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CHEF TRAINING

& KITCHEN MANAGEMENT

All In Good Measure

The 5 Points of Proper Portion Control

Your managers should be ever-vigilant about noticing any deviation from your standard portioning (and everything else) and correct, encourage or cajole as needed.

By Chef Joe Abuso

Although portion control probably doesn't top many chefs' lists of the most fun or creative parts of their job, it is still an important task for which they are responsible. Without it, both sides of any restaurant's basic equation — customer satisfaction and profitability — crumble.

Let's take a look at a number of ways that will help chefs master this essential part of running their kitchens. As an overview, good portion control depends on putting in place systems and procedures at five distinct points in a kitchen's workflow:

1. The written plating instructions.
2. Ordering/receiving procedures.
3. Prep work.
4. Service.
5. Closing.

Written Plating Instructions

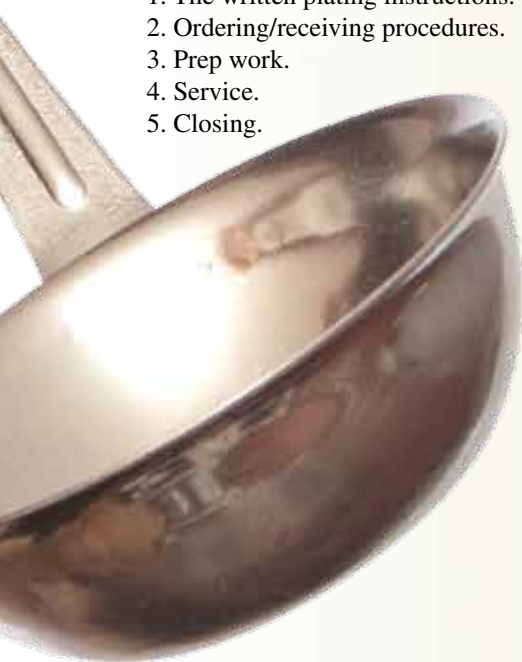
The written plating instructions and costing sheets for each dish, if done well, can be valuable tools for an operator in many ways. They can encourage the chef to give his best efforts to each menu item, knowing that his thoughts are a matter of written record, and are more likely to be adhered to by his staff.


They will make ordering easier by helping to give an accurate account of everything that is needed — no more, no less.

They will improve consistency by giving everyone responsible for building the plates much of the information they need to do their job. This applies to the managers directing the ordering, prep work and service, as well as the people further down the food chain who do a lot of the proverbial heavy lifting.

If plating instructions are not codified in writing, however, much will be left to chance. Realize that the quality and value of the information they contain is directly related to the quality of the effort that goes into writing them. Garbage in, garbage out, as information technology folks love to point out to the rest of us.

When indicating portion amounts on plating instructions, take the time to use the right scale or measuring device to determine what you really want to see on each plate. Estimating that you want a 6-ounce salmon fillet might very well be "in the ballpark," but take the time to





weigh one out, cook it and see if that's what you are really after.

The same goes for sauces, sides and other items. If the amounts indicated on the sheets are not accurate, everyone on the staff will quickly lose any enthusiasm they might have had for consulting them. It's then a slippery slope for any worker to get to the point of not taking seriously a sous-chef's admonitions about portion size, whether the worker in question is doing the butchering, preportioning or plating.

In addition to having a negative effect on portion control, sloppy work during the writing of the plating instructions/costing sheets will also wreak havoc with your pricing, ordering and cost control.

Ordering and Receiving

One of the most basic things a cook needs if he or she is expected to consistently produce your standard portion sizes is sufficient product with which to do so. The systems and procedures in place for inventorying, ordering, receiving and storage are some of the most important in any operation.

They affect every restaurant in a multitude of ways, including food and labor costs, food quality and consistency, overall customer satisfaction, sanitation, staff morale and many others. Here, let's just consider how your ordering and related activities can affect portion control. The most obvious example is simply not having a sufficient amount of a particular product on hand.

This might occur because it wasn't ordered at all, or because it wasn't ordered on time. Another possibility is that it was ordered, but not delivered, with the person checking in the order not noticing the omission. Regardless, various solutions, some less than ideal, may ensue. Ideally, someone will notice the problem in time to have more product delivered before it's too late.

Less than ideally, a butcher may decide to, for instance, cut the required number of steaks from the PSMOs on hand, but in the 6.5-ounce portion instead of the correct 8-ounce portion size. Also, it's one problem if a cook is only putting 2 ounces of green beans on a plate instead of the correct 4 ounces because they are not paying attention, and another if they're trying to stretch what they have to make it last until the end of their shift. Each situation has its own solution.

Another problem that may occur because of issues in your purchasing procedures is incorrect products being received and used. It's easy for your cooks to manage the portion size on a plate that is supposed to contain a 6-ounce bone-

less chicken breast when that's the size they have to work with. But when faced with a case of random breasts, it's impossible.

If they perceive the incorrect product as a symptom of apathetic or incompetent management, it will be hard for them to care enough to take the necessary action to correct the situation. Make sure that these kinds of problems are rare exceptions and not regular occurrences, indicating problems with your overall purchasing operations.

