

1-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Escoffier, Marcel R. (1987) "The Chef In Society: Origins And Development," *Hospitality Review*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/hospitalityreview/vol5/iss1/6>

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The Chef In Society: Origins And Development

Abstract

In his discourse - The Chef In Society: Origins And Development - Marcel R. Escoffier, Graduate Student, School of Hospitality Management at Florida International University, initially offers: "The role of the modern professional chef has its origins in ancient Greece. The author traces that history and looks at the evolution of the executive chef as a manager and administrator."

"Chefs, as tradespersons, can trace their origins to ancient Greece," the author offers with citation. "Most were slaves..." he also informs you.

Even at that low estate in life, the chef was master of the slaves and servants who were at close hand in the environment in which they worked. "In Athens, a cook was the master of all the household slaves..." says Escoffier.

As Athenian influence wanes and Roman civilization picks-up the torch, chefs maintain and increase their status as important tradesmen in society. "Here the first professional societies of cooks were formed, almost a hierarchy," Escoffier again cites the information. "It was in Rome that cooks established their first academy: Collegium Coquorum," he further reports.

Chefs, again, increase their significance during the following Italian Renaissance as the scope of their influence widens.

"...it is an historical fact that the marriage of Henry IV and Catherine de Medici introduced France to the culinary wonders of the Italian Renaissance," Escoffier enlightens you. "Certainly the professional chef in France became more sophisticated and more highly regarded by society after the introduction of the Italian cooking concepts."

The author wants you to know that by this time cookbooks are already making important inroads and contributing to the history of cooking above and beyond their obvious informational status.

Outside of the apparent European influences in cooking, Escoffier also ephemerally mentions the development of Chinese and Indian chefs. "It is interesting to note that the Chinese, held by at least one theory as the progenitors of most of the culinary heritage, never developed a high esteem for the position of chef," Escoffier maintains the historical tack.

"It was not until the middle 18th Century that the first professional chef went public. Until that time, only the great houses of the nobility could afford to maintain a chef," Escoffier notes. This private-to-public transition, in conjunction with culinary writing are benchmarks for the profession. Chefs now establish authority and eminence.

The remainder of the article devotes itself to the development of the professional chef; especially the melding of two seminal figures in the culinary arts, Cesar Ritz and August Escoffier. The works of Frederick Taylor are also highlighted.

Keywords

Marcel R. Escoffier, The Chef in Society: Origins and Development, Italian Renaissance, Cooks, Alexis Soyer, Lea & Perrins Worcestershire, La Belle Epoque, August Escoffier, Cesar Ritz, Frederick Taylor, FIU

The Chef In Society: Origins And Development

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The role of the modern professional chef has its origins in ancient Greece. The author traces that history and looks at the evolution of the executive chef as a manager and administrator.

The position of executive chef is a relatively new one in the long history of cooks and cooking. Chefs, as tradespersons, can trace their origins to ancient Greece.¹ Most were slaves, but as early as the 4th Century B.C., "Athenian cooks, as depicted in the Greek theater, were often nothing but slaves. In spite of their low estate, they seem to have played quite an important role in the life of the city...."² Yet even at this early date, the qualifications of a good cook were taught to aspiring slaves through books on the subject, and with an apprenticeship program lasting two years.³ Cooks of that ancient period displayed many of the talents and foibles that current chefs exhibit. In Athens, a cook was the master of all the household slaves; it can be presumed that good management skills were important even then. Additionally, law allowed cooks exclusive rights to prepare and sell specialties of their own creation, allowing one Greek cook to proclaim, "I have earned in my profession, as much as any comedian has ever earned in his own...."⁴

This Greek tradition, like so many others, was carried on by Rome. Here the first professional societies of cooks were formed, "almost a hierarchy."⁵ It was in Rome that cooks established their first academy: Collegium Coquorum. It was not until the 16th Century A.D. that cooking as a profession again attained such sophistication and prominence in society.

