

## Food for thought



the early years...

I had never in my wildest dreams imagine myself behind the kitchen pass. In the growing up phase of my life, I visualized myself as a renowned journalist while my father had other dreams, wanting to see me as a well-qualified engineer. "It's rightly said, for an unknown reason, no one ever gets everything they want.

I tried to be an engineer for my dad's sake and I failed miserably. I tried being a journalist, but I repeatedly failed my own aspirations and myself.

In reality I never wanted all that. All I wanted to be a creator, and content one.

I had decided on the food service industry then, because it was important to have a skill, no matter what field or stream I chose. Left behind by two years compared to my friends, doing nothing but changing colleges and courses, a close friend tempted me to

approach a hotel management degree in the city. I didn't see any point in doing this course but all that mattered at the time was the degree. I readily agreed to complete my hotel management course, a three-year bachelors degree and reluctantly started attending classes. There were times when I felt lost in the classroom; often thinking that I was a misfit amongst my classmates, wasting time.

After a brief period of theoretical education on cooking, I was introduced to the industrial exposure training at the Sheraton Group of hotels in Bangalore, India. The philosophy cooking and the entire process related to cooking had formed a strong impression on me. I worked for six long months doing basic jobs in the kitchen, from the dishwashing to the butchery section, all the while doing what I was told to. I never failed to take my eyes of these masterful chefs in the kitchen.

The entire process of cooking sparked my interest, providing me with an extended insight of the cooking industry. My keen attitude bagged me an extension as a trainee chef at the 'Windsor Manor Hotel' managed by Sheraton group of hotels in India.

It was difficult in the beginning in keeping up with my classes and work at the same time. I had cut off from my friends and my social circuit to get trained in my cooking skills. My training developed and elevated my interest; I now had something to look forward to after college hours.

My training and perseverance, kindled my interest to wanting more and my hard work along with a strong dedication, helped me win four chef competitions at the inter college culinary meets. The feeling of pride and satisfaction in me after winning had my belief set strong; cooking was for me. This skill will define me I thought. Despite all my aspirations for other things I had finally found my true niche.

Over the years one crucial ingredient in this recipe of wanting to be a top draw chef in this industry is, apart from your love for food, a clear understanding of your motives is essential. That's how you earn your stripes and be some one in this wide ocean of an industry.

An individual who wants to be a chef needn't necessarily hold a degree in a culinary education but he needs to have some hands on experience.

Some chefs join this industry with high expectations, thinking when they come out of culinary school, they are going to have a job straightaway, be somebody's boss but that doesn't happen. One has to earn what he gets and it's not limited to just the culinary field. If everybody thinks 'I am going to be able to do whatever the hell I want because I'm great' then we are screwed.

The key is to excel and the need to keep your head down and work, work hard and shut up. You've got a knife and an apron; plough away!! You either can keep up or just leave.

In the beginning of my career, I started as a trainee stepping up to the post of an apprentice. The kitchen I worked for, cooked western cuisine but instead of the food itself, I found the process of it more inviting, palatable, toothsome, scrumptious and divine. I couldn't stop imagining the look of pure ecstasy on my customer's faces after tasting these delectable dishes prepared by the brigade.

That feeling doesn't get any better than that! Even today! I want to show people that its fun cooking, it's cool, it's sexy and my whole mission is to make someone's dining experience better. I cannot emphasize enough that a good mentor in this industry is needed to guide you on your way to success, because trust me, success doesn't come when you want it to; it only knocks at your door, if you truly strive for it.

After putting all these hours of hard work and dedication, it felt so satisfying after receiving my first pay check as an apprentice, it

wasn't much, but it was celebratory moment reasoning with the fact that my new found love and passion had earned me my first pay cheque. Frankly when one comes into this world of cooking, you needs to put the moneymaking mantra at rest, rather focus more creating an experience that is appreciated and respected.

There is a lot of hard work involved in being a chef; it is not as easy as it seems. Don't get me wrong, I personally love to sweat it out and I have had great times working in kitchens despite all of the nonsense and politics that accompany my day to day routine on the line. Moreover, I have to admit I learned some cool skills that are extremely practical, not something every career can offer .I should also point out that some chef do make big money but those that do make the big bucks either literally work 24/7 or become a celebrity chef which requires a long road of hard work to achieve in itself.

The success that I pride on is finding the perfect balance between being able to do and accomplish all that I wanted to do in my career and being able to find the happy medium .I genuinely struggle with that. I would rather give as much to my life outside work as I give to my job, but my peers and family remind me of the cost , a huge cost because the reality is that I do miss key moments and before I can catch up , it's gone forever .

Chefs work long and unusual hours, making it difficult for them to socialize outside of working hours; not everyone is ready to sacrifice that. Eventually at the pinnacle of their careers, missing holidays, anniversary's, being late for your sons first birthday or school concert because the service was busy and no one could replace you and so forth creates a sense of guilt on the one hand and ironically accolades on the other .

So, here is meaty end of what I've been simmering about all this time . Well, after watching Master Chef have you begun to daydream? Have you been deciding at the spur of the moment,

bringing home a few fancy ingredients and making dinner for you and your family? Are you fantasizing, maybe, someday you will own your own piece of history in the pantheon of gastronomic Michelin star chefs? Are you exploring a-la Carte options, ambiance, and retro or in-vogue interior designs for your own restaurant?

Well, if you want to get rich by becoming a chef for all this, I say, you are suffering delusions caused by watching the food shows too much. Television showcasing food and varied culinary styles have arrested the minds of young cooks letting them think that they too can become a great chef. It tickles their excitement letting them perform like those on the food network trying modern cooking methods such as sous vide, molecular gastronomy, deconstructions and 12-hour roasts.

What they need to understand is chefs who have succeeded in making a great impression had their successes depend on varied factors, some maybe laboriously cultivated and some that are inherent. Seeing oneself on a similar level as an aspiring chef or a chef by profession not only requires understanding of the food fundamentals but a holistic, never let go attitude

As a chef, an individual also needs to have a natural innate curiosity about food and different cultures, essentially being accompanied with absolutely no fear of failure. Fear somehow permeates its way into your cooking, just go for it and if you mess it up, try again! It's not the end of the world. Being a chef also involves performing more tasks than cooking for e.g. pricing, ordering inventory, people skills and cost management. The list goes on . It takes sheer resolve and involvement and a strong willingness to learn more, "I knew nothing, I know nothing, I am always learning is your mantra of survival here."

So is cooking industry or being a chef a good career choice for you? Yes and No! Ask yourself, what is it that you want in life? If you want good relationships with family and friends as your main priority followed by lots of money and lots of leisure time then this

career is probably not for you but if you like being abused by working long hours, love nothing else but creating good food experience and bask in the glory of the same, It may be a wise move.

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