

Unlocking the Mystique of the Chef

Evaluating a Chef Candidate's Culinary Skills

Part 4 of 5

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This is Part 4 of a 5-part series called, "Unlocking the Mystique of the Chef". In the previous 3 articles, we answered just about every question you can imagine about chefs, such as:

- What is a chef and what do they do exactly in healthcare?
- How do you go about hiring the right chef for your department?
- How much should you pay a chef?
- How do you advertise for and recruit a qualified chef?

In Part 3, we listed a few interview questions to determine if a chef candidate really knows how to cook, and at the same time to also garner some insight into their personality, style and attitude. We mentioned that some chefs may not have been trained well, or may have worked in management so long they have forgotten the basics. We recommend that you make no presumptions about a candidate's skills just because they call themselves a chef or have attended a culinary class or school.

Part 4 of this series, "Evaluating a Chef Candidate's Culinary Skills" will provide you with the questions you could ask a candidate about his/her culinary skills and style and then we'll help you evaluate the candidate by dissecting the potential answers. This exercise can reveal a lot about a candidate (i.e., ego, personality, cognitive skills, ability to handle stress, etc.). We're testing for much more than just culinary skills. Remember, in Parts 1 through 3 of this series, we mentioned that it's tough to get the right person for this unique position. Therefore, as added insurance, it is necessary to go farther than you normally do in an interview process for most positions.

Question: Did you attend a culinary school? If so, when and where? When did you start and end?

Ask this question to "break the ice" even though it should be in their resume. Rephrase the question if you like.

Question: Was the culinary school a 1 year, 2 year or 4 year program? Did you attend full-time?

Verify attendance and graduation by calling the school after the interview if you are serious about the candidate.

Warning: In August of 2005, 60-minutes did a segment on how some national adult schools were simply methods for extracting money from students. Thousands of schools were involved.

One of their offerings was a culinary arts degree. Hence, all schools are not equal. See Part III for details.

Question: Did you enjoy the school? If so, what was your favorite part? Who was your favorite instructor and why?

Question: How did you get interested in food service?

In an ideal world, you might get lucky and find someone who is a “foodie”. That is, their life has always revolved around food. They would know about all or most of the celebrity chefs, watch the food channel, and experiment with recipes at home. Their vacations may even involve food and wine exploration. The opposite scenario is someone who just accidentally ended up in the food business and simply works so they can pay the bills. In short, to them it’s just a job.

Question: Who is your favorite celebrity chef?

If the candidate doesn’t have a favorite celebrity chef and isn’t familiar with any of them, they are probably not a “foodie”. Not a deal breaker, but also not a great sign either.

If they talk about a celebrity chef, their face should light up with excitement and admiration. If you hear a lot of criticism about more than one celebrity chef from the food channel, it’s a sign that this candidate may tend to always see the “glass as half empty”. You and your team need a chef with a winning attitude:

1. They see the good in everything.
2. They are more optimistic than pessimistic.
3. They are more positive than negative.

Question: Are you more of an optimist or a pessimist? Are you more positive or negative? Can you give any examples in your job and/or life? And how would your previous boss or employees answer this question about you?

Of course they may tell you what you want to hear, but you will know by the end of the interview.

Question: Can you tell me the name of the largest national association of chefs in the U.S.? Are you a member?

Answer: The American Culinary Federation (ACF).

If the candidate doesn’t know the answer, it is not a good sign. If the candidate is not a member, a good follow up question would be, “How do you keep your knowledge and skills up to date?”

If they are not a member of ACF, it could mean that being a chef is just a job to them, or that they are lazy about such things, or that they simply don’t like being part of a group. Or, it could mean that they have been too busy working in a hotel 120 hours per week to join and participate.

This does happen to chefs and it could prevent them from being involved in a professional association.

