

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at  
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister>



The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at  
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0007-070X.htm>

BFJ  
105,7

## CASE STUDY

# What makes a great chef?

J.D. Pratten

*Department of Business and Management Studies,  
Crewe and Alsager Faculty, Manchester Metropolitan University,  
Manchester, UK*

454

**Keywords** *Catering industry, Food industry, Employees, Career development, United Kingdom*

**Abstract** *The development of the UK restaurant industry is briefly outlined, and then the study seeks to examine the skills and characteristics needed to progress as a chef. Rather than describe the factors that drive workers from the trade, they are explored as problems which must be accepted and overcome, and virtues which must be acquired if anyone aspires to become a great chef. Sources include the comments of top chefs, food writers and others within the industry, as well as lengthy discussions with, and observations of, those working within the sector.*

### Introduction

The rationing of food produce in the UK during and after the Second World War created a generation with limited culinary experience. Few could afford to visit restaurants, so that the reputation of British food declined. Cookery books, such as David's (1950) *A Book of Mediterranean Food*, suggested expensive or unobtainable ingredients which limited their appeal. Women's magazines offered recipes for cheap meals. In the 1960s, television featured cooks such as Fanny Craddock, who appealed to middle class rather than mass audiences. In the 1970s, real chefs featured regularly on daytime magazine programmes. By the 1980s and 1990s, the kitchen time declined, and the shows relied more on the personality of the chef to provide entertainment. Many were filmed in locations appropriate to the food being cooked. Some even gained top 20 status in the viewing figures (Mintel, 2000).

Thus, television helped popularise the pleasures of food. At the same time, the increasing number of ethnic restaurants in the UK introduced most of the nation to the tastes of many countries. This coincided with an era when more Britons were travelling and eating abroad. The British palate was becoming more adventurous. Attitudes to food had changed rapidly. Chefs began to mix the styles, producing eclectic dishes of much appeal. Thus, British cooking began to gain a world-wide reputation. "Back in 1977, the words 'British' and 'cuisine' struck fear into anyone with a stomach. In 2002, foreigners flock here for the food. Consider this: in 1977, there were 20 restaurants in England with one Michelin star. Now there are 78 (Wales had none, it now boasts five). British restaurants now lead the world" (Keeble, 2002 p. 2). Indeed, author and chef Anthony Bourdain notes that "today, chefs from all over the world come to London to look, taste and learn. It is an amazing city for restaurants" (Moir, 2002, p. 8).



### The road to the top

The opportunity to become a famous chef is probably easier now than ever before, but the road to the top is difficult, and the new entrant will have to overcome many obstacles. Training is seen to be essential, which means a college course in food preparation and hygiene. As a chef “must be able to work quickly and effectively under pressure and have appropriate motor skills and manual dexterity” (Lee-Ross, 1999, p. 344), the technically incompetent should progress no further. Without practical experience, the first job would be trainee, receiving on-the-job training, then promotion to commis chef, involving vegetable and salad preparation, and dishing up the starters and sweets.

Kitchens are hot and uncomfortable. They are notorious for their discipline, as attention to detail is essential if high quality food is to be produced consistently. There does exist “a long tradition of culinary authoritarianism” (*The Sunday Times*, 4 November 2001, p. 15). Gordon Ramsay insists that “a kitchen has to be an assertive, boisterous, aggressive environment, or nothing happens” (Hollweg, 2001, p. 9). Some leave because they cannot cope with the conditions and attitudes.

A woman might find further problems, as the industry is male dominated, and has a reputation for sexism. In the *Michelin Guide* of 2000, of over 100 restaurants awarded a star in Paris, none had a female senior chef. Those in the kitchen would, no doubt, remind a female trainee that the French for a cook, *le cuisinier*, has a female counterpart, but there is no feminine for *le chef*.

Hotels include a breakfast service, probably from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m., and, like restaurants, lunch from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., and evening meal from 6 p.m. to midnight. Staff would be required to work two of these shifts, which makes for long and disjointed days, especially for those who do not live on the premises. Time off may be during the week, as the weekend trade is usually the busiest. This disrupts the social life of employees, and many are persuaded by domestic pressures either to leave the industry altogether or to find employment in less demanding areas than restaurants.

