

# Creating a Passion for Culinary Excellence

CULINARY CONNECTION



How to inspire passion to create more joy within your foodservice operation

*“A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary.”*

—Thomas Carruthers

We don't always love our jobs. We go through periods of stagnation, boredom, and burnout, and often enough that 79 percent of employers offer employee assistance programs with free counseling—though less than 10 percent of employees use them. (Agovino, 2019)

What if the answer is not counseling or trips to the beach every year? What if you could feel the excitement of new possibilities, personal growth, and a better future on the horizon? What if you got paid for the privilege? If you hadn't guessed from the title, this piece is about fostering, growing, or reviving a

passion for food service, and just how vital that can be in the midst of the “Great Resignation” that is impacting foodservice operations much harder than other industries. (Lufkin, 2021)

It is more important than ever to offer something beyond a paycheck and a phone number to call when it becomes too much to bear. As foodservice managers, we have a massive impact on the lives of our teams and more power than many of us realize over their day-to-day lives. Any opportunities we can seize to improve the quality of another human being's existence should be received with gratitude and maximized to make our kitchens, and maybe our world, a better place.



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### CAN PASSION BE INSPIRED AT WORK?

It will probably come as no surprise to anyone that the vast majority of people don't feel passionate about their jobs. A Harvard Business Review survey puts the number of people who feel passionate about their workplace at only 13 percent, and this was in 2017, before the pandemic left half of us bored and the other half burnt. (John Hagel III, 2020)

Is it different for chefs? I've heard far more chefs describe themselves as passionate than those I've met in any other profession. I have never heard someone from any other industry—apart from musicians and artists—describe or display evident passion for their calling. Perhaps it is the connection to the art of creation, however fleeting, while making food that gives joy, pleasure, sustains life, and brings people together.

Interestingly, almost three times as many Americans say they are passionate about cooking food in general than will say the same about their careers. (Munchies Staff, 2015) So while I am skeptical that you can create passion easily in a workplace at say, a duffel-bag factory, it's evident that you can foster such an environment in a kitchen. The

brilliant minds at Harvard say that passion comes from three attitudes towards work:

1. The long-term commitment to increasing your impact in your field
2. The mindset that challenges offer opportunities for growth and learning
3. The desire to connect with others who are of a similar disposition with regards to numbers 1 and 2 above

So, if we want to inspire passion at work, we need to provide a safe learning environment. That means the

I am probably describing it wrong. Igniting or reigniting passion is about growth and learning, it is being excited for today and tomorrow. Passion and engagement of staff is infectious, it leads to more job satisfaction, better quality work, and longer retention. (11 Benefits of Training Employees, 2021)

So how do we challenge our teams to be better by *adding* to their workload? In case you haven't heard, being a chef is *hard*.



**SO, IF WE WANT TO INSPIRE PASSION** at work, we need to provide a safe learning environment. That means the freedom to experiment, grow, and make mistakes.

freedom to experiment, grow, and make mistakes. We must present challenges that keep things interesting, contests, quizzes, recognition. We must be prepared to offer our knowledge to others, even making growth and learning a part of the everyday lives of our team members. We have to give them space to communicate and share their own knowledge and passion, with us and with each other. If this sounds easy,

### THE CHALLENGE

In spite of their passion, or perhaps because of it, chefs are more susceptible to a host of issues less common in other industries. The hours are long, the pay is comparably low, and the responsibilities of constant perfect timing, highly perishable ingredients, a transient workforce, and fickle customers are intense,

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and the gratitude is often just not there. Chefs are twice as likely to suffer from alcohol and drug addiction, depression, and burnout, and 9 percent are more apt to commit suicide than people who work in a duffel-bag factory. (Adams, 2019)

What reward could be worth such a daily struggle? The expression of one's art? The satisfaction of a perfectly executed meal or event? The chance to be better? Certainly, all of these, and more. Cooking is a practical art. Food can be beautiful to all five senses in ways that no other art can be experienced. If you don't believe me, go to a museum and take a bite out of a Van Gogh. Likewise, food is absolutely required for survival. Nobody I know of has ever died from a lack of sculpture. Cooking great food requires philosophy and scientific knowledge of the processes involved. It is mentally, physically, and creatively demanding. Watching a busy kitchen crank out food is like watching a choreographed dance, except virtually everything in *this* kitchen dance can send someone to the hospital with a single misstep. It is impossible not to derive satisfaction when it is done right, and who else but the craziest, most passionate people could thrive in such an environment—excepting circus performers and adrenaline junkies.

### KEEPING THE PASSION ALIVE

As the leaders in these turbulent and challenging environments, we must set the pace and lead by example. So, if *we* are not passionate, enthusiastic, and positive, it is unlikely anyone else will be. We must commit to being culinary students forever, always trying to cram a new tool or technique into our culinary toolbox. We must pledge to be perpetual educators, constantly challenging our teams to learn and grow, and driving them in the pursuit of excellence. If you just haven't been feeling it lately, you are not alone. Here

are a few excerpts from Forbes on reigniting your passion:

1. Challenge yourself: Pick any goal and go after it with everything you've got. Maybe it's baking the perfect cake and putting those little icing roses on it. Maybe it is teaching your entire team to make icing roses.
2. Think about the impact you're having: You affect a great many lives. With great power comes great responsibility. Be the change you want to see in the world.
3. Celebrate others: If you can't get excited about going to work, try getting excited because someone else does. Make somebody's day.
4. Let go of negativity: This sounds a whole lot easier than it is, but it will lighten the load considerably.

