



The growth of the US restaurant industry continues apace but finding enough chefs to resource it remains a difficult task. Solutions are available, however.

The restaurant industry is growing in leaps and bounds – which is good. But it appears to be outgrowing its available pool of trained chefs – which is not so good.

Arlene Spiegel FCSI, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates in New York City, says there is – and there isn't – more of a demand today. "Yes, there is more demand for skilled, a la carte, fine-dining restaurants to prepare fresh foods. Ghost kitchens also need trained prep folks. But there is less demand for QSR and fast-causal sectors, as much of the food is prepared in a commissary or outsourced from sous vide kitchens or prepared food suppliers. Chefs are not needed to peel carrots ever again."

SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Restaurateurs have lots of options at their disposal for seeing to it that their kitchens are always adequately and expertly manned. Retention of current staffers is obviously the preferred

choice. Keeping the good performers, Spiegel has found, is about the work environment, compensation and competition. "Kitchen culture is still in the dark ages, with 'old-fashioned' hierarchies. Today's young chefs want respect and opportunity."

Operators should begin by studying the menu, recipes, procedures and kitchen equipment "and identifying items that are taking too much time and labor," Spiegel says. "An often painful path to creating a lean kitchen is to go through the menu-engineering process. Be honest. Eliminate items that are forcing extra staff. Do you really need two pastry chefs? Do you really need 10 varieties of sliders?"

Some restaurants partner with culinary schools and programs to establish an internship/externship program in order to maintain a steady stream of kitchen staff. Many of these interns become full-time employees. The Ivy League culinary

schools, local Board of Cooperative Educational Services (public organizations created by the New York State Legislature in 1948 to provide shared educational programs and services to school districts) and community college programs are churning out young, eager folks who are ready to be hired, says Spiegel.

"An emerging group of women, especially with school-aged children, are gravitating towards the kitchens in their local neighborhoods," she says. "Hours are flexible and they can still be home for the family."

Spiegel advises restaurant management to study their guests' preferences. "Engineer your menu. Buy multi-task equipment. Find high-quality sources/suppliers for labor-intensive items and garnish on site.

Not everything has to be made from scratch. Put your labor where you get the credit, especially in your signature items." ■