

Commercial kitchen

ADVERTISING FEATURE

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Good atmosphere attracts good staff

With the cost of skilled commercial kitchen staff rising at 10 per cent a year according to industry association, Restaurant & Catering Australia, it's important to get the right ones, and even more important to keep them.

According to restaurant business consultant, Ken Burgin, leadership by the restaurant owner or manager is a vital key, and the atmosphere in the kitchen inevitably permeates out into the service and customers' areas.

"If the kitchen's yelling and screaming or misbehaving then the staff out the front become tense, and it all comes back to the boss not being a leader. All those clichés about chefs throwing knives — that's failure of leadership," he says.

"Good kitchen equipment is another important drawcard, along with good working conditions. It's like a lot of other manufacturing processes; you've got to get rid of the grunt work so the staff can do the things that make a difference.

"You have to think of it as a manufacturing trade. A good trades-

man or tradeswoman knows how to use equipment properly, they know all the short cuts, they're fast, they're accurate and they know how to do exactly the same things the same way every time.

"When you get good equipment and workspace design to help them do the job really easily, they can get on with doing a beautiful sauce instead of being bogged down fighting with an inefficient kitchen or walking up and down stairs to put boxes away."

Ken estimates that on a typical night a successful restaurant with seating for 100 customers would need a chef in charge, three assistants helping with the making and the preparation and another person washing the dishes.

"It's hard these days to get a good chef, they can command high wages, and you need to be able to offer him or her the right kitchen equipment, a nice space and a good atmosphere to work in," he says.

"It's important to have the right assistants too. A chef is like any other



skilled person, if they have to work with people who can't do the job they're not going to last very long.

"A good assistant chef needs to be able to demonstrate speed, efficiency and all the technical physical skills of cutting and chopping and using pans — they have to know a lot of things. Building up their skills and promoting them from within is important.

"The chef might say 'put that sauce together for me' and the recipe may just have four ingredients, but the assistants are cooks too, and they have to know how to do that.

"People will choose a place that's nice to work in, where they get paid on time, where it's not hard slog and there's good teamwork, and where there's a bit of prestige associated with working in the place.

"Restaurants — and they've never really done this very well — have got to start making themselves a good

place to work. Just because you've got a name and you serve good food doesn't necessarily mean that those benefits flow for the staff.

"If you are a slave driver and you've got a really tough kitchen — and a lot of kitchens are pretty brutal and sexist places — people just don't stay because there's a half a page full of ads for similar jobs in the paper.

"If you are going to work eight or 10 hours a day in a place, if it's a dirty kitchen, hot and steamy and there's nowhere to put your bag, well staff just won't stay. I'm not talking luxury, but it's got to be a nice place to work.

"There should be attractive equipment, good pay and a lot of the kids coming out after finishing their course these days are expecting on-going training as well. They're asking 'what new skills will I be learning?'"

To attract and retain good staff, you need to create and maintain an efficient kitchen with a pleasant environment.



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