While the level of sophistication may have declined during the Middle Ages, certain traditions common to chefs of all eras were maintained. Isabella Beeton, in *The Book of Household Management*, relates the management style of these "medieval [sic] chefs":

In the larger establishments of the middle ages, cooks, with the authority of feudal chiefs, gave their orders from a high chair in which they ensconced [sic] themselves, and commanded a view of all that was going on throughout their several domains. Each held a long wooden spoon which he tasted, without leaving his seat, the various comestibles that were cooking on

the stoves, and which he frequently used as a rod of punishment on the backs of those whose idleness and gluttony too largely predominated over their diligence and temperance.⁶

This Italian Renaissance brought back the Roman traditions of cooking, as well as so many other notable trappings of civilization. While authors differ about the significance of what happened next, it is an historical fact that the marriage of Henry IV and Catherine de Medici introduced France to the culinary wonders of the Italian Renaissance. Prosper Montagne⁷ mentions the magnificence of the feasts in the reign of Henry II, and important cookbooks were already being produced by French chefs even before their Italian counterparts arrived on the scene. Certainly the professional chef in France became more sophisticated and more highly regarded by society after the introduction of the Italian cooking concepts.

There is some dissension, recently, among food historians concerning the significance of all of the preceding discussion. The culinary historians of Boston, a society of food historians, has recently compiled a bibliography of all pre-1800 cookbooks contained in the 200,000 book collection of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliff. It is their contention that most of the cooking art as known in the West was originated in China, and that as spices flowed along the spice routes into Europe, so too did the recipes concerning their use. Other scholars believe that both China and the West borrowed their cooking ideas and their ideas concerning cooks from the great courts of ancient India. However, western chefs, no matter what their recipe source, have created a unique niche for themselves in society.

It is interesting to note that the Chinese, held by at least one theory as the progenitors of most of the culinary heritage, never developed a high esteem for the position of chef. Perhaps this is because the chef went from being a slave to being a merchant under the emperors, and the merchant class was the lowest class in classical Chinese society. A further deterrent in the rise of the Chinese chef was the lack of a tradition of public gourmet activities as were to develop in the restaurants and hotels of Europe.

Role of Public Chef Rises

The 17th Century saw the French monarchy reach its zenith, and with it the complexities of heading the royal kitchens reached mammoth proportions. Surely, the chef under Louis XIV had to be a master of organizational management as well as being a skillful cook. Banquets for over a thousand people were not uncommon, and even the more intimate royal banquets presented a challenge with their multitude of courses. The professional chef had become the operating head of the royal household. One chef, Henri Vatel, exhibited many of the traits common to this position; his organizational ability led to his being entrusted with a construction project worth 300,000 livres in the hard currency of 1661. He also displayed other characteristics of many chefs, notably an intolerance for mistakes. He was entrusted with organizing a great banquet for one employer, purchasing hundreds of fish for the occasion. He

happened to arrive at the kitchen at the same time that another fish delivery was being made, and upon seeing only a few fish being delivered, he retired to his room, where, thinking that his banquet and his reputation were ruined, he killed himself.⁸

It was not until the middle 18th Century that the first professional chef went public. Until that time, only the great houses of the nobility could afford to maintain a chef. But the rise of republicanism and the middle class was the point at which the chef became a part of the public business. This introduction of professional cooking into the public domain was not an overnight thing. Indeed, the first restaurant was established under the reign of Louis XVI.⁹ While the first restaurant was a simple affair, serving soups only,¹⁰ by the end of the 18th Century, the French restaurant had a very elaborate menu. It was near the end of this period that the greatest French chef of all time appeared, A. Careme. Perhaps it was the heightened public awareness of fine cuisine, sparked by such writers as Brillat-Savarin and Grimod de la Reyneire, that has allowed Chef Careme to carry that badge of distinction, but it was he who first codified and “streamlined” French cuisine. Perhaps another reason for this prestigious position in gastronomic lore was that he cooked in England, thus introducing that country to the wonders of French cuisine. He published 11 volumes of recipes and cookery insight and managed kitchens for both public and private dining. Careme introduced another aspect of the profession, that of the personality cult. The popularity of Careme and his creations as well as the scholarly codification of both the ancient and modern recipes of his cookbooks made him much sought after by the powerful and wealthy.

