

# Factors that Impact the Quality of Your Food

CULINARY CONNECTION



**TIPS FOR  
MAINTAINING  
QUALITY IN  
THE FOODS  
YOU SERVE**

It's a given that one of our main goals as foodservice professionals and chefs is to always serve our guests a variety of great foods to enjoy. When we get down to the nitty-gritty of it, the more specific we get, the more likely we are to succeed. Let's look at some specific things we should consider that will improve and maintain the quality of the foods we prepare and serve.

Factors that determine the quality of the food our residents experience in the dining room can be divided into two categories. One category is the actual products we purchase. The other is how we handle those products, starting from when we receive them to when we finally serve them.

## SELECTING YOUR PRODUCTS

Let's first consider the products themselves. The "center of the plate" is a good place to start.

### Center of the Plate Items

Meat and seafood will certainly get noticed by our guests—as good or bad—and will also be a major factor in our food costs.

When purchasing beef, consider its cut and grade. The cut describes the part of the animal it comes from (chuck, strip, etc.), and the grade (Prime, Choice, Select) the amount of "marbling" or intramuscular fat it contains. Different cuts and

*Continued on page 2*



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*Continued from page 1*

grades of beef work best for different uses, and vary greatly in price. The goal is to pick the best option for a specific use that's within your budget.

Cuts that are best for quick, high-heat cooking, like grilling and sautéing, include tenderloin and NY strip steaks. They are also the most expensive. Good-value options in this category are Denver and hanger steaks. For slow-cook, low-heat cooking methods like braising and smoking, brisket, short ribs, and chuck roasts are perfect. With enough time at low temperatures, these relatively economical cuts will result in tasty, melt-in-your-mouth stews and BBQs. Learn which cuts work best for specific cooking techniques. Understand that quickly grilled brisket will make a

terrible “steak,” and a pot roast made with NY strip will be a very tough, flavorless, and expensive version of that dish.

Consider the grade of the meat, too. Prime has more marbling than Choice, and Choice has more than Select. The more marbling, the more flavor, juiciness, and cost. Prime will not fit into many of our budgets. But Choice is still a very good product and will yield great results. And a well-prepared Select product will be better than a poorly-prepared Prime or Choice cut. For some applications, like thinly-sliced roast beef for sandwiches, Select will not only be just fine, but a good value and smart pick as well.

As for fish, fresh or frozen are the two basic choices. Using fresh fish in an operation

requires a good bit more effort and expertise than opting for frozen. (For more detail, see *Seafood Basics* in the Sept-Oct 2020 *Edge*.) However, if you are up to the task, incorporating more fresh products in your seafood offerings will certainly be appreciated by your residents. Having said that, there are many excellent frozen products available that will yield great results while simplifying your workload.

### Vegetables and Herbs

The vegetables you serve your guests immediately let them know how much you care about what you do. While some frozen and canned products have a place in any operation—frozen peas and canned tomato products come to mind—fresh vegetables, nicely prepared, will definitely be a cost-effective way to up the ante of your food quality. If the extra labor is an issue for you, see if your vendor offers pre-cut vegetables. While diced fresh carrots cost more than whole carrots, once you factor in time, payroll and waste, they're a bargain. You don't have to go 100 percent fresh overnight. Working fresh vegetables in a little at a time is a step in the right direction. It's an easy way to improve flavor, texture, and nutrition.

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*Continued on page 3*



That said, in some cases dried is preferable, like in a long-simmered tomato sauce or Cajun gumbo. But in others, like in a butter sauce or vinaigrette, fresh will look and taste better. Fresh garlic is also very different from garlic powder. If you're currently using powder, try fresh garlic and be honest with yourself about the difference in flavor. (Buying pre-peeled is worth the cost; and be careful not to burn it.)

### Desserts

Fortunately, there are a lot of good, ready-to-serve desserts available. But adding some made-from-scratch items to your menu will definitely raise the bar.

