

Function Centre

As a chef it's easy to find yourself repeatedly in-between jobs, many of us are simply restless and always looking for a new adventure. Maybe you have just come back from cooking at a resort on an island or maybe you have just come back from a skiing retreat, who knows? But as a chef you can always pick up work through an agency while you are applying for your next preferred destination and job.

This chapter, which I have called Function Centre, is from when I was working for an agency and worked a couple of months at this fantastic function venue where all kitchen staff took pride in their cooking, and served some of the best function menus that I have seen. They made me feel welcome and I immediately felt like part of the team that was assigned to cook during the busy silly season: Christmas. I was there for two months before venturing on to my next exploration as a casual chef.

I have tried to give you, the reader, an explanation as to how we, chefs, cook for hundreds of guests at venues like this. I hope you find it enlightening.

Peter took a break with the head chef to talk about serving times for the entrée and main course. He wrote a list of times and beside those figures, he jotted down the times that he should start cooking each food item so that they could be served warm and to perfection. Peter had been doing this job for some time and had discovered, and mastered, each oven's quirks. One applied more heat to the back of the oven than at the front so midway through the cooking process Peter habitually took the front trays out and swapped them around with the back ones. Another oven had a tendency to go dormant if it was filled up too much. The steamers were new and worked a treat so at least he didn't have to worry about them. The atmosphere was one of concentration. No one was in the

mood to talk too much; this was an extremely busy weekend. We saved our chats and fun for the weekdays when it wasn't as busy.

Things were coming together nicely when Peter and I paused for a minute to see how far we had progressed on our prep list. We agreed that I should continue working with the kitchen hands while he worked on getting everything ready for the first function, which was to be held in one of the smaller function rooms.

As the clock's hands clicked on to quarter to seven, I started to drag out the trolleys from the cool rooms piled with the food for the large function room. There were five hundred and twenty guests booked for a staff function. The tarts were ready to go into the oven at ten past seven, which meant the entrée would be served at half past seven. I asked those assigned to the cold section if the salad, dressing and garnishes were ready. They were! At twenty past seven, I took the tarts out of the oven and shifted them into a hot box.

'Ready in ten minutes', I shouted out to everyone in the kitchen, although it was aimed at those who would be serving the entrée.

Peter stayed in the kitchen while I carried the hot box out to the serving area and prepared it for service at one end of a large table. It was the only furniture in the room. The staff lined up on both sides of the table. The cold entrée would be served on one side while the tomato and goat's cheese tarts would be served on the other side. We started serving with the two lines moving at the same time. It was well organised: one person took a cold plate with pre plated mouse from the plate trolley and passed it down the line to the next person where the sauce, Verde, was dripped around the mouse using a bottle with a thin nozzle. The next person arranged a few salad leaves on the side of the dish. And the last person in the line dressed the leaves with a couple of drops of balsamic dressing.

The first person on the other side squeezed a tiny circle of crème fraiche in the middle of a plate and passed it onto the next person who placed a warm tart on top of the crème fraiche. This acts like glue so the tart won't slide around the plate and make matters difficult for the wait staff. The person next in line would place a small salad of fresh herbs on top of the tart, while last person dressed this with Vinaigrette. At the end

of the lines, two additional people wiped the plates and passed them to the waiting wait staff. The guests had a choice of either dish.

Peter remained in the kitchen religiously sticking to his time sheet. The mains were chicken breast served on a risotto cake with green beans and fillet of beef on a ragout of mushrooms with fondant potato and baked beetroot. The vegetarian meal for the day was baked filo pastry filled with vegetable couscous and feta. Peter had it all under control as he gave orders to anyone who didn't already have a job. In my case, I took the chicken out of the oven and placed them in a large hot box, which had already been returned to the kitchen. An apprentice strained the sauces through the finest of sieves and used a wooden spoon to speed up the process. By tapping on the edge of the metal sieve whilst holding the handle in his other hand the thick sauce eventually worked its way through. It had a great shine to it and it wasn't hard to notice Peter's approval. While it was the head chef's duty to oversee everything, he left the team assigned to the hot section to continue unsupervised as it was clear everything was under control. Kitchen hands covered and took the sauce containers to the service area. Fillet of beef was packed in hot boxes along with baked filo parcels; all that was left was the steamed beans.

