventory is reduced to a certain point.

## GROCERY LIST



Here is a typical partial list of groceries from the computer of a successful New York restaurant that is moderately priced with a large choice of genuine cooked-on-premises items and an interesting wine list that changes regularly to allow customers to experiment. If you don't recognize each item and its use, you should.

Artichoke hearts; arugula; anchovies; A1 sauce; Angostura Bitters; bacon; beef broth; beans (black turtle, dark red kidney, navy, etc.); Baker's spray; barley; capers; canned clams; cranberry juice; cherries; chopped beef; chutney; Coco Lopez; cornstarch; condensed milk; Dijon mustard; eggs; flour; garlic; garlic powder; graham crackers; Grenadine; ham; horseradish; jam; ketchup; Kos lettuce; lemon juice; lemons; lentils; Lea & Perrins; maple syrup; Melfry; mayonnaise; muffin mix; olive oil; olives (cocktail olives); cocktail onions; pasta (fettuccini, tortellini, penne, lasagna, linguine, spirals); pineapple juice; Rose's Lime Juice; rice; saltines; split peas; steak; sugar (white, brown and confectioner's); Sweet & Low; tart shells; Tabasco sauce; tomato purée; tomatoes (whole, plum); tomato juice; canned tuna; vanilla extract; vinegar (red wine, white wine, malt and balsamic); walnuts; walnut oil; spices (basil, bay leaf, chili powder, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, curry, Coleman's mustard, nutmeg, oregano, paprika, parsley, pepper (black and white), salt, tarragon, thyme)