Prep Work

Much of what will eventually go right, or wrong, with the portions your guests see on their plates can be traced back to the kitchen's prep work. The basic job that needs to get accomplished during prep time is the production of the right food in the correct amounts in time for service. We've already talked about the importance of good purchasing procedures.

The step that precedes placing an order is for the chef to write his prep list, which is determined by the menu and the expected number of guests. This prep list will indicate just what his staff needs to prep, so that he will know just what needs to be ordered. Assuming the orders were accurate and the deliveries correct, the prep list will then be the road map from which the kitchen crew will work.

First, be methodical in writing your prep list — in whatever way works for you — so that you don't accidentally leave anything off. It's hard for your cooks to give out the right portion of something that doesn't exist. Using the menu as your guide is usually a good place to start. Next, be sure that your prep list is accurate in how much you want of something and just what, exactly, it is that you want.

This is especially important if there are any curveballs on the list — items that are a break from the norm in either quantity or specification. If a certain cook usually produces 1 gallon of a particular sauce, but because of a private banquet you'll need 6 quarts, be sure to indicate it on the list, mention it to him, and follow up while it could still make a difference. If the normal portion for salmon is 6 ounces, but tonight you're running a mixed grill with a 4-ounce portion, be sure that whoever is butchering the fish is in on the plan.

Do the math to figure out the quantities needed for each side dish, sauce, garnish and anything else your crew will need to produce the menu. Then double-check it if you have any doubts (or even if you don't), and put it on the

list. Just because every item is on your prep list, the cooks all have access to it and you've even talked to them about some of the items, don't feel that your job is done. Taking an occasional observant lap around the kitchen and making sure that everyone is with the program is never a waste of time or effort.

A decision that every chef must make is which menu items should be preportioned during prep. Factors to consider are the cost of the item, the difficulty in portioning it, the level of expertise of the staff completing the dishes, volume and the speed required at service.

Very expensive items that require some experience in handling should definitely be preportioned. Filet of beef steaks, sea bass and medallions of foie gras are obvious examples. When a guest orders an 8-ounce steak, he expects to get 8 ounces, not 7. On the other hand, taking a close look at how much it would cost an operator to unintentionally serve 8.5-ounce portions instead of 8-ounce portions in a single month is sobering. (Let's assume that the beef is \$18 per pound. That's \$1.13 per ounce. If the restaurant serves an average of 30 steaks each day, six days a week, for four weeks, that's 720 steaks, and an extra 360 ounces of beef. That adds up to \$405 lost in food costs in four weeks. Ouch.)

Preportioning also makes sense for more humble items for the sake of convenience, accuracy and speed at service. Many sandwich shops preslice and portion their deli meats and cheeses for these reasons. Certain side dishes and desserts can be redesigned with individual portioning in mind. Individual corn "soufflés" can take the place of a spoonful of corn on a plate, and individual chocolate cakes instead of a slice might liven up a menu while simplifying portion control at the same time. These kinds of items can work especially well for banquet work.

Service

Service is when, with the addition of a little more effort, all of your previous planning and work will come to fruit. In correct portioning, what your cooks need on the line is simple: the right food in sufficient quantities, the right utensils with which to serve it, and the knowledge of how to combine the two. Every service should start with a manager visiting each station to ascertain that each cook has all three items.

The manager should be totally familiar with the menu and be able to quickly and accurately assess each of the food items for quality and quan-

tity. Now is the time to decide if more of a certain item must be prepped or brought to the line, or to notice that something is amiss and figure out how to correct it. If, for instance, what are supposed to be 6-ounce grouper fillets are looking a little skimpy, it could be decided to turn three orders into two, if that would effectively correct the mistake. If, at the start of a dinner service, 6-ounce beef tenderloin steaks are observed, but 6-ounce steaks are only served at lunch, with dinner getting an 8-ounce portion, make the swap.

Each cook should have whatever ladles, scoops or spoons they need to correctly portion the food on their plates. The restaurant should own enough of each item so that the cooks don't have to hoard this simple equipment before their colleagues get to it first.

Next, the manager should talk through each plate with the cooks preparing them, especially with staff new to a particular station, to uncover any holes in their understanding of just what they'll be expected to accomplish.

While this chat should of course include overall presentation, timing, seasoning and requisite cooking techniques, the simple topic of portioning shouldn't be neglected. An efficient system for replenishing the line, that everyone understands and follows, should be in place.

Depending on the circumstances, it might be a good idea to have separate staff available to bring more prep out to the cooks as they request it. The cooks need to meet the replenishers halfway, and request particular items when they are almost out. Not after they have been without it for 10 minutes and are now supposed to be firing an order of it.

As with everything else in a kitchen, having managers explain and demonstrate to the staff just what each portion should be is only half the battle. The other half is doing regular follow-ups. Just because a cook did it right last week, and yesterday, doesn't mean they'll do it again today. Your managers should be ever-vigilant about noticing any deviation from your standard portioning (and everything else) and correct, encourage or cajole as needed.

Closing

Last but not least, be sure that when your cooks break down their stations at the end of a shift, their sole priority isn't getting out the back door as soon as humanly possible.

Instead, instill in them the understanding that it's the first step in getting them successfully set up for when they return.

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