(Council, 2018)

### TRAINING FOR CULINARY EXCELLENCE IN OUR TEAMS

Sanitation and kitchen safety are an incredibly important aspect of our jobs, arguably the most important. Protecting our teams and residents is absolutely critical, but it is hard to get excited about antibacterial soap and the snap of a nitrile glove. I am going to assume that this is already an integral part of your operation's training program and move on to the fun stuff.

#### Garnishing

When training cooks to garnish, you can use a citrus wedge or a sprinkle of chopped parsley, and there is nothing wrong with that! But instead of teaching two or three old favorites, examine the philosophy of plate presentation. This will allow them to get creative and become more adaptable with time. Thinking in terms of food height (mind those pesky plate covers!), contrasting colors, creatively displayed sauces, negative space, and layering different textures can help them come up with their own displays. Let them get the credit and feel the accomplishment. (Plate Presentations, n.d.)



### Cooking Techniques

Cooking is far too broad a science for a universal approach, but foods should taste like what they are. Ingredients in most cases should retain their identity, and the cooking technique in the title of the recipe should be the cooking technique used to prepare it. If the item is Roast Chicken, it should have the character of something that has been roasted. Understand the basic techniques and use them properly. Do not call it Roast Chicken and serve pale, flavorless, baked chicken. Teach the techniques behind the recipes and remember that the details matter! If you put chicken into a 350°F oven and then turn the temp to 425, it is already too late—you have baked it, not roasted it.

### Seasoning

Aspiring chefs always think they will creatively discover some new seasoning blend or combination of flavors that is going to revolutionize the culinary world. If someone already came up with curry powder, it is likely

that the best flavor combinations have been discovered. Start with garlic, lemon, salt, and pepper. I love to provide a safe environment to experiment and make mistakes, but learn to command the basics first, *then* we can talk about your teriyaki horseradish lasagna idea. Just remember, you can always add more flavor, but you cannot take it out. You can only experiment on your residents so much before they start calling for your replacement.

### Getting Creative Within a Tight Budget

If your cooks have time, let them utilize leftovers or other ingredients that need to be used up to create food for staff meals or cooking competitions. Maybe even bring in a few fun items too, if the budget allows. These are great ways to encourage creativity and a little friendly rivalry without breaking the bank. If your menu allows you to serve a “soup du jour,” then consider adding it to your

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daily routine. Soups are a great way to use up extra product, and there are infinite possibilities. As your staff becomes more comfortable with it then it will be their favorite part of the day. Often the creativity and appeal come as much from the name they call their creation as the soup itself. Leftover nachos and bean soup, or *Taco Fiesta Soup*... which would you rather eat? There is a lesson here about being a professional chef that I will let you ponder on your own, that presentation isn't just about plating. This creativity can *really* come in handy when you need to clean out the freezer to make budget at the end of the month,

your crucial ingredients don't show up on the truck, or you forget to order something important.

When your team feels able to contribute to the success of the department by keeping the budget down and still putting out top quality, they will feel amazing. Make sure they get any credit you can send their way. Sometimes we are at our best when we are the invisible hand that holds others up to the limelight. **E**

## CE Questions | CULINARY CONNECTION



*This Level 1 article provides basic resources. The desired outcome is to ensure a basic understanding and explanation of concepts of the subject matter and recalling of related facts.*

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1. The "Great Resignation" is hitting foodservice operations:
  - A. Harder than most industries
  - B. Less than most industries
  - C. About the same as most industries
2. The majority of workers say that they:
  - A. Feel passionate about their jobs
  - B. Do not feel passionate about their jobs
  - C. Would prefer a factory job
3. Most workplaces offer employee assistance and counseling options:
  - A. To deal with stress, burnout, and mental health issues, among other things
  - B. Less than 10 percent of employees take advantage of these services
  - C. Both A and B
4. Chefs are at a higher-than-average risk of:
  - A. Substance abuse, depression, and suicide
  - B. Various forms of cancer
  - C. Joining a cult
5. Workers who feel passionate about their jobs:
  - A. Are easily distracted and less productive
  - B. Have greater retention, engagement, and work outcomes
  - C. Are impossible to distinguish from workers who just don't care
6. One way to reignite passion for your job is to:
  - A. Start a workplace romance
  - B. Renovate your office
  - C. Challenge yourself
7. One of the attitudes that demonstrates passion at work, according to the Harvard Business Review, is:
  - A. The mindset that challenges offer opportunities for growth and learning
  - B. The desire to be left alone at work so you can get things done
  - C. The long-term commitment to starting a new career