Put on your detective hat and in a non-intrusive, respectful way, try to find out why they are not a member of the ACF. You could say, “I’m just curious, why are you not a member of the ACF?” If you hear a lot of negativity, then maybe this candidate tends to look for the bad in everything. Keep in mind that there are a few talented chefs who have chosen not to participate in the American Culinary Federation.

Question: Are you certified with the American Culinary Federation? If so, at what level?

If they are not certified with the ACF it’s not the end of the world, but it is another piece to the bigger puzzle. Perhaps they think they are so terrific that they don’t need anyone to measure and validate their skill level. This could mean that they have a huge ego. Red flag. You want someone who is confident, but not arrogant. Remember, chefs can be arrogant and egotistical. This style won’t work in healthcare.

If they say, “*Yes, I am certified*”, and then ask you, “*What do you mean by ‘what level’?*”, we have a red flag. It is not possible to be certified by the ACF and not know the exact level of certification that one has achieved. Refer to Part 1 for various certification levels.

If the candidate is certified, ask them to provide verification of certification from the ACF or another certification body such as the Healthcare Culinary Academy. Remember, a graduation diploma from a school is not the same as certification. Graduation does not speak to competence and experience. However, some schools make sure that graduates depart the school with a beginning certification level such as certified cook.

Question: Have you ever been involved in the mass preparation of hundreds of servings of:

- Meatloaf
- Pot Roast of Beef
- Stroganoff
- Chicken Parmesan
- Spaghetti and Meat Sauce
- Lasagna
- Etc.

Again, you’re just testing “the waters”. If a chef has spent 20 years in a steak house restaurant, the adjustment to hospitals can be huge. In this case, your cooks may know more than the chef candidate about most of the foods you prepare, which can cause problems. Comfort foods are not a priority in most culinary schools. So, the answer to this question is important.

If the candidate says, “Yes”, then ask him/her when and where and maybe dig a little further.

Question: What is the difference between braising and roasting? (Note – I will spend a lot of time on pot roast and roast beef cooking because I have found that it is a perfect barometer of

culinary knowledge. In addition, I have found this area to be a major problem in healthcare.) We are aware that the questions will seem too basic, but we have found that they are not.

Answer: *Braising* – Braising is the combination of dry and moist heat cooking. Typically the meat is browned or roasted at high heat to develop color and taste. It is then slow cooked in a closed pan with liquid of some sort kept in the pan during the rest of the cooking process. This method is used for tough cuts of meat, like bottom round and chuck roast. The meat is cooked for hours until it is “fork tender”. Fork tender means that a knife is not required because the meat is so tender. In culinary schools, students are taught to sear meat before first. In hospitals, this step is often skipped and the final product is still good because most hospitals use a quality base to enhance the flavor of the gravy made from the defatted drippings. However, if the browning process is skipped then the cooking process would be called “stewing” instead of braising. I left out when to season the meat above because it is not an exact science. There is flexibility in timing, quantity and type of seasoning used.

Roasting – No water, no lid/cover. This method is used for prime rib, top/inside round or other tender cuts destined for “carve to order” in the café.

Not knowing the exact difference between roasting and braising combined with a few other clues can be a deal breaker. I would not hire a chef who doesn’t know the difference.

Be careful, don’t give the candidate the answer until they are totally finished providing their answer. Probe until you find out exactly what they know. Let them talk. Sometimes they’ll come up with something that’s so “off the wall” that it tells you that they don’t have a clue. While you’re doing this, you may begin to see signs of their personality. This is good. How do they handle themselves if they don’t know the answer? Are they “rattled”, nervous, defensive, or are they confident and calm? If or when (you’re choice) you share the correct answer, do they accept it or do they challenge it with an attitude? A defiant attitude is a deal breaker of course.

Question: According to culinary manuals, what is the highest temperature to set the oven when roasting a top/inside round? (Note for interviewer - Lower temperatures are even better.) We’re looking for the highest temperature allowed to produce a quality top/inside round only. Not prime rib or Chateaubriand.

