

Chef Certification

More than mere letters on a jacket, professional certification for chefs has become a symbol of knowledge, skill, and culinary prowess. Many world-class chefs have no formal education or apprenticeship on their resume, but for many employers certification has become crucial as a measure of a chef's ability to be food manager, personnel director, social worker, and customer-relations agent.

Certification Evolution

The American Culinary Federation (ACF), governing board in the standardization of the culinary industry, has recently returned to the practical examination of kitchen skills. The ACF still emphasizes the academic proficiency of the modern chef, but now the certification process has evolved as a viable summation of a chef's drive, organizational skills, taste, creativity, and execution under pressure.

The ACF has also teamed up with the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in developing the ProChef Certification program. Under the scrutiny and guidance of the ACF, the continuing education department of the CIA developed this program to mimic the grueling Certified Master Chef (CMC) exam in a shorter, level-specific, four-day format. Upon completion of the rigorous examinations, the successful candidate is awarded dual certification from the respective institutions.

Benefits

Realistically, however, culinary certification does not necessarily apply to every chef. "It really depends on the individual and what [he or she is] trying to achieve," says Tama Murphy, CHE, CCSP, and director of continuing education at the CIA. "ProChef Certification is an exhausting four days of written and practical examinations, which require stamina and self-management. Are chefs willing to test their skills and abilities against established standards and competencies? Do they already have credentials that will help them achieve their career goals and objectives? Are employers satisfied with their [chefs'] current knowledge and skill set?"

In a similar approach, Certified Executive Chef Russel Cunningham of Jury's Hotel, Washington DC, notes that he has found great benefit from his certification. "I wouldn't necessarily recommend it for all of my cooks, knowing their motivations and goals. But my designation has . . . helped me on paper, [and] the competitions in which I have participated have always helped me in honing my skills and better understanding what I do."

As for helping his crew, he states, "If anyone wonders whether they might need to be certified, all they need to do is to look on any number of chef employment Web sites. The listings will let individuals know whether or not they need it. For example, it is difficult to find club or hotel executive chef employment that does not require Certified Executive Chef ranking in the ACF."

Certification is also available for personal and private chefs, culinary educators, and administrators. Each level has very specific guidelines, and each candidate is scrutinized by the ACF in order to ensure fair opportunities for all members.

Guidelines

In order to be certified, one needs to be an active member in a local ACF chapter. The guidelines for each certification level differ; the information on the ACF Web site, acfchefs.org, will answer the first and foremost question of which level of certification a chef may seek, along with the guidelines for each level.

For the ProChef Program at the CIA, ciaprochef.com has a great amount of information and study guides, as well as free educational workshops once one sets up an account. When a chef applies to the ProChef program, his or her resume is reviewed by a panel of CIA faculty members. If accepted, the chef will then be assigned a mentor, who will guide the candidate through the multitude of competencies for the specific level.

Level 1 earns the dual designation of Certified Culinarian/ProChef Certified Level 1 (CC, PC I). Level 2 earns Certified Chef de Cuisine/ProChef Certified Level 2 (CCC, PC II). The final Level 3 yields the prestigious certification of Certified Executive Chef/ProChef Level 3 (CEC, PC III) and acts as a precursor to the very demanding CMC exam held in the same kitchens.

The CIA decides whether a chef will start at Level 1 or Level 2, but regardless of experience, all chefs in the program must go through at least Levels 2 and 3, because the eight days of competency exams combined are what make up the CEC, PC III ranking.

Ultimately, it is the process and not the letters that make a chef. Without education or willingness to study and absorb new cuisines and techniques "on the fly," it is too difficult to stay up with modern trends. Culinary certification thus becomes an invaluable tool for those who wish to grow exponentially in the industry.

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