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Committing

When I began in the kitchen I had no experience. The lady who hired me had decades of experience as a chef in many places. She worked where I was as a vacation from the pressure of fine dining. She seemed to enjoy teaching me and the other kitchen staff and I quickly learned a lot. Many of my early tasks seemed mundane and tedious, but it was in those 4 or 5 months that I developed skills that would serve me forever.

I started out working shorter hours. I would come in at 12pm and work until about 7 or 8 at night, when it started to get busy. The first projects they had me do were extremely basic, they were things that could stand to be messed up. This included chopping parsley and other herbs by the gallon, finely slicing dozens of onions to be cooked down for french onion soup and mixing large batches of sauce for the classic mainstay bar food dishes, such as burgers, chicken sandwiches and some simple salads. I did not have any of my own knives or other tools and just wore my normal clothes and sneakers as opposed to more specialized chef clothes and shoes that would really support your feet and knees, and I would never bring a change of clothes. Doing precise knife work with a giant dull knife was quite the challenge and I would slip all over forever wet floors while carrying the 20 pound bags of onions and flour. My knees and back would ache from hours of heavy manual tasks. I was often hunched over so as not to hit my head in the dim basement with 5ft ceilings. Still I persevered and enjoyed this challenge. It felt good to have actually done something, and it felt good to have worked hard after so long being trapped

indoors.

I eventually learned the benefit and necessity of proper tools and attire, and after a few months of completing these tasks, they trusted me with new ones. I would clean oysters, scrape pork skins for special chicharon, make fancier sauces that required precise measurement, and handle expensive ingredients, such as wild mushrooms, expensive vegetables and the occasional truffle for rare specials (this was an upscale bar). Scraping the pork skins was an indescribable pain. There was a layer of fat attached to the skin that we would remove, but this fat was very thick, congealed and often quite adhered to the skin. You also did not want to puncture the skin which was quite difficult since it was more delicate than the fat somehow, and would stretch and constrict as we cleaned it. The whole ordeal was greasy and the skin was rubbery, using a giant knife under these conditions was quite sketchy at times. Cleaning oysters required use of a very stiff brush and also great force to remove other sea life that had grown on the shells. Gloves were never worn because it made it harder to grip the oysters, and more difficult to tell if they were clean. As a result my hands would often become quite raw from the sharp spiky oysters and coarse sanding of the brush. Even cleaning the wild mushrooms was a long tedious process, where tender handling was prudent. We would submerge them in water and gently swirl the water so as not to damage the mushrooms. This process would be repeated up to 5 times to achieve completely clean mushrooms. Doing hard work on a scale like this, in the dank, wet spaces or inferno like kitchen of the restaurant was an extreme contrast to the previous 2 years of pandemic doldrums and uselessness. I did however begin to develop an excellent work ethic as I persevered with these excruciating tasks.

One day I came in and my boss was there helping, because we were short staffed. I started doing my normal tasks for the day as do the rest of the cooks in the kitchen. The usual

conversation and banter ensued to occupy our tired minds. At some point they began talking about needing more cooks for 'hot side', as some people were inconsistent or had left. I finished my work for the day and went to ask the sous chef if there were any other things she needed,

“Not really” she said looking around, “how would you feel about taking on some more hours, you feel like sticking around?”

“Sure” I said,

Of course I was content about this, as I needed more money and had plenty of extra time I could work. Right then, my boss glanced over at me with a grin, “you wanna start learning the line!?”.

This is certainly a big deal in a cooks career, as it marks the point where you really learn how to cook, to be resourceful, and deal with a lot more stress. I was enthusiastic about this and up to the challenge, eager to move on from the boring prep work that had consumed all of my time before. So I began training to work on the line, where everything is cooked to order for customers.

The basic structure of a restaurant kitchen works as follows; you have dishwashers, bussers and prep cooks who help clean the kitchen and organize the food inventory, then the prep cooks will 'prep' large batches of items which will be the building blocks of different dishes on the menu, for instance if you have a spaghetti and meatball dish, the meatballs, the sauce and the pasta will be made in advance and in large enough quantity to last for a few days. Then the line cook will get an order on a ticket from wait staff and assemble all of the ingredients, with some additional sauteing of this or sprinkling of that, putting your own touch on it. Of course this, and (often) plating, must be done to a consistent standard that the owner or head chef will determine. All of this is expected to be done in less than 10 minutes most of the time. When a restaurant is

very busy, such as on a weekend, you may receive dozens of tickets in an hour, each for a table with multiple dishes requested. Learning how to deal with this helped me learn how to perform under stress and how to be aware of multiple things at once. As well as how to push through with something till the end and not give up. I was often distracted from the more difficult parts of the job because I realized and appreciated the beauty in all of the dishes we made, no doubt because of my mentors. My work ethic would benefit so much from all of this as well as my realization that caring about something makes it easier and more satisfying to do most of the time.

The chef who hired me had cared very much about the dishes we made and instilled her enthusiasm and appreciation of simple things in all of us. It was a decent bar with a kitchen and cocktails that were perhaps a step above others, but still just a bar. She only worked at that bar for a few more months and eventually grew tired of the incompetence some of the other workers and management exhibited. With her departure the quality definitely began to decline, as few of us cared about what we were doing for the money we were making. As is unfortunately the case with many foodservice businesses there was high turnover, and I would see many people come and go. Some would bring enthusiasm, some were just looking for a job, and some were very experienced and tired but still had passion deep down. Soon I was cooking at a much higher level and I ended up working at 2 more restaurants after, each paying me more than the last.

So much of working in a restaurant is doing things because you think they are important. This is definitely less the case in fine dining, where everything is a bit more monitored to ensure consistently high standards. However there is always that extra length that someone who knows and cares will go to just to satisfy their own drive and standards. Especially in smaller, less expensive restaurants a lot of things happen at the discretion of an employee. You may notice that the quality of food at some small establishment you liked suddenly changed, for better or for

worse, but this was because somebody decided to put in more effort, somebody cares about what they are doing. For a long time that was me, and I learned how to be that way from others who were that way. I also learned my worth and was able to realize that I may not want to do this for the rest of my life. That was when I decided to pick up where my interests left off after highschool, and go to college to pursue something really interesting. My work ethic was never great when it came to school, or practicing my instrument, or working out, but working in foodservice definitely improved that. The drive and conviction have definitely made their mark in me though, maybe that's just growing up, but I still feel like I worked for it.