The dedicated employee will accept the conditions, the discipline and see the long hours as an opportunity to develop skills. Marcus Wareing opened Petrus in London in 1999 and gained a Michelin star within seven months. Tom Twentman noted that “in an industry notorious for its long hours, Marcus sees little point in the nine-to-five Monday-to-Friday work ethic”. Wareing himself recalls that “when I was training, I worked 16 to 18 hours a day for two years. I never went to bed before 2.30 a.m. but you need that attitude to take you where you want to go” (Twentman, 2002, p. 41)

As shown in Table I, chefs are also poorly paid. Bob Cartwright, spokesman for hotel and pub chain Six Continents suggests that “pay does differ depending on the outlet involved . . . the skills and qualification of the chef . . . and the type of food being prepared”. Nevertheless, some will be “attracted by better rates of pay in contract catering and also enjoy the prospect of working straight shifts” (Halstead, 2002, p. 5).

In February 2002, one employment agency advertised for a commis chef at £10,500-12,000 and a chef de partie at £12,500-15,000 in a Michelin rated gastro pub ([www.amicusrecruitment.com/jobs.htm](http://www.amicusrecruitment.com/jobs.htm)). Another required for a restaurant with two Michelin stars a senior chef de partie at £18,000, a chef de partie (£15-16,000) and a commis (£11-12,000). It also was trying to recruit a head chef in an establishment with two AA rosettes at a salary of up to £25,000 p.a. ([www.gladstoneparkchefs.co.uk/](http://www.gladstoneparkchefs.co.uk/)).

Wages are a common reason for leaving the industry, and the information above confirms the complaint. Only the head chef's post matches the average UK weekly wage. Our aspirant must work hard, with long hours and poor wages. Having served as a commis for about two years, progression to chef de partie would be normal. This position indicates that while still learning the trade, he is ready to contribute to discussions on meal preparation and balance. Around this time, further restaurant training is needed. This often involves work abroad, traditionally in France, but Australia is currently a popular destination, as is work in the kitchens of the ocean liners. This was the route followed by one of the UK's most famous British chefs, Gordon Ramsay. After college, he trained for three years with Marco Pierre White at Harvey's in London, and went to France. He also worked under Albert Roux, and spent three years as personal chef on the yacht of Australian television mogul Reg Grundy before returning to London to open Aubergine, aged 26.

**Reaching for the top**

Having gained further experience, promotion may be rapid. Next is sous chef, a highly competent cook, responsible for a team producing part of the meal. Second chef should be able to deputise for the head chef and maintain the standard of service. Then head chef, with overall responsibility for implementing the restaurant strategy, overseeing a clean and efficient kitchen, and ensuring that the customer receives the ordered meal in an appropriate time and at the highest quality. Some establishments have an executive chef or chef to cuisine as a manager and administrator, designing menus, ordering, budgeting, recruiting, training, maintaining quality, and acquiring stars, rosettes and other awards. If such an appointment is not made, the work would fall on the head chef.

	Male	Female
Pub	7.64	6.63
Restaurant	7.28	5.80
Hotel	7.71	5.82
Contract catering	9.04	7.02
UK average wage	11.97	9.76

**Table I.**  
Chef's wages, in pounds

**Source:** HM Government Office for National Statistics

Thus, the ambitious entrant to the industry will have spent their time preparing foods and learning techniques, which allows promotion to sous chef, where the nature of the work starts to change and new skills are required, as they need to both take and give instructions. Employment agencies dealing in catering staff have reported that their greatest demand is at sous and above, as many do not want the supervisory responsibilities.

Head chef is another promotion many do not want. The nature of the job changes once more, centring on organisation, not cooking. The proprietor and the head chef arrange the menus, which are constrained by cost. Thus, the head chef cannot cook exactly what he wants. He needs to develop the skill of compiling a menu, which balances lighter and heavier starters with appropriate main courses, using meat, poultry, fish and vegetables so as to present a menu attractive to all customers within cost constraints. Stephen Sandner, now a licensee/chef, became an executive chef with Burton Inns. He recalls that he "had the responsibility of looking after 40 chefs in four locations and, although I continued to do a bit of cooking, I spent virtually half of my week in the office" (Twentman, 2002, p. 41).

The purchasing function will rest with the head chef, who has to deal with suppliers, ensure the accuracy of orders and exercise effective stock control. He will also be involved in interviewing staff, and for conducting their kitchen trials. Rotas need to be drawn up, with adequate provision for vacancies, illness and holidays. The head chef may be obliged to employ agency staff, who may be unfamiliar with the specific ways of the kitchen, and so need instruction. In fact, the head chef must supervise and train all staff, as he is responsible for the quality of the food leaving the kitchen, but he spends less time in the kitchen. Many who aspired to be head chef have left the position because they do not like the administrative work, and want to play a greater part in the cooking process.