Careme provides a striking image of the professional kitchens of his time:

Imagine yourself in a large kitchen....There one sees twenty Chefs at their urgent occupations, coming, going, moving with speed in this cauldron of heat....In this furnace....not a sound is heard; only the Chef has the right to make himself heard, and at the sound of his voice everyone obeys.¹¹

Until very recently, this image could be used to describe almost every professional kitchen in the western world: The authority of the chef was unquestioned and absolute.

The cult figure of a great chef continued to evolve with the career of Alexis Soyer. It was he who became the “King of Chefs and the Chef to Kings.” Soyer followed the by now traditional career path for chefs, apprenticed at age 12, working his way up through a variety of kitchen positions until becoming a head chef at age 17 and managing a staff of 12 cooks. At 21 Soyer left France and began cooking in England. From the time of his arrival until the time of his death at age 47, Soyer maintained a very high public profile.¹² As chef of the most important political club in London, while devising ways to feed the starving poor of Ireland during the potato famines, and at his peak of public acclaim during the Crimean war, Soyer seemed to be both a chef and publicist. He invented such popular recipes as the Lea & Perrins Worcestershire Sauce, an army field kitchen still used by the British army, and a soup

kitchen capable of feeding 20,000 persons a day. He also published the first cookbook printed in England for the English housewife.

Modern Chef Is Traced To Ritz, Escoffier

The position of executive chef in a hotel awaited the arrival of the first true hotel as it is known today. The meeting of Cesar Ritz and August Escoffier in 1880 brought this about.¹³ In the mid-19th Century large resort structures resembling the contemporary hotel began to take shape. Ritz was manager of one such resort, the Grand Hotel in Monte Carlo, in 1880 when he lost his chef to a rival property. It was then that he hired Escoffier. With this team, the culinary tradition within the hotel was born.

By 1884, the two men had begun to ascend to world-recognizable heights in their management and cooking skills. Soon after its grand opening, the Savoy Hotel built by D'Oyly Carte came under their management.¹⁴ Along with such novel ideas as indoor plumbing, individual guest rooms, expansive lobby areas, and posh entertainment in the front of the house, the two men evolved an equally modern system of food preparation in the back of the house. Perhaps the apotheosis of their collaboration occurred in the building and opening of the Ritz in Paris. Ironically, the Prince of Wales encouraged them to go back to France to open a grand hotel in Paris, largely because the Prince had nowhere to stay in Paris that offered a bathroom.¹⁵

Escoffier and Ritz entered Paris during the height of what historians call *La Belle Epoque*,¹⁶ an age when Paris was the center of the arts. Impressionable youth from all over the world descended on Paris to soak up both its culture and its wine. The images of Paris of this period were recorded by such artists as Monet, Cezanne, Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec. Ritz found a suitable site and converted a former palace (*une petite maison a laquelle je suis très fier de voir mon nom attache*)¹⁷ into the grand Ritz hotel. As Sanger notes, "A great Chef is often anything but a great organizer."¹⁸ But Escoffier was both. Remembering the heat and noise of the pre-electric kitchen, Escoffier reorganized the kitchen itself, planning its layout so that each dish as it was being prepared moved from cook station to cook station.

An example cited was *oeufs Meyerbeer*, which formerly took 15 minutes to prepare; in Escoffier's kitchen an *entremetteur* baked the eggs, a *rotisseur* grilled the kidneys, and a *saucier* prepared the truffle sauce. The preparation time was reduced nearly to the time it took to cook the kidneys.¹⁹

Clearly Escoffier was influenced by the works of Frederick Taylor, whose first work, *Shop Management*, was published in 1903. Escoffier was profoundly affected by the principles espoused by Taylor:²⁰

- Replace rules of thumb with science (organized knowledge).
- Obtain harmony in group action rather than discord.
- Achieve cooperation of human beings rather than chaotic individualism.
- Work for maximum output rather than restricted output.

