Chefs

Chefs (‘chefs) prepare and cook food for people in hotels, restaurants, and institutions.

Restaurants are becoming increasingly popular as more people eat meals away from home. Interest in ethnic and regional foods and a demand for lighter meals prepared with fresh ingredients and fewer calories have expanded the range of dining options. Consumers can eat a quick hamburger or pizza at a fast-food franchise, or they can go to an exclusive restaurant for an elegant six-course meal. Some establishments offer low-calorie meals complete with a breakdown of the nutritional components of each dish on the menu. Other restaurants offer classic French cuisine in the tradition of Escoffier.

Chefs are in demand and not just in restaurants or hotels. They work in resorts, hospitals, schools, colleges, private homes, and on ships. Factories, airlines, and catering firms hire them. Many companies hire chefs to cater meals on site for their employees. Chefs are responsible not only for the profit and loss of the operation, but also for the reputation of the establishment.

Work Performed

Although the terms chefs and cooks are sometimes used to mean the same thing, chefs generally have more experience and training, and are more skilled than cooks.

Executive chefs are in charge of large kitchens. They manage the kitchen staff, oversee operations, and are responsible for the quality of the food and the service offered in large hotels and fine restaurants. They develop and maintain standards of food preparation and service. Executive chefs create and test new recipes, and are in charge of planning, purchasing, inventory, and all the paperwork that goes along with those activities. They check food deliveries to make sure the order is correct and the supplies meet their standards for quality. Executive chefs may set menu prices, keep time and payroll records, and hire, train, and dismiss workers. They also maintain standards for sanitation and cleanliness.

In large establishments, an executive chef may supervise other chefs, each with special duties. Sauté cooks or sauciers take care of sautéed foods and their sauces. Grill cooks grill and broil meats and other foods. Garde-mangers take care of cold salads, hors d’oeuvres, and buffet presentations. Other chefs prepare fish, vegetables, soup, or pastries. In some hotels executive chefs may cooperate with a steward or maître d’ in kitchen, pantry, and storeroom duties.

Chefs and cooks who work in school and factory cafeterias usually prepare a limited number of entrées, vegetables, and desserts. Most of the time they prepare food in large quantities. Chefs who work in restaurants usually prepare a wider selection of dishes in smaller quantities, and prepare most meals to order.

Chefs and cooks assemble, measure, mix, and cook ingredients for soups, salads, entrées, gravies, sauces, casseroles, and desserts. They prepare salads, cook vegetables, and prepare meats, poultry, and fish for baking, roasting, or broiling. They use pots, pans, blenders, slicers, grinders, cutlery and mixing...
utensils. They work at counters, stoves, ovens, broilers, and grills.

Chefs and cooks rely on their training, experience, and judgment to season and cook the foods. Once they decide the food is prepared properly, they carve meats, arrange the food on plates, and add gravies, sauces, or garnishes.

**Short-order cooks** work in small restaurants, diners, and coffee shops. The menu is usually basic and the food does not require extensive preparation. The cooks may grill hamburgers, make sandwiches, or cook French fries. They may dish up servings from a steam table. They work on several orders at a time. In small places such as diners, cooks may serve people at the counter, collect payments, and run the cash register. They may slice meats, prepare salads or soups, peel vegetables, or do other chores. They may wash dishes and clean the kitchen equipment, counters, and floors after the restaurant closes or during slow times.

**Working Conditions**

Many restaurant and institutional kitchens have conveniently arranged work spaces, modern equipment, and air-conditioning. Older or smaller establishments are often less well-equipped. Working conditions vary according to the establishment, the kind of food served, and local laws on food service.

Chefs and cooks are on their feet for hours at a time. They lift heavy pots and kettles and work near hot ovens or grills. They must prepare quality meals under the pressure of time constraints. Kitchen equipment and machinery can be noisy. Cooks who work in diners or other small restaurants may prepare meals in crowded kitchens. Job hazards include slips and falls, cuts, and burns, but cooks and chefs rarely suffer serious injuries on the job.

