

Are you getting paid enough?



We take an unscientific, but telling, look at the state of employment for chefs.

BY KATIE AYOUB

The one topic that seems to engender almost as much fervor among chefs as food is career. *The National Culinary Review* received passionate responses to a small-scale study about career satisfaction. We asked chefs about their salaries and benefits, education payoff and quality of life. The spectrum of answers was broad. But underlying themes surfaced that perhaps represent a current of thought among chefs. Some are as fickle as owners who hire them, moving from job to job often. Most argue they're not compensated adequately for the time and energy they place in their work. But none of the chefs we surveyed would trade in their chef coats for civilian clothes. Could the money be better? Probably. Is job satisfaction high? Definitely.

According to industry experts, salaries and job opportunities are improving. The Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1998 reported that executive chefs earned a median annual salary of \$40,000, sous chefs, \$27,500, and pastry chefs, \$26,000. In 2001, salaries jumped to \$48,000, \$30,000 and \$30,000, respectively.

After Sept. 11, the industry suffered. Marcus Duval, owner of Duval International, a professional-chef search firm based in Salem, Ala., noted a downturn in hiring practices. Instead of maintaining high-income executive chefs, many restaurant owners opted to fire them and promote their \$40,000 sous chefs. Typically, promoted sous chefs would be brought up to \$45,000 or \$50,000—lower than the \$65,000 average, says Duval. Executive chefs would then take other jobs for less money. Jobs became scarce, because few were willing to leave the security of their current positions. “But the economy’s definitely on an upturn now,” says Duval, who has been in business for 30 years.

Who’s earning the most money with the best benefits? According to Duval, country-club chefs have it made. Clubs look for experienced, pedigreed chefs and reward them with annual salaries starting at \$75,000, he says. Some catch the brass ring at \$200,000. The clubs also entice with bonuses, matching 401Ks, good insurance and generous vacation packages. Chefs of country clubs enjoy seasonal menuing and more freedom in the kitchen than in other arenas. But they clock the hours that most other chefs work, too: six days a week, 50 to 70 hours weekly. “The clubs look for chefs who can cook well, of course, but they also want the full package—a good cook and someone who can manage and run numbers,” says Duval.

Pastry chefs at country clubs, he says, average \$45,000 to \$60,000 per year. An added bonus? Standard workweeks and decent vacation packages. Executive chefs at four-star hotels are next on the salary totem pole, coming in at \$65,000 and up,

depending on how large the hotel is, says Duval. Executive sous chefs earn \$35,000 to \$42,000, and pastry chefs, \$40,000 to \$45,000. “You find sous chefs here more than in any other segment. The hotels give them a standard routine and know their hours, and there’s promotion from within,” says Duval. (In other arenas, the sous-chef position is hard to fill. Most want the top toque and aren’t willing to “settle,” says Duval.)

According to Duval’s estimates, executive chefs cooking at independent restaurants are earning an average of \$65,000 a year. Many restaurants now expect the chef to also prepare pastries and desserts. Looking for a new job? Duval recommends representation. “You need someone to negotiate for you. You need to be represented to get the best package,” he says.

Do you think your salary is fair?

We asked chefs that question and, with few exceptions, were told that they thought they should be making more. Hourly-wage sous chefs were grateful for overtime, running into 60- and 70-hour workweeks to make finances comfortable. Executive chefs in our survey reported salaries from \$34,000 to \$119,000, plus bonuses. One can guess which chefs felt undercompensated. Chef/owners couldn’t estimate annual income, as much of their net worth is tied up in the restaurant. One chef/owner surveyed (all subjects were granted anonymity) said, “There are times when my salary is below average, but as an owner, I am continuously growing equity in the company that will pay off.” Another chef/owner commented that if he worked for someone else, he would be pulling in twice what he makes now.

The pastry chefs in our survey felt more job satisfaction than their cook-

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ing counterparts. "I love the salary I make now. I have great benefits. I do feel I'm getting paid enough for the work that I do there," said a pastry chef working in a country club.

One country-club sous chef said, "I thought that a culinary degree would guarantee me more money." Quite a few of the chefs surveyed echoed this sentiment, but a few felt that a culinary degree is crucial to successful

climbing of the kitchen ladder.

One chef/owner gave success a formula—
increased education equals increased sales equals increased profits equals increased salaries.

An executive at a fine-dining independent restaurant, although degreed in culinary arts, doesn't think education holds cachet. "A formal educational

background in this field

of work isn't what qualifies an individual to perform his or her job suc-

cessfully. My salary is based on the level of success that I achieve daily, weekly, monthly and yearly—not on my schooling," he says. "But where a corporation doesn't have the ability and focus to singularly recognize a chef's talent and ability to cook, yes, it's easier for them to believe in someone's certification than to certify for themselves."

Job satisfaction

Our small-scale survey confirmed that chefs love their chosen profession. Average workweeks punch in at 60 hours. Chefs in seasonal markets work up to 80 hours and seven days a week during peak season. Chefs' salaries could be higher. Hours could be shorter. But all of the chefs interviewed loved the work. For many, loving what you do is the marker of a successful life. □

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No more overtime?

Overtime rules are changing. For the first time in 50 years, the Department of Labor has updated regulations under the Fair Labor Standards Act, effective Aug. 23. The new regulations redefine the duties of positions exempt from overtime pay. It also has raised the salary threshold for workers who automatically qualify for overtime pay under federal law. Now, those who make less than \$455 a week, or \$23,600 a year, qualify. The previous threshold was \$155 a week, or \$8,060 a year.

The Washington D.C.-based National Restaurant Association is analyzing the report and will release its findings soon. It sees the redefining of chef status from executive to professional as a positive for the industry. "Chefs are now recognized as professionals. They'll finally be given credit for the skill and craft of being a chef. This classification will attract more individuals to the industry," says Robert Green, vice president of

federal relations for the NRA. "This new regulation more accurately defines the duties of a contemporary chef."

Employers classify employees based on duties. Now there are two voluntary classifications for exemptions—a learned professional and a creative professional. The former must be a graduate of a four-year culinary program. The latter must somehow contribute to the restaurant's artistry and imagination, perhaps through menu design.

The advantage for both chefs who fall into those two categories, or for workers who make more than the new threshold for overtime pay, according to Green, is the opportunity for yearly salaries as opposed to hourly wages.

Health benefits and vacation packages, once not an option, may be a reality with the new rules.

For more information, go to www.restaurant.org or www.dol.gov.