Those who remain work under the constant pressure of attempting to gain recognition within the industry – winning the coveted stars and rosettes. An award, particularly a Michelin star, brings massive prestige to the chef, the staff and the restaurant. To aspire higher can be costly and will involve an increase in overheads, which may not be compensated by a corresponding growth in revenue. A restaurant must make considerable investments to obtain second or third Michelin stars. In 2002, chef Richard Guest gained a Michelin star at the Castle Hotel in Taunton. When asked about a second star, he was enthusiastic "I would like to have a go, otherwise I would become stagnant. I have got to get better", but owner Kit Chapman had serious reservations, explaining that "it is very difficult for a hotel like this to get two stars . . . I am not interested in chasing pools of fool's gold" (Day-Lewis, 2002, p. 9).

The chef may not wish for the stress which would be caused. The achievement of a particular award may be enough for some to leave the kitchen. When Marco Pierre White became the youngest chef to gain three Michelin stars at the age of 33, he stopped cooking. "What was there left to

achieve? Nothing. I had been cooking six days a week for 23 years, and I wanted to stop" (Johnson, 2002, p. 53).

### **The attitude needed**

Those who reach the highest level of culinary excellence are driven by a compulsion that few would feel. Gordon Ramsay is recognised by many as the UK's finest chef. He "has been obsessed all his working life with gaining the ultimate culinary distinction – three Michelin stars". It was awarded to his Chelsea restaurant, Gordon Ramsay, in 2001. He commented that "for the first time in my life, I feel I have achieved something". His attention to detail is absolute, a fact that he himself recognises: "I will get furious with one of my staff because they have not opened a £2.70 scallop properly and I think to myself 'how much pain is a £2.70 scallop really worth?' But the day I can accept that opening a scallop correctly does not matter is the day I have to get out of this business" (Das, 2001, p. 36). It is this attention to detail which seems to distinguish those at the top of the profession, "the perfectionist nature needed to run a good hotel" (Owen, 2000, p. 15). John Pringle founded Jamaica's Round Hill Hotel, and later became Jamaica's first director of tourism. At the hotel, he employed a manager, but despite this he would meet each guest on arrival, and rose at 5 a.m. to supervise each breakfast tray as he believed that the first impression of the day was the most telling (Pringle, 2000).

A chef needs one more virtue, the ability to produce food which tastes excellent. Kit Chapman praises Richard Guest for his "finely tuned palate. He understands taste very well, which the majority of chefs do not because they are taught how to do things mechanically, they are not taught how to eat. Successful chefs are successful not because they know how to cook something, but because they understand the effect of food on the palate" (Day-Lewis, 2002, p. 9). Gordon Ramsay makes a similar point when describing his associate Angela Harnett: she "has the assertiveness that demands perfection . . . She doesn't cook with pictures, but with flavours" (Richardson, 2002, p. 1).

### **Conclusion**

There is a clear road to the top in the restaurant sector. It involves college training, and then working from the lowest position in the kitchen towards the top. Many enter the trade, but are unable to stand the discipline, the conditions of work, the hours or the pay. To remain requires dedication, and the culinary techniques must be fully mastered, but this does not guarantee progress to the top. Further skills are needed as supervision of staff demands good communication and leadership qualities. To become a head chef, these must be developed and augmented by additional abilities, such as stock control, ordering, budgeting, and many other facets of commerce education – and the food must be perfect. It is indeed a long road to the stars.

## References

- Das, L. (2001), "Table for five, night and day", *The Mail on Sunday*, 26 August.
- David, E. (1950), *A Book of Mediterranean Food*, John Lehman, London.
- Day-Lewis, T. (2002), "The proof of the puddings", *The Daily Telegraph*, The Weekend, 6 March.
- Halstead, A. (2002), "Pub chef wages among catering trade's leanest", *Morning Advertiser*, 14 March.
- Hollweg, L. (2001), "In the hot seat", *The Sunday Times*, Style, 25 November.
- Johnson, R. (2002), "Food fella", *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 14 July.
- Keeble, J. (2002), "We've travelled a long way", *The Daily Telegraph*, Travel, 27 April.
- Lee-Ross, D. (1999), "A comparative survey of job characteristics among chefs using large and small-scale hospital catering systems in the UK", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 18 No. 4.
- Mintel (2000), *Impact of Celebrity Chefs on Cooking Habits*, January.
- Moir, J. (2002), "The ultimate challenge", *The Daily Telegraph*, The Weekend, 16 February.
- Owen, J. (2000), *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 November.
- Pringle, J. (2000), *Round Hill Jamaica*, DMP Inc.
- Richardson, B. (2002), "Cooking up a storm", *Daily Telegraph*, Weekend, 8 June.
- (*The Sunday Times*) (2001), 4 November.
- Twentman, T. (2002), "Service that's all smiles", *The Daily Express*, Careers section, 28 February.