**Hours and Earnings**

Hours vary with the position and the establishment. Chefs and cooks may work thirty-five to sixty hours a week. Some work split shifts, with several hours off between two work periods. Those who work in restaurants and hotels may work evenings, weekends, and holidays. Cooks in school cafeterias and seasonal resorts may work only at certain times of the year.

Many public eating places close one day a week, often on a Monday or Tuesday when business tends to be slow. Cooks and chefs do not have all holidays and weekends free, since most restaurants are open on these days. Some restaurants rotate weekend and holiday work among their employees. Some restaurants have three shifts. Others have two.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in November 2004, chefs and head cooks earned an average of $34,870 a year. Earnings ranged from a high of more than $56,060 a year to a low of less than $18,090 a year. Wages depend on the establishment, its location, and the skill and education of the worker. Private clubs, well-known restaurants, and hotels pay the highest wages. Executive chefs in well-known restaurants may earn more than $60,000 a year.

Full-time chefs and cooks may receive paid vacations, sick leave, and health insurance. Employers may furnish uniforms and offer free or reduced-price meals as a benefit, although some employers deduct the cost of meals from wages. Some employers pay tuition for continuing education courses and pay membership fees for professional organizations.

**Education and Training**

Some workers start as kitchen helpers and learn the art of handling, preparing, and cooking foods on the job. However, the trend is for students to learn these skills in a vocational school, community college, or culinary institute. Graduates of these programs will find better jobs with more responsibilities and a higher salary. Technical schools, trade schools, and two-year and four-year colleges offer courses in hotel and restaurant management and food preparation. Many two-year colleges offer an associate degree in food service careers. Culinary schools offer many different programs leading to a degree or a certificate in culinary arts.

Some large restaurants have their own training programs for new employees. Professional associations and trade unions offer apprenticeship programs. The American Culinary Federation, in cooperation with local employers, community colleges, and vocational institutes, offers the National Apprenticeship Training Program, a three-year program of on-the-job training and class study for aspiring cooks and pastry cooks. Those who complete this program are recognized as Certified Culinarians.

Culinary students spend most of their time learning to prepare food and handle kitchen equipment through hands-on practice. Cooking classes may cover everything from cooking with a wok to baking bread. Courses may cover menu planning, portion sizes, food cost control, purchasing food supplies in quantity, selection and storage of food, and use of leftovers. Students also learn how to handle kitchen equipment safely and learn sanitation regulations and public health rules about handling food.

Other courses may include international cuisine, classic regional cooking, pastry preparation, and spa cuisine. Students may study nutrition, wines and spirits, and menus and facilities planning. Some programs stress supervisory and management skills. Students may also take courses in business administration and business law. Many programs include paid internships at a restaurant or other food-service establishment.
Licensing, Certification, Unions and Professional Societies

Some chefs and cooks are union members, especially those who work in big cities or in large hotels, resorts, and restaurants. In 2004, the Union of Needletrades, Textiles, and Industrial Employees (UNITE) merged with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) to form UNITE HERE. This union represents more than 440,000 active members and more than 400,000 retirees throughout North America.

Certification is not always required but is preferred by many employers. The American Culinary Federation (ACF) has a membership made up of professional chefs and others who work in the food service industry. It has a certification program for cooks, sous chefs, pastry chefs, executive chefs, master chefs, and culinary educators. Standards for certification are experience, professional education, and successful completion of one or more exams.

The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) is an independent, nonprofit educational organization which provides a wide variety of professional development programs and instructional materials. CIA offers many certification programs and, together with the American Culinary Federation, offers the ProChef Certification program for food service professionals.

The International Food Service Executives Association (IFSEA) is the oldest food service trade association in the United States. It administers the Master Certified Food Executive (MCFE), the Certified Food Executive (CFE), and the Certified Food Manager (CFM) programs, as well as the IFSEA scholarship program.

