

Unlocking the Mystique of the Chef

The 2005 Annual HFM Conference (“Recipe for Success”) will feature a culinary competition and will promote culinary excellence. In keeping with this theme, and in response to the numerous inquiries HFM has received regarding the use of “chefs” in healthcare facilities, we are presenting a five-part series of articles to help our readers decide if they should hire a chef, as well as how to select and properly utilize these valuable professionals.

Part I – “Chef”- What’s in a Name

The titles “Chef” and “Executive Chef”, as used in the Healthcare Industry, are generic terms generally referring to the individual overseeing the production area of the foodservice operation. This person may or may not actually cook, and may or may not have responsibilities for non-food production areas, such as the café and patient/resident tray service.

In both healthcare and commercial settings, there are no specific standards that a person must meet to be able to use the titles “Chef” and “Executive Chef.” This is a good thing for the neighborhood barbeque king who wishes to play “Chef-for-a-Day,” but complicates our efforts to hire a qualified individual to lead our healthcare foodservice production teams to culinary excellence.

One would hope that an individual using the title “Chef” in a professional context would possess at least minimal culinary education, skills and experience. However, in reality, little can be inferred by the mere possession of the generic titles “Chef” and “Executive Chef.” Many times, a person just assumes one of these titles because of the duties performed or the job position held.

While the generic titles mentioned above aren't associated with a specific level of knowledge and skills, the American Culinary Federation (ACF) headquartered in St. Augustine, Florida does offer credentialing for the culinary profession, and has established criteria for several levels of certification* as follows:

- Certified Master Chef (CMC)
- Certified Master Pastry Chef (CMPC)
- Certified Executive Chef (CEC)
- Certified Executive Pastry Chef (CEPC)
- Certified Chef de Cuisine (CCC)
- Certified Culinary Administrator (CCA)
- Certified Cook (CC)
- Certified Pastry Cook (CPC)
- Certified Culinary Educator (CCE)

*More details on the criteria required to achieve and maintain the various certification levels are available from The American Culinary Federation, P. O. Box 3466, 10 San Bartolo Road, St Augustine, FL 32085 – 904-824-4468.

There are only 71 Certified Master Chefs (all levels/categories) and 2,281 Certified Executive Chefs (all levels/categories) currently credentialed and recognized by the American Culinary Federation. In many cities of fewer than 100,000 inhabitants there are no Certified Master Chefs and few, if any, Certified Executive Chefs.

Obviously, there are many individuals working as “Chefs,” who are not credentialed. In fact, many of the well-known “Celebrity Chefs” are not certified by the ACF, although they often have been awarded honorary status in recognition of their notoriety and contributions to the industry.

The lack of certification does not mean a chef is not qualified. Rather, it often simply means the individual has chosen to not participate in the credentialing process. In large part this is due to the fact that many employers, including some prestigious restaurants,

do not require certification even on the part of their “Head Chef” (yet another generic title of little professional meaning).

Although the landscape is changing (as it should), due to efforts of the ACF and other industry groups, there is little pressure at present from employers to motivate chefs to participate in the credentialing process. Chefs are most often judged by their track record, not by their certification status.

This situation creates a dilemma in the healthcare industry where we are generally accustomed to working with credentialed professionals who have successfully met minimum criteria for education, certification, registration, and licensure. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your feelings about such matters), there are no regulatory agencies requiring any level of certification/credentialing with regard to chefs in healthcare facilities, or in commercial establishments.

Given the above circumstances, a healthcare executive having made the decision to hire a chef must proceed with caution and with a “buyer beware” attitude. In the majority of circumstances, it is preferable to hire a chef who has achieved an ACF certification - the higher the level, the better. By doing so, you are better assured the person being hired meets specified criteria covering education, testing (written and hands-on), and experience as defined by the ACF.

However, if you limit the search to only those individuals who are certified by the ACF, you may be surprised and disappointed by the low number of available candidates. More importantly, you may be bypassing some very qualified chefs who have chosen to not pursue ACF certification.

In the event you consider hiring a non-certified chef, you should test the individual’s culinary knowledge and skills, in addition to carefully examining previous work experience and references.

In summary, anyone can assume the title of “Chef” or “Executive Chef,” but to rightfully use the “Certified” titles established by the American Culinary Federation (ACF), an individual must meet specified criteria and receive certification from the ACF.

A final word of caution - As with any profession, being “certified” only means that the person meets the criteria specified by the entity awarding the certification. It does not guarantee that the person will be a successful employee within your facility.

In subsequent articles in this series, we will further discuss hiring-related issues and explore other topics that will unlock the Mystique of the Chef. We will focus on answering the questions we most often are asked such as:

- Should I hire a chef? What are the benefits of having a chef on my Healthcare Team?
- How do I go about hiring a chef? How should the job posting be worded? What should I look for in the résumé? What questions should be asked in the interview? What are the salary expectations?
- How can I ensure the chef is an effective manager and leader? How can I determine if a former commercial restaurant chef really understands the healthcare environment is very different from the commercial world?

If you have any questions, or issues you would like to see addressed in this series of articles, please email them directly to HFM so that we can try to provide you with the information you desire.

About the Author: Don Miller (“Chef Don”) is a graduate of California State Polytechnic University and is a Registered Dietitian. He also is a Certified Executive Chef and is one of very few individuals holding this combination of credentials. Following a highly decorated career as a healthcare foodservice operator, Don has become a noted professional speaker and the owner of a successful consulting firm promoting culinary excellence in healthcare facilities.