Even without a pastry chef, there are lots of "chef friendly" desserts like custards, cobblers, and bread pudding that most kitchens can produce without much trouble. Even something as simple as switching from non-dairy whipped topping to whipped heavy cream will make you some friends in the dining room.

### MAINTAINING PRODUCT QUALITY

Once you've selected your products, the second factor comes into play: what you do with them. The three parts to this category are storage and handling, seasoning, and the application of heat. First, let's look at storage and handling.

#### Storage and Handling

Have good procedures in place for inventory, ordering, receiving and storage, and be sure that they're always followed. The idea is to have the correct amount of the right products in good condition available when you need them. Coolers should be kept between 36°F and 40°F, and freezers at 0°F or below. Keep your coolers and dry storage areas neat, organized, and clean. This will make it easier to rotate your stock and see that everything is covered, marked, dated, and otherwise properly stored.

#### Seasoning

Next, consider the importance of appropriate and consistent seasoning. It's always a good idea to have a chef or kitchen manager frequently tasting and giving feedback on how each dish in the kitchen has been seasoned. There are a few areas to be aware of, the most basic of which is salt content. Too little and, even if someone can't put their finger on it, they'll know they don't like it. Too much, and it's inedible. Remember, you can always add more, but you can't add less. Spiciness is another basic characteristic to consider. A little kick from black

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pepper, Tabasco, or fresh chilies is often a good call. But play to your audience. What's bland in Texas might require a fire extinguisher in Maine. And just like salt, it's easier to add than remove.

#### Application of Heat

Last but not least is the application of heat. One of the easiest things for a kitchen to get sloppy about is how they actually cook the food. The way to prevent this is training, supervision, and regular reinforcement. Have at least one person in your kitchen who really knows how to properly cook every dish in your repertoire. And make sure they understand that, since they can't cook everything all the time, a main part of their job is to politely and consistently help others to do so.

Continued on page 4

The most basic error is to either over- or under-cook something. Unfortunately, it's also the easiest thing for your guests to notice and be unhappy about. A chicken breast that can't even be cut with a steak knife or grilled fish that looks like sushi won't fly. Again, training and regular supervision is key.

Another common problem is serving food that should be hot, cold. Don't accept that this is inevitable; it's not. Take the time to figure out just which habits are causing the issue, correct them, and realize that they'll need to be corrected again. Maybe the very next day. It's worth the effort.

Finally, train your cooks to be masters of whatever basic cooking techniques are used in your kitchen. Frying, grilling, searing, poaching, braising—they're all popular for a reason. Make sure that those reasons are apparent in your dining room. Your guests will love your cooking if your fried items are golden brown and crunchy, your poached fish is

delicate and moist, and your stews are rich and savory.

## SUMMING IT UP

Preparing food that looks and tastes delicious can be achieved even on a modest budget. Keep the tips and strategies presented here in mind as you purchase, store, cook, and serve food to your clients. They'll thank you for it. **E**

## CE Questions: Culinary Connection



*This Level II article assumes that the reader has a foundation of basic concepts of the topic. The desired outcome is to enhance knowledge and facilitate application of knowledge to practice.*

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- One of our main goals as foodservice professionals and chefs is to
  - Always serve our guests a variety of great foods
  - Stay current with our colleagues on Facebook
  - Wear season-appropriate clogs
- The two categories of factors that determine the quality of our food are
  - The cuts of meat and the freshness of fish
  - The products we purchase and what we do with them
  - The products we purchase and how we receive them
- The grades of beef indicate
  - Their thickness
  - Their weight per pound
  - The amount of marbling
- A good cut of beef to braise is
  - Tenderloin
  - Short ribs
  - Prime
- When using fresh vegetables it can be good to
  - Order them pre-cut
  - Organize them by color
  - Cook them to at least 180°F
- When adding salt it's good to
  - Measure weight
  - Remember that it's easier to add than remove
  - First dissolve it in a liquid
- The best way to insure good basic cooking technique is
  - Through training, supervision, and regular reinforcement
  - To require online management training
  - To have textbooks available