Answer: Convection – 275^oF; Conventional – 325^oF. This can be verified in any authoritative culinary book. This is basic culinary 101.

This can get tricky. If they get the correct answer, that is a good sign. If they come within 25^o, we may let them slide. But, 50^o off is not a good sign at all. And 75^o or more off is a definite red flag. This is a deal breaker in my opinion. Every chef who knows how to cook should be able to get close to the correct answer. And FYI, many hospital cooks in the country set their convection ovens at 350^oF and cook everything at that temperature. Roasting a top round/inside round at 350^oF in a convection oven during the entire cooking process results in “hockey puck” roast beef. Not being aware of this fact is a bad sign.

Bonus – If the chef says he/she starts the roast at a high temperature for a short time and then turns it down to the temperature we are looking for or lower – Bingo! You have just discovered someone who knows how to cook. Starting high for (approximately) 15 minutes and then reducing a lower temperature has been taught at the CIA since its inception. But remember, this is bonus information. Not everyone will know or remember this technique.

Question: Situation – We have roasted a top/inside round and it's perfect. Can we slice it up and hold it for 30 minutes before we serve it to the patients and still have a quality product that will be acceptable to the patients?

Answer: No. This is not recommended. Top/inside round cannot be sliced and held unless you hold it covered for so long (hours) that it becomes like pot roast. Then you might as well call it pot roast of beef in the first place.

Question: If you were forced to serve sliced roast beef to patients using top/inside round for some reason, how would you do it so that the final product is tender enough for patients?

Answer: (This is correct, but not practical): Cut the roast to order right on the tray line. Most folks don't have time to do this of course, but technically, it would help make the product slightly better. But in reality, the final product would still be tough because the customer doesn't consume it immediately. However, if the chef has healthcare experience, he/she should know that it is not practical to carve meat on the tray line in 99% of healthcare situations.

If the chef says he/she would change the sliced roast beef to braised pot roast of beef, you're maybe talking to someone who has excellent culinary common sense and experience. This answer is a "green flag". Once braised, pot roast becomes fork tender, it is very difficult to ruin. The only thing that could happen if it is held too long, it could eventually fall apart so much that it becomes like beef for barbeque beef sandwiches. Even then, it would still be tender and patients could eat it. We can't say the same for mishandled top/inside round.

Question: According to the USDA, What internal temperature must pre-roasted beef be re-heated to? Most people will not know the answer.

Answer: According to the USDA, it must be re-heated to a minimum of the original internal cooked temperature. The 165°F standard for re-heated food does not apply to whole roast beef.

Question: What is ROUX? And what are the different types of Roux?

Answer: Roux is a mixture, equal by weight, of flour and fat that, after being cooked over low heat, is used to thicken soups and sauces. There are three classic types of roux: white, blonde, and brown and two Cajun roux's: mahogany and peanut butter, the names refer to their color not their ingredients! The color and flavor is determined by the length of time the mixture is cooked. White roux and blonde roux are made with butter. The former is cooked just until it begins to turn pale golden and the latter until beige. They are used to thicken cream and white sauces and light soups. The fuller-flavored brown roux can be made with butter, drippings or pork or beef fat. It's cooked to a deep golden brown and used for rich, dark soups and sauces. Cajun roux is

generally made with lard and develops a very unique flavor profile. Cajun roux's are used in gumbos, etouffee, and numerous other Cajun dishes.

To personalize the culinary questions, add a few more questions yourself such as:

- What happens to meatloaf when it is over mixed? (Gets tough)
- Define a few cooking terms, such as “julienne” (vegetables cut into thin strips), “dredge” (to coat in flour or crumbs), or “blanch” (to partially cook food by immersing in boiling water).
- What are Mother Sauces? (They are the basis of all sauces).
- What are the five Mother Sauces? (Bechamel, Veloute, Brown or Espagnole, Hollandaise and Tomato).

