



## Your Happy Place

### Improving Kitchen Efficiency, Productivity, *and* Morale

With the current labor shortage, you need every aspect of your concept to be as efficient and productive as possible – especially the kitchen. In this article, we review approaches to streamlining operations and scheduling flexibility for a happier back-of-the-house crew.

By Lindsey Danis

**R**estaurant work is hard work. And whether a concept is full-service or delivery and takeout, the kitchen is the point of stress of any operation. As much as your back-of-the-house staff might enjoy working with food, they are considering their quality of life as much as anyone during the so-called “Great Resignation.”

Improving the efficiency and professionalism of your kitchen operations is going to attract – and keep – the best

and brightest kitchen staff. It might require an investment in equipment, systems, and training. But the payoff can be substantial, including improved morale and more consistent quality of product leaving the kitchen.

Chef Omar Pereney is founder and principal of hospitality consulting company Culinary Matters. He believes the first steps in streamlining kitchen operations don’t have to be big to be effective.

Streamlining menus and cross-utilizing ingredients are frequent suggestions for controlling food costs, but these tactics also influence kitchen efficiency and staff morale. Inventory management weighs heavily on every conscientious chef, who wants to use fresh ingredients and avoid waste.

Sprawling menus are difficult to manage for even the best kitchen crew. Consistency can falter and the chances for confusion and mistakes at the expo pass escalate. Paring down the menu reduces stress for everyone in the kitchen down to the prep cooks. Cross-utilizing makes purchasing easier and reduces waste.

The quality of pre-prepped items has only increased over the years. And with labor costs rising, it behooves operators to consider paying a bit more for items delivered to the restaurant with some of the preparation steps done. It's a balancing act to be sure, as many operators take pride in from-scratch menus. But prep takes time and can drive up the cost of all items, even vegetarian offerings that do not require expensive proteins.

## Systems

It is impossible to be successful in the restaurant business without systems. This is particularly true in the kitchen, which is a manufacturing operation. Increased productivity lowers labor costs and improves job satisfaction. No one wants to be on the line during a busy shift without structure.

As Pereney notes, the little things matter. Having a prep list ready when the staff clocks in helps them hit the ground running, rather than having to cobble it together quickly before working at their stations.

Whenever staff are left wondering what to do when they show up to work, time is being wasted. Motivation can decrease as well. Allow time pre-shift for you and your chef to assemble a quick pre-shift meeting. Sure, you can discuss any changes to the menu, address problems that arose during previous shifts, and solicit ideas to improve service. That said, it is time well spent if for no other reason than to foster teamwork rather than an "every cook for themselves" mentality.

Pre-shift meetings are a valuable opportunity to set the tone for a productive shift by "making sure the people we have are engaged and feel good," says Pereney. He believes the point of a pre-shift should be team building or education. "If employees are zoning out or chatting amongst themselves during a pre-shift, it's both a missed opportunity and a red flag. To get more out of your pre-shift meetings, consider current challenges the team may be facing and how you might address them," he continues.

## All Aboard

Any operator who is struggling to find and keep reliable kitchen staff cannot afford to skip onboarding for new hires. Even experienced chefs will be lost in a new restaurant for a few days as they figure out where everything is and what

## HYPER FOCUS

Are you considering launching a new concept in this market? You might want to focus.

Chef Omar Pereney, founder and principal of hospitality consulting company Culinary Matters, recommends what he calls "hyper-focused concepts". Whether the concept is burgers or tacos, paring down the menu to one major focus means keeping the menu simple, executing that one thing really well, and "playing to our strengths," he says. When a concept has a small menu, cooks make the same thing over and over. With familiarity comes efficiency and increased productivity.

everyone does, say Pereney. Let alone, becoming familiar with the menu.

"In the back of the house, onboarding has traditionally been very Wild West," says Pereney. "Here's your apron and good luck. Trial by fire won't work if we hope to retain staff and keep them happy," adding that smart operators have gotten a lot more proactive about onboarding.

Training takes time, which is something independent operators have precious little. He suggests that video can be effective for onboarding new employees. Platforms, such as RestaurantOwner.com offer produced training videos for staff, as well as the opportunity to upload custom modules specific to the operators.

"Staff can learn on their own time and in an environment where they can step back and focus," says Pereney. A lot of learning has to take place in real time, of course. But as much if not more can happen on the employee's schedule when they are not harried. With video learning systems, the length of the course is known so you can compensate hourly staff for the time they put into reviewing them.

Training doesn't end at onboarding staff. If your cooks are not working efficiently, productivity drops while frustration increases. Medical training has long used a three-step process: watch one, do one, teach one. This can be effective for many of the processes involved in executing menus. If you can cut the time in half that it takes to prepare an item, you've increased productivity by 100%.

Scott Alters, chef-owner of Jacksonville, Florida concept Rue Saint-Marc uses video to keep open lines of communication with his cooks, as well as build skills. He sends daily videos to his team sharing both culinary and leadership skills. This gives the team something to talk about and builds professional skills, something Alters is passionate about passing on to his people.



*"Staff can learn on their own time and in an environment where they can step back and focus," says Pereney. A lot of learning has to take place in real time, of course.*

*But as much if not more can happen on the employee's schedule when they are not harried. With video learning systems, the length of the course is known so you can compensate hourly staff for the time they put into reviewing them.*

## WHAT ARE GIG WORKERS

"Gig work" is income-earning activities outside of standard long-term employer-employee relationships. The term is thrown around in the media these days, particularly by restaurateurs who note that their staff often have work outside their business. In some cases, "gig work" is no more than old-school "moonlighting" for extra money. In some cases, it's simply an employee's desire for flexible work arrangements around other interests and responsibilities. In other cases, it is necessitated because restaurant employers limit their hours to avoid penalties if they don't offer healthcare benefits, pursuant to the Affordable Care Act.

