

As I lay my arms on the desk to type this article, I am reminded of the hazards of the business as the weight of my limbs presses down on two nice pizza oven burns. This is the first time I have ever worked with a pizza oven, and I find myself getting the sheet pan burns so frequently attained during my years in banquet kitchens.

There is definitely a great truth to the adage as to whether one can stand the heat in the kitchen. Professional cooks tend to perfect an ironclad pelt, displayed by running one's finger through the deep-fryer or picking up a french onion bowl right out of the broiler without seemingly causing any more damage.

This summer, I had the privilege of having some great exchange students (remember my reference of my home-away-from-home as the 'Epcot Kitchen'?) who really stood up to the challenge of gutting out some extremely hot and stressful work days. And while some of them wondered why anyone in my position would remain in such a hazardous environment, a question upon which I often find myself reflecting, others were stoic in their professional demeanor, and downright productive in the heat of action.

But the staff favorite this year was Viktoria, from Russia. She impressed everyone from Chef to Restaurant Owner to Cooks to Servers, and at times it seemed as though she was measuring her improvements not only on her quickly-improving culinary skills but mainly on how much hotter a pan could be before she picked it up and carried it across the line. Her major at University is International Business, and she has no intentions of working in professional kitchens as a career. The other cooks had fun watching her grow in a short three month span, and as we shot another commercial for a local cable company, she found her way in there too, tossing pizza dough, receiving a copy of it to take back to Russia with her, which had her jumping up and down with joy.

It was refreshing to see such spirit in a young person, all too often missing these days (I couldn't stay off of my soapbox for too long), and I was proud to make Viktoria a member of the team. As I wrote about Bikash the food runner a couple of months ago, I felt that a little recognition for some of our friendly visitors is due.

Some of my employees from Mexico have promised me some proper mole cooking instruction, and those of my Nepalese friends who promised to come back next year have already taught me a great deal about food from their culture.

As I am creeping up on old age more rapidly than I had hoped as a youth, I have found a great source of enlightenment in conversing with our young friends from afar, as if to get a fresh perspective on life and world, especially as it pertains to food, attitude and culture. So, I guess a few burns don't really mean much, and in fact are nothing in the way of veering me from the kitchen, regardless of the heat.