

The key drivers that have led to the decline of the technical chef.

Casual Staff
Compromised regulation
Convenience Foods
Corrupted Public Perception
Criticising Education
Dishonest Titles
Forgotten Heritage
Greed with Inexperience
Industrial Burnout
Management by wannabes
Structural Change
The Blind Leading the Blind
False TV and Media Hype
Untrained Artistic Licence
457 Visas



The story of the influences that have shaped the modern cook or chef, many readers will relate to parallel experiences from their diverse backgrounds.

One could feel that we are in the presence of the proud and noble of yesteryear. He leaned slightly to one side in his wheel chair, his battered and shaky feet caused by years of standing on concrete, legs partially covered with a tartan-patterned blanket covertly hiding his moccasin slippers. His aged wrinkled face with a defiant glaring stare itself told a story.

Not a lot of imagination was needed to see how the fire in his eyes were in the past the controller and seer of all. With receding ghostly silver hair shaped like an atoll and hands clasped together as if in pray pleading for someone to finally listen to his tale, fingers occasionally twitched, were obviously not from a sedentary career, but more like matured tools that had inherited the marks of real hard work. Here was Stan to tell us his account of how it really happened.

No! CHEF Stanley.

I want to tell you son of how it all happened, how once on this planet there were many real chefs. They were not only specialist in cookery but were also leaders, and philosophers who simply believed the industry best operated with clear guidelines.

In the beginning,

In the romantic days known as the classical system, the commercial kitchen operated with discipline, regulation, stability, and culinary hierarchy.

Is this how it happened?

Not that long ago, there was a renowned restaurant in a multinational hotel that offered classical à la carte; the very busy restaurant even offered guéridon, liquor, and cheese trolleys.

Under the watchful eye of a passionate maître d'hôtel, the station waiters would inconspicuously attend to every need of their patrons, while their commis quickly and quietly moved back and forth to the busy kitchen.

The main kitchen run by a passionate Chef de cuisine was also responsible for many other kitchens in the hotel, but preferred the title Chef de cuisine, believing the term "Executive Chef" was a little aloof from the real role of leading a group of cooks and chefs.

The rigidly structured kitchen had sous chefs who supervised a group of chef de parties, each responsible for specific productions like fish, larder, grills, sauce, pastry and more. Most chef de parties were in charge of an apprentice who mainly performed the manual chores.

The kitchen even had a kitchen clerk who called orders at service time. No one was handsomely paid, working conditions were uncomfortable to say the least, and not all was good in those old days.

However, there were unwritten laws, explicitly followed by all the staff in terms of minimum professional dress, knowing one place and title in the hierarchy, behaviour in front of clients, using kitchen terminology, and an absolute respect for culinary history.

These ideals were not taught, they were inherent, essential, and as much a part of everyday work as making a sauce or drilling a fish. Everyone had a job, eager to learn, knew what to do, knew their place, and if they worked hard could expect to progress up the ladder to a comfortable living someday.

These were the core values and attributes of the classic kitchen.

The Chef de cuisine reported directly to the hotel director and everyone was contented in his or her work.

The hotel became famous for its food, good management, and a secure place to work.

The Outcome

Until,

Change

The kitchen changed focus from the primary goal of offering quality food for reasonable return to centre on greater profit margins.

Is this how it happened?

One day on his rounds just after lunch service, the hotel director stopped at the kitchen, counted 16 cooks, 8 apprentices and 5 ancillary staff, and thought they are not working hard enough; thinking; maybe the reason why the hotel was not making enough money to satisfy shareholders .

Convinced that the hotel could generate more profit from this lazy kitchen, he decided to employ a consultant who was an accountant to advice on ways of reducing costs and increasing profits.

The consultant reported for duty, was provided with a lush office and quickly settling in, he than employed a secretary to do the typing of the reports to the hotel director.

To pay for the consultant and secretary; the Chef de cuisine was duly notified to reduce the kitchen staff by two.

Legally not able to sack apprentices and more to the point, morally of the opinion to protect the futures industry, he had to let two chefs go.

However now working in an understaffed kitchen, he started to become cantankerous and **highly suspicious of management’s intensions.**

The Outcome

Next,

Change **The kitchen abandons its rigid structure. And the role of a Chef de cuisine as a unique manager of a highly specialised environment alters to become an assembly line technician.**

Is this how it happened?

In one of his earliest reports, the consultant advised the hotel director that the Chef de cuisine was taking far too much time training, intervening in conflicts, interviewing staff , and particularly appeared to be wasting time walking around the hotel kitchens all day, and would be far more productive elsewhere, even actually cooking.