'Trays for beans please', Peter yelled.

The second chef placed five trays on one of the working benches. The beans had been cooked on steamer trays and now were placed in the trays that the second chef had laid out. We poured butter that had been seasoned with salt, pepper and garlic over the rows of beans. The excess butter and water simply sieved through the steamer trays and into the trays beneath which did not have steamer holes.

'Hot box ready for service', Peter yelled.

And on cue, two kitchen hands wheeled the box out to the service area. The head waiter informed us that there was a slight delay so four minutes to service. Everyone checked the service list to see what they had been assigned to plate during service and where they would stand in the line. Everyone slid on gloves and waited for action.

Peter and one of the kitchen hands were the runners during service, which entailed them to run with replacement trays to whomever called out that a particular item was

running low. Hot plates from the plate warmers were placed at the end of the table where the plating would begin. These were in reach of the first person on each line.

Peter and the kitchen hand started to pass trays of the items to be served down the line. They were placed in the middle of the table allowing space for the plates to be pushed down the line on the edge of the table. Each person in the line lifted their designated item from the tray and places it on the plate in front of them whilst pushing the plate further down the line at the same time. Then the serving of five hundred and twenty meals – two hundred and sixty on each side – began.

On line one the ragout was poured in a circle in the middle of the plate mindful to keep clear of the center where the second person would place a fondant potato. If there was too much sauce under the potato it would slide around whilst being served. Further down the line, the fillet of beef was placed on top of the fondant potato. The next person placed five wedges of baked beetroot, which had been tossed in olive oil and seasoned around the edge of the plate. The second last person placed a garnish of julienne fried leek on top of the beef.

The other line saw the first person grab a plate and place a baked risotto cake in the middle. Next a generous amount of sauce was poured from a jug around the risotto cake. Then the crispy chicken was placed on the risotto cake. Further down the line, five beans were placed on one side of the plate and leaned against the risotto cake. The second last person squeezed a drizzle of thick basil oil on top of the chicken. The last person in both lines wiped the edges of the plates and made sure that the plates were presented well.

‘More beef please!’ called someone from the lines.

‘I need more risotto cakes!’ Shouted another person.

Orders flew towards Peter and the kitchen hand at a steady pace. The empty trays were quickly stacked on the shelves under the table and allowed for full ones. Sauce jugs were refilled.

‘Two vegetarian meals please’, the head waiter called out.

Peter prepared two plates, poured on the tomato salsa and garnished the plates with chervil and tomato concasse and sent it down the line.

‘Running low on fondants.’

Everyone was focused on their job, occasionally looking around to see if they were in rhythm with the others in their line. It was the wait staff serving the guests who struggled to keep up with the pace. Peter inhaled deeply and quickly looked down the line to see the end result. The plates look great; he nodded his head in appreciation as a smile crept on his face.

It was seventeen minutes after we had started when the head waiter called last table. After the last plates made their way down the lines, everyone started to pack up and wipe the bench down. We had to set up for dessert. The hot box was taken back to the kitchen. The many dirty trays, jugs, containers and utensils were carried to the pot wash area. It was twenty past nine, and dessert was at ten o'clock. The buzz from the large function room drifted through the doors. Chatter and laughter told us that all was going to plan and that the guests were having a good time. I had to stay back to serve the dessert, only six chefs were needed to handle this duty since the desserts were already half done and plated. All that was left to do was the sauces and garnishes so the others started to pack up their knives and wash the main kitchen down before they headed off.

'See you tomorrow, Erik, thanks for today.' Peter called over his shoulder as he headed towards the door.

'See you, buddy, we're all right for tomorrow, aren't we?'

He stopped before he reached the door, 'No, you should come in at seven,' he answered straight-faced before he pushed open the door.

'Yeah, right.'

Dessert was served at quarter past ten. The entertainment went for a little longer than anticipated. Twenty to eleven and we were in the change rooms, it had been a good day and we would be back at ten o'clock tomorrow to do it all again.