- Develop all workers to the fullest extent possible for their own and their company's highest prosperity.

Along with the re-structuring of the kitchen itself and the introduction of new equipment and methods, Escoffier codified French cuisine, attempting to apply scientific thought to the organization of recipes. His three great works, *Ma Cuisine*, *Le Guide Culinaire*, and *Le Livres des Menus*, arranged over 7,000 recipes into an orderly progression based upon the overriding culinary gift presented to mankind by the French, the sauce. Escoffier felt that his greatest accomplishment was the simplification of service and of the menu.²¹ He was able to reduce the basic sauces down to five main groups, and, with the addition of one or two ingredients, he could devise thousands of variations upon these five. His genius lay not in the development of numerous recipes, but in development of numerous recipes using a relatively small number of primary ingredients.

What other hotel opened with Cesar Ritz managing, Escoffier in the kitchen, the dining room entertainment featuring an orchestra led by Richard Strauss, and the singer being Florence Nightingale? Naturally, it was a much-copied success. Escoffier and Ritz built many other grand hotels, as did others. The ideas originated by these two men were duplicated and enlarged upon for the rest of the century. Large public dining rooms and banquet facilities demanded equally large kitchen areas staffed with a multitude of kitchen workers. Little has changed since the organization of the kitchen brigades under Escoffier. As of this date, the kitchen staff, and how it is organized, indeed even the uniforms, is as Escoffier invented them.²²

The ideal chef historically had to have a firm knowledge of the techniques and utensils of his trade. Indeed, it could be said that he was a tradesperson first, and developed his managerial skills at an historically later date. Having begun as a slave the chef became the military cook, who, between wars, cooked at the baronial estates. As peace became more common than war, he had to constantly refine his recipes and cooking techniques. At an historically early age, the chef had become a highly skilled artisan, carving and sculpting his food into high art. At this same time, he became a businessman, creating new dishes for profit. Civilization advanced, and larger and larger banquets and other food-related functions became the norm, necessitating the development of a kitchen hierarchy which, in turn, necessitated the development of more advanced management skills on the part of the head chef. With the evolution of the large dining establishment, the lead chef soon began to do less and less actual cooking and more and more supervision and creative work. The democratization of society soon added the concept of public celebrity to the chef's position, and it was this last step which established the position of chef as one beyond that of a common manual laborer.

Today's Chef Is Analyzed By Survey

The first and only modern study to date analyzing the role of the executive chef was conducted by Wayne Guyette in 1980.²³ He sent questionnaires to the chefs and general managers of 425 hotels which

met five criteria: location, size, room rate, the presence of on-premises food facilities, and the presence of an executive or working chef. The purpose of the study was to determine how well chefs performed the four basic managerial functions of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. His findings were that both chefs and managers recognized the importance of these skills, but that "the two groups disagreed significantly concerning the degree to which these skills were currently being practiced by the executive chefs."²⁴

The results of his questionnaire showed that 90 percent of all chefs judged themselves good or very good planners, while 63.3 percent of all managers thought that their chefs' skills were good or very good. Over 87 percent of the chefs judged themselves good or very good organizers; only 61 percent of their managers agreed. Eighty-seven percent of the chefs felt that they had good or very good directing skills; 58.3 percent of their managers agreed. The two groups were closest to agreement concerning controlling skills; 87.5 percent of the chefs felt that they were good or very good at control and 60.8 percent of the managers agreed. The conclusions were obvious.

