

Good to Great Catering What makes a Great Culinary Department?

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It is the first weekend of summer complete with the playful sound of kids playing in the neighborhood, the heavy humidity sitting on my shoulders and a catering deadline hanging over my head. This afternoon ends a rigorous week of traveling presentations and difficult business decisions. I had so many thoughts of what to write about, but could not choose. Do I discuss incredible edible garnishes or grilling techniques or some new recipes we have been developing? Is it the right time to wax on about sustainable seafood or organic produce? Or, should I just write down what I am feeling right now? Should I just write about what I want to always experience at home or when I travel?

While cooped up in the cramped quarters of coach, flying to three different cities this week, I read an exceptional book, "Good to Great". In the book, the author, Jim Collins writes that the opposite and mortal enemy of great is good. When we settle for good, we stop trying to achieve greatness. Has that happened to your culinary department? Have you been good for so long that you think your great, because you have confused consistency with excellence? Let's see what defines greatness in a catering culinary department. Let's discover how we can make that shift to great. Let's push each other to become the best we can.

Defining Greatness

Ask your clients. Ask them who they consider to have the absolute best tasting food with the greatest presentation in your region of the country. Ask them to include restaurants in that analysis as well. Ask your staff the same question. Then ask yourself. There can only be one best, but there can be many great. If you face the ugly truths about the product you serve, whether it is five course tasting menus or the succulent barbecue, you will know where you stand. Is your food greeted with the pleasure full moans of an adoring public or the casual sounds of a family at the drive through window? Your goal should be to be the best compared to the others. When you can truly say you are the best and have that confirmed by those around you, you have achieved greatness.

The Kitchen Leader

Is the leader in your kitchen one that puts the cuisine first or does he or she step in front and display ego. Great kitchens are led by a leader that can stand back and let success happen without interjecting self promotion. He recognizes that his team needs to have the best people that fit into the culture of the company. If someone is not working out, he lets them go so as to not waste their time or his. Mostly she finds the right spot for them, a place where they receive mentoring and deliver excellent work. Lastly the leader believes that their culinary operation can be the best and will be successful. Never do they waiver or doubt about the eventual achievement of greatness.

Focus

Do you have focus or are you all over the board with your menu? Do you have the same cooks or “Chefs” making deli platters and then preparing the Beef Bourguignonne? I have seen in many operations a monumental change in quality, when they figured out who they were. I highly recommend that if you find yourself drowning in orders and chaos with little to show for it in the end, it is probably because you are trying to be all things to all people. Focus! Decide what will drive your economic engine, what you can do better than anyone else and what your passion is. When you decide these things, you will undoubtedly discover the secret to excellence. After that, excellence will beget success.

Be disciplined

Mr. Collins writes that great companies are disciplined. That does not mean they don't have fun, in fact they love their jobs more than any other company employees. It means that a disciplined operation that is led by a consistent and disciplined leader is the best place to work. Systems and rules are good to have as long as they are well defined and communicated. Avoid too much paperwork, and more understood procedure that delivers positive results. This is most likely the hardest thing to do in a kitchen. Try bringing in an outside consultant or Chef that can see what you do and give you a different perspective. Sometimes we just can not identify the problem areas because we are too invested in them or too close to them.

Celebrate success

Encourage celebration while evaluating failures. Compare yourself constantly, and when you have a successful moment reinforce it. Some ways of doing that are giving your staff recognition to your clients. Bring them out on the floor every once in a while and introduce them to a satisfied customer. Let the client thank them. Work to have your company featured in an article and make sure the staff is recognized. Deliver awards to the staff, whether it is done on a monthly or an annual basis. Let everyone know that you want to celebrate greatness with them, not alone.

Greatness looks and tastes and smells different. It is obvious. You recognize it immediately. Make that your goal. Slowly introduce effective leadership, vision, focus, discipline and greatness into your company.



Chef John Walsh of Chef's Expressions striving for
An excellent presentation



A Summertime Picnic with the freshest ingredients used to obtain excellence.