The hotel director concluded that alteration in the hotel operations was both good and inevitable; change would not affect the hotel culture, change was a positive that would not alter basics values and attributes of the hotel, and decided the hotel needed a human relations department.

Soon a Director of Human Resources commenced duty and immediately employed a personal assistant to manage appointments, A recruitment manager to develop job descriptions , a training manager to teach staff about changes, a labour relations manager to mediate in the growing tensions arising in the kitchen, and a clerk to keep staff records.

To pay for the human relations department, the Chef de cuisine received instructions to trim the kitchen brigade by four.

Not being able to sack apprentices, he had to make four chefs redundant by reorganising the kitchen, **combining production in sections** and took upon the operating one of the sections during service.

The Outcome

Soon thereafter,

Change

The industry introduces the concept that a manager can control any setting and does not need to know the general technical skills and knowledge in the environment they manage. Characteristics identified in the common unqualified restaurateur.

In conjunction with the arrival of convenience foods that leads to the decline of work place practice, basic technical cookery skills, and use of culinary terminology.

Is this how it happened?

The new director of human resources, who had never actually worked in a commercial kitchen, did not understand its language, operation, and management style, persuaded the hotel director that the hotel required a Food and Beverage Manager to supervise the cantankerous chef.

In addition, advised the pressured kitchen would also be far more productive with an academically qualified administrator trained in proper management theory, and even further advised that managers do not need experience in operational matters as after all, they only manage people.

Soon, a Food and Beverage Manager with an MBA straight out of university with the latest people management theories and books commenced duty. Following the latest management theories, the food and beverage manager employed a personal assistant, a room service manager, a restaurant manager, and a banquet manager.

To pay for the food and beverage department, equivalent salaries substantially reduced the kitchen budget.

Not being able to sack apprentices, he decided to close the pastry section, terminate his butcher, and sack two others. He reconstructs the menu by adding ready-made foods, pre-portioned meat cuts and other **convenience foods**.

The Outcome

Before long,

Change

The title “chef” begins to lose its symbolic meaning, charisma, esteem, and unique identity, causing a loss of focus on “theatrics” in dining that evolves into the decline in fine dining.

Is this how it happened?

The inexperienced F&B manager eager to make his mark hurriedly convened a meeting of all executives to attend a workshop to discuss ways to minimise costs.

The Chef de cuisine not officially titled executive, and not considered by the F&B and management group important to the hotel success, especially as a participant in a senior administration workshop; as well as seen to be busy keeping the kitchen operating, did not receive an invitation to attend.

During the workshop, the executives noted that none of the demonstrators known as celebrity chefs on TV, wore full chef's uniforms; moreover, many cooks seen on public transport in cook's pants, also wore a baseball cap. Thus agreed, if the same standards applied in the hotel, it could be a huge cost saving measure.

The executive group agreed they would relax their policy of strict standards of dress and behaviour.

They agreed the chefs hat could be replaced by a cheaper baseball cap, the white coat be replaced by a tee-shirt, and the white aprons replaced by a striped bib apron; noting the added advantage, that a blue striped apron hides stains better, therefore needs less washing.

They also concluded, as additional cost saving measures, there was no need for tablecloths, waiters did not need uniforms or fresh flowers on the tables.

The Outcome

Incited by the employment of casual kitchen staff,

Change

Job dissatisfaction and dampening of cookery passion develops in the kitchen. In addition, the chef loses perception of power and status by not dealing directly with suppliers. Furthermore, a similar situation replicated with the use of contract and part time teachers in the culinary education sectors.

Is this how it happened?

The executive group next formed the opinion that the chef was taking far too much time ordering foods and inspecting deliveries, and decided to create a separate purchasing and stores department with a purchasing manager.

They also decided that casual cooks and chefs were less expensive and should replace some of the full time staff.

On arriving the stores manager required three people to receive pack and store goods, one to deliver the goods to the kitchen and two cleaners.

To pay for the purchasing and stores, the near out of control Chef de cuisine next instructed to reduce the kitchen staff even more.

Not being able to sack apprentices, he had to release some of his oldest and experienced chefs, found ways to reduce the choice on the menu, banned staff entering competitions, **and employed five unskilled casual staff to replace redundant staff.**

The Outcome

Now,

Change | The introduction of ambiguous industry titles into kitchens replaced authority without responsibility or accountability.

Is this how it happened?

The apprentice cooks, realising they were used as cheap requested a pay rise; subsequently the chef approached the food and beverage manager.

“You must be joking; we cannot afford a pay rise, we have to pay for all the managers.

However as they are now expected to perform the job of a qualified chef, lets give them a new important sounding title, we will reclassify them as an apprentice chef”.

