

The Washington Post

The crippling problem restaurant-goers haven't noticed but chefs are freaking out about

By Roberto A. Ferdman August 12, 2015



Behind the swinging doors of restaurant kitchens around the country, things are getting a bit more chaotic. It's not the sort of thing diners would have noticed, because it's happening behind the scenes, out of view. Orders are still coming in, and plates are still coming out. But there's a growing problem that chefs and restaurateurs are talking about more these days.

Good cooks are getting harder to come by. Not the head kitchen honchos, depicted in Food

Network reality shows, who fine-tune menus, and orchestrate the dinner rush, but the men and women who are fresh out of culinary school and eager to earn their chops.

The shortage of able kitchen hands is affecting chefs in Chicago, where restaurateurs say they are receiving far fewer applications than in past years. "It's gotten to the point where if good cooks come along, we'll hire them even if we don't have a position. Because we will have a position," Paul Kahan, a local chef, told the Chicago Tribune last week.

It's an issue in New York as well, where skilled cooks are an increasingly rare commodity. "If I had a position open in the kitchen, I might have 12 resumes, call in 3 or 4 to [try out] in the kitchen, and make a decision [a few years ago]," Alfred Portale, the chef and owner of Michelin-starred Manhattan restaurant Gotham Bar and Grill, told Fortune recently. "Now it's the other way around; there's one cook and 12 restaurants."

And it extends to restaurants out West, where a similar pinch is being felt. Seattle is coping with the same dilemma. San Francisco, too. The glitz and glamour of rising through the ranks in the restaurant industry simply isn't what it used to be. Long hours, low pay, and a series of other cultural and economic factors

have made lower tier restaurant work a much less desirable path than it once was, leaving many kitchens chronically understaffed.

One of the clearest obstacles to hiring a good cook, let alone someone willing to work the kitchen these days, is that living in this country's biggest cities is increasingly unaffordable. In New York, for instance, where an average cook can expect to make somewhere between \$10 and \$12 per hour, and the median rent runs somewhere upward of \$1,200, living in the city is a near impossibility. As a result, people end up living far from the restaurants where they work. Add on top of that how late dinner shifts can end, and people are arriving home well into the night. Top it all off with the fact that culinary school graduates are often working through significant amounts of debt, and the burden can be insurmountable.

It's not as though restaurants are cheating workers out of heaping piles of cash either. The truth is that there simply isn't a whole lot of money to circulate around. The National Restaurant Association estimates that the median profit margin for mid-level establishments (those with average checks of \$25 and higher) was only 4.5 percent. Celebrity chefs and successful restaurateurs exist, but they are the exception. And a good deal of the money earned by the former comes in the form of television contracts, book deals, guest appearances, and other tangential earnings. "The pay just isn't there," said Kim McLynn, who is a representative for industry research firm NPD Group.

Some also worry that food television has created a pervasive, mistaken perception among young, aspiring chefs that success is earned less through patience and perseverance than it is through sudden fame. Cooking shows on the Food Network, Bravo, and elsewhere, have spread a misleading sense that kitchen work is mostly creative and fun. The reality check that young cooks experience at their first kitchen shift can be crippling.

"It's tiny and hot, not much room to move," Andy Ricker, the chef and owner of Pok Pok in New York City told Grub Street in 2013. "You're dehydrated, and it's crazy busy; the floors are greasy; there's flames and water. It's not like being in Kitchen Stadium."

And then there's another subtle but significant change happening across America that doesn't bode well for the restaurant industry. After years of steady inflows of Mexican immigrants, who have proved both eager and talented cooks, the trend is reversing itself. The number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States has leveled off over the past decade (it peaked eight years ago in 2007). By 2012, net migration to Mexico was already zero, or even negative, meaning that more Mexicans were moving back than moving in.

That's terrible news for an industry that has relied heavily on the demographic. In 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that 1.4 million out of a total of about 12.7 million workers in the restaurant industry, were legal or illegal immigrants. In 2008, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that roughly 20 percent of the country's more than 2.5 million chefs and cooks were undocumented immigrants.

"I would be surprised if the slowdown in Mexican immigration isn't responsible for more of the problem than many people realize," said Tyler Cowen, an economics professor at George Mason University who has written extensively about the economics of restaurants. "This sector is, as anyone in it will tell you, kept afloat by immigrants, especially Latinos. They're essential to its health." Cowen believes that the improving economy is also hurting the restaurant industry. As other sectors pick up, service jobs suddenly become less appealing, he says. "Improving economy, declining immigration, and higher rents — those are the three main things creating the shortage of cooks," Cowen said.

Despite the maelstrom of issues afflicting the industry, new restaurants continue to open, which could be exacerbating the problem further. "The easiest point of entry is simply there are more restaurants today than ever — a 25 percent increase from a decade ago," the Chicago Tribune wrote earlier this month. Just as the pool of potential candidates is thinning, more kitchen jobs are opening up, creating a growing gap supply and demand gap.

The National Restaurant Association touched on this phenomenon in its latest industry forecast. "Growth in the number of hospitality job openings accelerated sharply in 2014, a development that was out of sync with the pace of hiring," the report said.

For now, urban diners will continue to eat out, rub their stomachs in delight, and go home without having realized that behind the swinging doors, the kitchen crew could very well have used a few more able hands. That's because restaurant kitchens are resilient workplaces, where pressure is a fact of life. But if the trend continues, it will only be a matter of time before the problem spills out into the public, slowing service, deteriorating meal quality, and perhaps eventually, forcing restaurants to close their doors.

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