

## Mr. Executive Chef: I Understand the Challenge in Hiring and Keeping Your Staff

As an executive chef or culinary hiring manager, you face challenges everyday in recruiting and retaining cooks, sous chefs, and other back-of-house (BOH) staff...you're not alone! The hospitality industry continues to grapple with significant staffing shortages, a trend exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing economic factors.



The pandemic led to widespread restaurant closures and layoffs, prompting many culinary professionals to seek employment in other industries. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the food and beverage serving and related workers sector is projected to grow by 5% from 2023 to 2033, aligning with the average growth rate for all occupations. Despite this projected growth, the industry faces a substantial number of job openings annually, with many positions arising from the need to replace workers who have exited the labor force.

Rising operational costs, particularly in housing and essentials, have made it challenging for cooks to sustain themselves on traditionally lower wages, leading many to leave the industry or relocate to more affordable areas. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the median annual wage for chefs and head cooks was \$59,000 in May 2023, while food preparation workers earned a median annual wage of \$32,500. In Canada and the Caribbean, compensation tends to be more competitive; however, while

Canada offers higher salaries, its taxes are also higher—though healthcare is free. In contrast, expatriates in the Caribbean are generally tax-free and receive additional benefits such as housing.

## **Strategies to attract and retain skilled BOH staff**

### **1. Competitive Compensation and Benefits**

Offering competitive pay and benefits is crucial. In 2024, 45% of restaurant operators reported not having enough staff to meet customer demand, with 57% being more than 10% understaffed. The leading cause of employee departures is low wages, cited by 34.6% of employees as their primary reason for leaving. Implementing a fair tipping structure that includes BOH staff can also enhance compensation.

### **2. Fostering a Positive Work Environment**

Creating a collaborative and supportive work culture is essential. Encouraging open communication, providing opportunities for staff to contribute creatively to the menu, and recognizing their contributions can lead to higher job satisfaction and retention.

### **3. Investing in Training and Professional Development**

Providing ongoing training and mentorship opportunities helps employees grow professionally and feel valued. This investment not only enhances their skills but also contributes to the overall success of the restaurant.

### **4. Building Partnerships with Culinary Schools**

Collaborating with culinary institutions to create specialized programs or internships can be beneficial. These partnerships can serve as a pipeline for new talent and provide students with practical experience.

### **5. Maintaining Open Lines of Communication**

Regularly engaging with your BOH team to understand their needs and aspirations fosters a sense of involvement and loyalty. Transparent communication about daily operations and how they impact staff roles can help employees feel more connected to the restaurant's mission.