The title” apprentice cook” officially becomes an “apprentice chef”, inheriting the authority without the responsibility or experience.

The Outcome

Next,

Change | The industry fails to rigorously check organisations for training credentials, encouraging apprentices to realise they can move employers without redress, while motivating employers to poach.

Is this how it happened?

Two apprentices spat the dummy and immediately resigned, to move to a new trendy restaurant, not for one moment considering they signed a term of contract to train in all aspects of kitchen operations and to be loyal to their chef.

Additionally they had not bothered to ensure that the new property employed trained professional cooks. However, moved because of a promise of a few dollars more a week, and understanding they be promoted to a sous chef the day they received their certificate, if not before.

While all this was happening, the purchasing manager decided that computers were necessary to keep track of the growing documentation and stock control, so persuaded the food and beverage manger to add an information technology department.

Next on the scene was a new information and technology manager who was a software expert, however needed the backup of an information technology technician.

To pay for the two IT staff, the even more argumentative, and Bad-tempered Chef de cuisine was required to fire two kitchen staff.

Not being able to sack apprentices, and even though he was now operating with more apprentices than full time qualified chefs and casuals, he made two more of the brigade redundant.

He reduced the size of the la carte menu, introduced a table d'hôte and starts blackboard specials using purchased ready-made frozen meals.

Chef now arrived each day at work frustrated and exhausted from working seven days a week.

The Outcome

As greed and ignorance grows,

Change

Recognition of prior learning reduces industry wide standards, while indifference to burnout of kitchen staff becomes an acceptable practice, and even seen as a part of industry working conditions. This results in the exodus of highly skilled chefs into alternative careers.

Is this how it happened?

Struggling to keep production in the kitchen the chef had no option but to bring back his apprentices after school.

Noticing this new roster, the Food and Beverage Manager concluded, “Why send them to school anyway”, we can deliver our own training.

After all training is training, and what does it matter if the trainer is not an experienced cook.

Let us deliver our own “in-house training”. We might even attract government funding while reducing wasted employee time.

In any case, our apprentices can prepare our menu here; therefore, why waste their time learning irrelevant stuff at school, stuff that is not even on our menu. Recognition for prior learning is perfect here; we can even arrange our own assessments.

With only the chef, five casuals and six apprentices remaining, and no one listening to his plea, that apprentices need better training, that it was false economy to run a kitchen with untrained staff, and burning out people leads to reduced productivity.

The situation had deteriorated so much, the exhausted chef became ill, decided to move to another industry, and resigned.

The Outcome

This triggers

Change

The justification for employing overseas labour, using the excuse that local talent is unavailable.

Is this how it happened?

The hotel director advertised for another Chef de cuisine only to discover that there were very few trained and passionate chefs in the market, and those who did apply were expensive.

So decided to source a new head chef from overseas and instructed HR to apply for 457 visas and interview a few.

However, in his instructions to HR stated, “Please make sure they know about professional cooking. We desperately need a fully trained qualified chef”. “What do you mean”? Inquired HR, “Ask them a few technical questions such as what is a “mirepoix, and expect them to know that it is a mixture of vegetables”.

The HR manager duly interviewed an applicant and quizzed “what is a mirepoix”. “Well I know how to boil vegetables for a soup” was the answer – AH! “You know that it is a mixture of vegetables, so you must be a fully trained chef”.

The old chef lent back in his chair, a tear in his eyes and continued:

If only someone had done their homework. They would have realised that when numerology philosophy applied to the number 457, we obtain (4+5+9=16 = 1 plus 6 = 7).

The number 7 is associated with people who are aloof, arrogant cynical, insecure, loners, other people's problems simply do not interest them, and further they are pessimistic, and secretive.

And, if only someone had known, what a mirepoix was?

From this point forward,

Change

Industry endorses young naive egocentric chefs, who believe that title validates their position and status; an attitude compounded by lack of mentoring or appreciation of neither heritage nor understanding the historical significance in cookery?

Is this how it happened?

By now, there was chaos in the kitchen with declining margins from restaurants.

With only casuals and apprentices running the hotel restaurants, the director had no alternative but to promote the oldest third year apprentice chef to be provisionally in charge of the kitchen while they waited for the new chef to arrive.

The apprentice then thought "I am now the head chef" but what do I call myself?

After discovered that all his mates they were calling themselves executives decided to call himself the **Executive chef**.

Enter the Age of Aquarius,

Change

Apathy becomes a competence, lack of personal accountability, becomes the norm, passing the buck becomes a skill, and technology (particular the mobile phone) invades all areas of hospitality.