Taken together, these findings show the executive chef to be a troubled and troubling manager, consistently evaluating his performance in the crucial managerial functions of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling more favorably than his superiors.²⁵

Guyette's explanation of the findings were well founded. He felt that most chefs were European trained, where the European guild system of apprenticeship had instilled a "quirky and authoritarian role model"²⁶ of the master chef. When these people came over to America and were employed in hotels, their primary advancement had been through the ranks of culinarians, not managers. As the author notes, "this emphasis on technical skills to the exclusion of managerial skills in the promotion process creates a false perception among chefs concerning the skills required by their position."²⁷

The author notes an alienation of the chef within the organization and equates this alienation with the resultant lack of advancement of chefs within the organization. Indeed, 66 percent of the managers surveyed stated that their chefs did not possess the managerial skills expected of someone at that salary level.

The American Culinary Federation (an association of over 10,000 culinarians) has addressed the problem of insufficient managerial skills in its certification program. While still heavily emphasizing the technical aspects of the culinary arts, there is at least some requirement on the part of the apprentice chef to learn the basic management skills of control, organizing, and planning. The program is expected to take two or three years to complete,²⁸ after which the culinarian becomes a certified chef. Further study and credits earned from recognized culinary skill tests earn the individual a certificate as a "certified working chef." Other titles and certificates are conferred by the organization, and there are several other certificate programs within the profession, but clearly the trend is toward the adoption of the American Culinary Federation's certifica-

tion program as a national standard.

The certification program places great emphasis on technique; the 429-page student manual and workbook devotes fewer than 25 percent of its bulk to managerial skills. Most is devoted to the technical aspects of food preparation and handling. Even the 309-page instructor's guide devotes only 15 percent of its pages to such topics as the tools of management, maintenance of personnel records, cost analysis and budgeting, and menu planning.

It should be noted that standard college textbooks used in the teaching of the hospitality student are themselves very deficient on material concerning the management of the kitchen. *Professional Cooking* by Wayne Gisslen, published in 1983, offers no advice on how to manage a kitchen; only one of its 606 pages even mentions kitchen organization. The widely-used textbook *The Professional Chef*, prepared by the Culinary Institute of America, does mention the qualities of management required of a chef:

Today he [the chef] must be an organizer, a personnel man, and often also a buyer. He should have some knowledge of nutrition and diet and should employ this knowledge in planning menus and instructing his personnel in food preparation. He should have some background in kitchen layout and design—knowledge of equipment and of the various elements required to operate and maintain it. He must have a good basic foundation in mathematics and be able to calculate food and labor costs quickly and accurately.... It is vital that he have a good understanding of people and that he be able to get along well with them. He must have the ability to instill in his employees a desire to do their best, for his employees are often a reflection of himself; and the work that they perform is the structure of his reputation.²⁹

Courses of study at schools devoted to the culinary arts offer the apprentice cook an exposure to modern managerial theory. The Culinary Institute of America, perhaps the best known such school, offers the student several courses in management and control. While it too emphasizes technical skill training over academic achievement, at least the graduating chef has been exposed to management concepts. No study has been done to determine how the graduating chef's attitudes concerning management may be affected by exposure to the authoritarianism of the European-run kitchens within which he finds himself.

It is interesting to note that the primary administrative responsibility of the chef, as perceived by these textbooks and cooking institutions, is that of cost containment. Whether through judicious purchasing or by selective menu planning, the chef as an administrator has been given the duty of costing his operation and keeping those costs in line with his forecasts. Perhaps this is best emphasized in the entry under *Brigade de Cuisine* in the *Larousse Gastronomique*:

The art of managing the kitchen team of a big restaurant or hotel is a difficult one. A chef in charge of a kitchen must not only be a man who knows his job inside out, but he must also

have the qualities of an ideal administrator. Today, more than ever, the kitchen of a restaurant or hotel must be well organized; everything must be foreseen and carried out in such a way that the dishes, while being excellent in quality, cost only what they should cost and no more.³⁰

Yet what other department in a modern hotel is responsible for costing its operation? Does the front desk manager cost out the rooms? Is the housekeeper calculating the laundry cost for the organization? Personal experience as a hotel controller indicates that these functions are usually performed by the hotel accounting department. Could it be that an unfair burden is being placed upon the chef, or is this duty in response to the sanctity of the chef's domain? These philosophic questions await future study.

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