The National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation (NRAEF) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fulfilling the educational mission of the National Restaurant Association (NRA). NRAEF offers publications and career resources, as well as the ServSafe® Food Safety Certification program which is desired and sometimes required by employers.

The International Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (CHRIE) is an advocate of hospitality and tourism education for schools, colleges, and universities offering programs in hotel and restaurant management, food service management, and culinary arts. CHRIE offers products and services related to education, training, and resource development for the hospitality and tourism industry.

Personal Qualifications

Cooks and chefs must be able to work as part of a team, and should be able to work under pressure. They should have a well-developed sense of taste and smell, abundant creativity, and artistic flair when working with food. Those who work early morning hours or late night shifts should be able to adapt to those hours. Stamina and an even temper are important, since the work can be physically exhausting and frustrating at times. Most states require that chefs and cooks have a health certificate to ensure that they are free of communicable diseases.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in the year 2004, there were about 117,850 chefs and head cooks at work throughout the United States. Sixty percent of all cooks and chefs worked in restaurants and other retail eating and drinking establishments. Twenty percent worked in schools, universities, hospitals, and nursing homes. The remaining 20 percent worked for hotels, government and factory cafeterias, private clubs, and other organizations.

Employment Outlook

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a steady increase in the number of jobs available for chefs and cooks through the year 2012. Chefs may find good job opportunities in full service restaurants that offer varied menus. This kind of restaurant will continue to be popular, because families lack the time to prepare meals at home and have the income to dine out more often. Short-order cooks and those who work in fast food restaurants will find fewer jobs because fast food establishments are expected to grow at a slower rate than other kinds of restaurants. Nursing homes, residential care centers, and other health care institutions will hire more cooks to prepare meals for a growing number of elderly people. Institutional and cafeteria chefs will find fewer jobs as these organizations continue to contract food service to outside organizations.

Experienced cooks and chefs will find work in hotels and restaurants, health spas, vacation resorts, and in educational institutions. Because of the demand for well-trained cooks and chefs, many employers will offer higher wages, better fringe benefits, and more training to attract and hold workers.

Entry Methods

High school students and others interested in this work can start by working part-time in the kitchens of local restaurants. They may also find part-time and summer work at fast-food restaurants, private clubs, hotels, hospitals, or schools. Beginners peel and chop vegetables or wash pans. Later they may learn how to arrange salads, set up desserts, carve meat, and set up buffets.
Graduates of culinary institutes, apprenticeship programs, or other agencies that teach cooking skills can get help from the placement services of these agencies. Want ads in newspapers, professional journals, on-line job banks, and trade magazines list jobs for all kinds of workers, from kitchen helpers to executive chefs in luxury hotels.

**Advancement**

The demand for cooks and chefs makes the prospects for advancement good. Experienced cooks may move to a larger or more prestigious establishment that pays higher wages. With education, talent, and experience, these workers may move up through the ranks to become head chefs or executive chefs. Some chefs and cooks start their own catering service, or become restaurant owners.

Cooks and chefs can become banquet managers, food service administrators in school districts, food service coordinators, food company supervisors, or food editors of trade magazines.

**For Further Research**

**American Culinary Federation**, 180 Center Place Way, St. Augustine, FL 32095-3466. Web site: www.acfchefs.org

**Culinary Institute of America**, 1946 Campus Drive, Hyde Park, NY 12538-1499. Web site: www.ciachef.edu

**International Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education**, 2810 North Parham Road, Suite 230, Richmond, VA 23294-4422. Web site: www.chrie.org

**International Food Service Executives Association**, 2609 Surfwood Drive, Las Vegas, NV 89128-7183. Web site: www.ifsea.com

**National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation**, 175 West Jackson Boulevard, Suite 1500, Chicago, IL 60604-2814. Web site: www.nraef.org

**UNITE HERE**, 275 7th Avenue, New York, NY 10001-6708. Web site: www.unitehere.org

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