Is this how it happened?

The hotel director very unhappy with the restaurants limited operating times and highly restricted menu with declining patronage and extremely low profits from foodservices, decided to approach his consultant to ask what to do now?

The consultant replied; "I am incredibly busy, looking after the HR department, and advising others. I am especially dealing with issues in the food and beverage department, and cannot help you now".

He next then went to the Food and Beverage department and inquired what do you do now? To received a similar answer: "We are flat out keeping the kitchen staff, service staff and central stores under control, preventing them from fighting and averting industrial disputes mainly about working conditions".

He then went to central stores to ask what they do now. However, could not get an answer, they were all flat out packing boxes with ready-made frozen meals in the deep freeze.

So finally, he went to his new executive apprentice chef and asked?

Please tell me, why we have such a limited menu, are losing customers, constantly receiving complaints, our bottom line is way down, the cooks come to work in their kitchen clothes, and there is a lot of bad language from the kitchen staff, who also appear stressed.

With a puzzled look, the young executive chef answered, "Have not noticed that; however I will Google to see why, and there is probably an app out there to fix it".

The Outcome

With only a few old school chefs remaining,

Change

The operation of the majority of modern kitchens becomes reliant on ill-prepared apprentices, managed by the new age inexperienced pseudo chefs.

Is this how it happened?

However just to let you know, said the young chef, I have prepared a new exciting menu with my own creative flair with dishes such as purée of pumpkin consommé and New York cut schnitzels.

The Outcome

I will need more staff, I suggest we forget employing first years, they are just too inexperienced and we can easily advertise and attract highly experienced second and third year apprentice chefs.

Feeling guilty,

Change

Industry shifts the blame onto technical education, despite for decades, educators followed industry advice on curriculum that was delivered by experienced and successful chefs; additionally not acknowledging that much of the training is “in industry” and external to formal school tuition.

Is this how it happened?

The young apprentice chef continues;” We all know it is the fault of educational system, they are not taught properly, and by teachers who are old fashioned”.

We have kids coming out of school who are just not able to cook.

Have heard it is a big issue everywhere.

The industry finds it is almost impossible to employ cooks who can cook, there are only executive chefs around, accountants now manage schools, and there are high wages, penalty rates, inferior short educational programs and more.

The rumour is; someone caused the situation, when he said, change is inevitable and change does not alter basics values and attributes.”

To the contemporary kitchen,

Change

Commercial cookery reaches a crisis point, inflamed by false “reality media” that misguides public perceptions.

The tired emotional chef paused – “**Is it that bad**” we ask?

A tiny smirk appeared on his face; he looked up, and after some time continued:

In some cases yes, I know that we have come a long way. Conditions in the industry are better than in the classical kitchen. There are some great chefs, good restaurants, and dedicated teachers about, mainly I fear from old school, however, unfortunately just as many if not more employers, and employees are shysters.

The real issue is no one cares about policing them; they openly hide in the hysteria of the industry, as it is in their interest to con the media and public. They use media, food stylist, and spin to con the public into believing they are a genuine commercial chef.

We see every day television programs featuring celebrities either trying to act as an exceptional chef, or as an out of control loud-mouthed bullies. Popular TV shows purposely conceal the fact that good food preparation is difficult; on the contrary, TV shows intentionally fake that being a chef is easy, exciting, and glorifying, whilst televising incorrect technical practices that unfortunately mislead and miseducates the gullible public.

Each generation must improve or decline its standards. For many years, we moved forward, however, I fear the situation we described in my last job will quickly spread if not checked now.

As the world changes, so too must the cook, chef and the kitchen. Change is good, change is a part of progress, and changes usually lead to improvements.

However, as the culinary arts change, cooks, and chefs must hold fast to their core values and attributes. Chefs must not place core values and attributes into the same pot as changes to preparation and presentation. Values and methods are independent and entirely separate, and to the unguarded easily mixed into one bad recipe for the future.

Chefs must maintain their core values; a commitment to protect their brand against incompetent practitioners, they must follow culinary codes of practices, respect culinary history, recognise that a cook is a technician and a chef is a technician with responsibility. Keep the vital branding of a chef with a recognised global uniform, an image that provides a sense of belonging to a unique group. Alike, realise adhering to common culinary terminology provides global consistency and culinary conversation. All these are attitudes that set apart the professional cook and chef from others.

That is the real lesson. It is not finished yet, how it will end is up is in the hands of the remaining real practising chefs who must lead the current generation by example.

One thing is clear, only if chefs maintain their core vales and attributes will their numbers and a brighter future return, unless, we have to question, have chefs forgotten the need to protect their inheritance.