Because of the control exercised over most of its staff, a restaurant most likely can't hire kitchen staff as independent contractors or "1099" workers. It's a red flag for the IRS. However, on a part-time basis, "gig" employees can be helpful to operators to avoid ongoing or temporary staffing shortages. With modern scheduling software, as noted in the main article, and effective training, they can fill in as needed, as long as they are dependable. Even if they have strong culinary experience and skills, some training is still required to become familiar with the restaurant's systems and procedures, not to mention familiarity with the equipment, menu, and staff.

"The best way [to motivate employees] is to keep people inspired, whether through pre shifts, education, or getting them involved in aspects not necessarily related to their job," says Pereney. This might include training hourly team members in managerial duties to build their skills and motivate them. While not every hourly team member will have interest in these new duties, some will, and Pereney says this can be a good way for operators to identify which employees are able to handle added responsibilities successfully.

## Cross Training

With many independent operations struggling to fill positions, cross training can provide a much-needed boost to productivity," says Dave Gates, senior vice-president of restaurant development at Carrollton, Texas-based labor management system and consulting company UniFocus. "To make up for the lack of sufficiently staffed operations, it is crucial that current employees have the necessary knowledge and experience to perform various roles in order to ensure that essential service functions don't grind to a halt," says Gates.

Gates encourages operators to think of cross training as "mutually beneficial," explaining, "Employees should be provided with the option of increasing their skill set according to what they wish to achieve long term in their job or career goals." Cross-trained employees can move from one role to another, stepping up to fill in when someone doesn't show up or quits.

Of course, training them on new skills takes time and patience. It's a longer-term investment. In addition, you want to reward staff who take an interest in broadening their repertoire. While in the short-term, employees can work slowly while adjusting to unfamiliar tasks, over the long run, the move can be an efficient one. Workers can adeptly do more, they're more engaged because they're learning and growing, and cross training can be a path to increased responsibilities that correlate to higher earnings.

Gates cautions operators to take worker preference into account when cross training. If an employee has no interest in training for a role, it can backfire by decreasing morale and productivity. They could quit in protest. Make cross training an opt-in strategy in the current environment, particularly for staff who are dedicated to the industry as a career path. They are priceless in this environment.

## Scheduling

Scheduling software like Austin, Texas-based HotSchedules, which Pereney recommends, reduces the time necessary to schedule, and even allows employees to find their own solutions should someone need a last-minute shift change.

Gates encourages operators to consider scheduling with an eye toward respecting employee needs and preferences. This shouldn't come as a surprise to operators given the trends in the industry over the last several months. Employees have options, and if you won't give them a schedule that meets their needs, they know the place across the street probably will.

His company, UniFocus, specializes in workforce management, including scheduling, labor management, time and attendance, and task management.

Artificial intelligence is changing the face of business in every process including independent restaurant scheduling. UniFocus applies predictive analytics to forecast staffing needs.

By using data to understand historic demands and make predictions about future needs, the software can help you schedule the number of employees you need in a given shift. When a shift has the right number of workers in any given role, employees avoid the stressors of too few or too many hands-on deck and work together as a team.

A feature called ShiftGenius offers employees choices about when they work that are tied to the demand projections mentioned above. Using this feature, managers can present employees with options of when they can work, and employees get to choose the shifts that work best for them. When employees get to pick when they want to work, they feel like their preferences and needs are respected. They are likely to show up ready to work and appreciate being given a choice. ShiftGenius lets managers quickly address a callout by seeing who else is available.

While managers might understand the appeal of demand-oriented scheduling, they can sometimes be reluctant to adopt it. They might think employees will be critical of the practice. Or they might worry about the time it will take to pull the data, analyze it, and make decisions. But consider, these days, employees want greater flexibility in their work schedules. Particularly for those juggling multiple jobs, balancing work and school, or balancing work and childcare.

Gates sees connections between productivity, flexibility and workplace culture. "The goal of any restaurant business should be to create a better work environment compared to their competitors. Restaurants should strive to earn a reputation where they are seen as creating a partnership with their employees, where individual needs or concerns are always addressed in an effort to ensure that responsibilities and goals can be realistically achieved," he says.

## KITCHEN GEAR

On Page 42 of this issue, we cover the role of kitchen display systems in boosting consistency and productivity. Please consider that article a companion to this one. Automation of labor-intensive food prep and cooking processes has been evolving for years.

Independent operators often ignore technology. No doubt, the gear can be expensive, but with the increasing cost of labor, the economics of these investments make more sense. And they can be a boon to productivity, particularly with short-staffed kitchens. The list continues to grow.

Programmable Combi ovens use three methods of cooking in one appliance: convection, steam, and a combination of steam and convection are now standard equipment in on-site foodservice operations, such as campus dining and hospitals. Thermomixers are blenders that also cook and stir your food at adjustable temperatures and speeds.

Pereney is a fan, explaining, "thermomixers combine the functionality of a scale, blender and stove. You can control the temperature and program different cooking cycles," he says, adding, "You have one appliance where you're dumping the ingredients in, setting up the cycles, speed, and kind of forgetting about it while that thing is making you a sauce or a soup," he adds.

## Constant Review

"The restaurant labor shortage requires operators to review what they are doing every day and add value by making their restaurant better than what the competition offers," says Gates. "Every week, an owner should be looking at what they should stop, start, or continue to focus on," he adds, continuing, "If this sounds daunting, consider it an opportunity to experiment.

He offers these words of optimism: "Each week the restaurant will improve, and before you know it, feelings of success will return from the chaos created by the ongoing labor crisis."

**RS&G**