Remember, getting the exact correct answer is nice, but not critical. But they should be able to either get close or provide some intelligent response. If they don't have a clue, you will know.

Note: If the chef asks you, “*Where did the questions and answers come from?*” This is a fair question. Here is the answer. The questions and answers came from a Certified Executive Chef and Registered Dietitian with 38 years experience. He is the Dean/Owner of the mobile “Healthcare Culinary Academy”. His mentor and culinary coach was Chef Art Jones, CEC, ACC. Chef Art taught at the Culinary Institute of America for 30 years. At the CIA, Chef Art was referred to as “the LEGEND”.

Time to Cook

Now, the “*coup de gras*”. When you think you have the right candidate or two, it's time for the hands on test. Basically, you provide them with a basket of food with entrée vegetables and starch, and have them prepare a meal, plate it up and serve it to 4 key people. It is fair to watch the candidate work. After this test, you will know whether this candidate is right for you.

Potential Components for an Advertisement for Executive Chef

We suggest that you include as much text as you can afford in the chef advertisement. Once HR reads this entire series of articles, they will understand why you will need to include more text than normal.

EXECUTIVE CHEF

The Executive Chef reports to the Food Service Director and is one part of the food service management team. The chef manages the production of all food, follows standards, creates new standards as needed, controls quality, trains employees, and works within a tight budget.

Skills Required:

- Ability to function as one part of a management team.

- Ability to lead, inspire, and bring the best out of a team.
- Demonstrated computer knowledge and skill including ability to use spreadsheet applications and word processing programs. (To shorten this you could just say, “Strong computer skills”.)
- Strong customer service and communication skills.

Qualifications/Education (suggested only):

- Culinary Arts degree or BA/BS degree in related field.
- Certification at Sous Chef level or above preferred.
- 10 years of general food service experience.
- 3 years culinary management, Executive Chef or Sous Chef (under Chef) experience.
- Current Serv-Safe or other food safety or HACCP certification upon 90 days of hire.
- Knowledge of modified diets or healthcare experience is a plus.

Salary Range:

As discussed in the previous articles, this is tricky. HR often has little or no experience classifying a chef’s position for salary. And when HR calls other facilities, they may be unaware that the term “Chef” or “Executive Chef” is not used in a consistent manner. This may cause mistakes to be made in determining an appropriate salary range for the position. We recommend that you get help on this subject and submit helpful information to HR to assist them in classifying the position correctly. For starters, present HR with this entire series of articles. Once they review the articles, they will understand that classifying the chef’s position is tricky and therefore will be a team effort with the FSD involved. Also, keep in mind that as an HFM member, you are entitled to 1 hour of free coaching per year from the author of this series of articles available at chefdon@cox.net.

Critical – Once you arrive at the correct pay scale, we feel that it is very important to include the salary range in the advertisement. Even if this practice is not standard operating procedure with HR, we recommend that it be done for the chef’s position. Why? Because it will save the hospital and you a lot of time. Otherwise, every chef earning from \$20K to \$125K per year will apply. Divulging salary range up front will help you get the right person for the job.

Another tip – Emphasize your benefit package as it will usually be better than hotels and restaurants. Working 40 or 50 hours per week instead of 80 to 100 can be a huge draw.

Caveat – If your chef’s position is already classified for salary range; this is a good time to reclassify the position. Why? Because due to the uniqueness of the position, some chef’s positions in healthcare are classified too low to be competitive. The last thing you need is continued turnover in this position because the position is classified too low. Turnover in the chef’s position is worse than turnover in many other positions for various reasons.

Closing Remarks

In Part 5 of this series, we will cover standards of performance for an Executive Chef in healthcare. A great chef needs to be a “catalyst” for success just like the rest of the management team. Learn exactly what a Catalytic Leader is in Part 5 of this series.

Because you will not find this information in any book, we recommend that you store these articles so you have them when you need the information.