

Consistent Effort

What do you do if guests think your restaurants' food is inconsistent?

Dear Arlene: *I have a four-unit quick-service restaurant chain. I have been operating them profitably for three years, but there seems to be inconsistencies in the product. Often, a customer will tell me that he likes the food in one location better than the other. What can I do to ensure a more consistent outcome in all of my stores? – John, North Carolina*

Dear John: Your company is at that critical stage when you are too small to hire a full-time quality control product manager, but too big to ignore the need for infrastructure development. If your menu is consistent, it is easier to create the internal tools you will need.

The very first task is to create a purchasing guide that specifies every product, including all of the disposable goods that you currently use. The products should be listed categorically by type, such as produce, grocery, frozen and dairy.

Next to each item, the detailed specification should be noted. For example: Tomato Sauce, Hunts, No. 10 can; Chicken Fingers, frozen, Tyson, Tenderloin Strips; Milk, 2 percent, gallon, and so on. I even include the manufacturer or supplier code numbers, if possible.

By eliminating any possibility of changes in the product, the recipe has a better chance of coming out the way you want it. The unit manager or purchasing person must vigorously comply with the specifications and not be tempted by suppliers to make substitutions.

The second task is to create a foodservice manual that details the entire spectrum of batch and single-serve recipes. The binder should be divided into sections that reflect your offerings: bulk prep, appetizers, sides, soups, salads, sandwiches, entrees and desserts.

Bulk recipes should be titled, such as "Marinade for Chicken Teriyaki," "Vegetable Soup" and "Roasted Garlic Mashed Potatoes." The recipe should include the

ingredients listed in order of use and be specific regarding weights and measures, yield, preparation time, holding time and actual technique.

Single-serve recipes need to be specific, as well. In addition to portion size, an actual photo of the finished dish should accompany each recipe. This will serve your managers well for training and compliance checks.

I like to place both bulk and single-serve recipes in clear sheet protectors so that they stay clean. By numbering the pages and identifying the category, the sheets can be kept in order. I also feel it is useful to keep the recipes and digital photos on a computer in each location in case one gets misplaced.

If possible, a video of the proper procedure for preparing difficult items is recommended. It should show the utensils and equipment required, measuring of ingredients and actual cooking of the dish, including final plate presentation.

You can help ensure consistent execution by providing the proper tools for measuring. In addition to the typical back-of-house scales, cups, ladles, scoops and measuring spoons, it would be helpful to mark the numbers on the slicing machine for all meats, cheeses and vegetables; post heat levels and times for all microwavable, fryolator and oven-baked products; and even post defrost times for frozen products.

Even if you do all of the above, without your expressed commitment to maintaining standards, the best managers will not focus on the details. After all, can you imagine the variations of McDonald's "special sauce" if specifications are not followed? ☹️

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