

HOW-TO

Turning kitchen workers into 'owners'

Don Miller, executive chef and foodservice director at Ocean-side, CA-based Tri-City Medical Center says the key to the high-level of pride his staff has in its work today stems directly from what he calls "ownership."

"If you make your hourly workers feel they own what they're doing, they'll go about their work much differently," he feels.

Take a walk through Miller's cramped kitchen and you'll find work stations festooned with jumbo-sized color photographs of various dishes or decorations that show the worker at-a-glance "how it should look."

Another purpose behind these "work station" galleries of "perfect plates" is to develop the kind of consistency and quality that their customers expect, Miller says.

"Everyone in the kitchen owns what he or she does because we have empowered them to take ownership for what they do—for their work area and the food they prepare and serve. When you can get people to take ownership, you get at least twice the results you expect."

Grillman James Moore has cooked for Miller for almost three years. The grill area in the cafeteria is his grill, Miller says.

Kiss of the spider burger: Today, Moore creates many of his own special sandwiches as daily specials in the grill. Example: On his spider burger (a special bacon cheeseburger), Moore criss-crosses three 3-1/2-in. strips of bacon so they form six legs. He serves the burger open face and, at the bacon's cross-point, Moore places a dollop of guacamole to form the spider's body. It's great at Halloween, he says.

Tri-City's baker, Dolores Coleman, has created an entire collection of signature muffins like peach, strawberry, pistachio, pink colada, and even peanut butter and jelly.

The garde-manger, who produces all the cold food and garnishing for catering at the hospital, Sandy Sheppard, also has her own catering business on-the-side. She's developed many cold "signature" plates for Miller. Sheppard says: "Sometimes when we're busy, we get extra help in here. I watch them work and I feel like I'm almost embarrassed to send some of the food out. . . I don't want it to go out when it isn't right."

As Miller sees it: "Sometimes directors don't want anybody else to get famous or good because it makes them feel threatened. I say give people an opportunity to succeed. I want them to become as famous inside or outside these walls as they can. All these production people now have skills that they've developed on their own. And they can sell them anywhere, but we think they'll flourish best here."

How to develop "ownership:"

- Miller starts with books, magazines and videotapes that show his staff "how it's done right." Training materials should be foodservice-related, and backed by motivational and "success" books and tapes, Miller adds.

- Even though kitchen space is limited, each production worker has a work station decorated with large, color photos of functions performed at their station. If it's catering, upscale platters and arrangements are pictured. In the patient area, photos show the "standard" that's expected in patient tray service.

- Miller gives his crew leeway to create their own products. He feeds them food costs, portion control and general culinary guidelines. "Then they're free to add lib from there."

A matter of pride: Everyone in the kitchen "owns" something, Miller points out. For Stony Yates, sous chef, it's signature soups. Marilyn Murray, assistant sous chef, creates signature entrées for catering.



The hospital stages specialty-dish demos to show off new plates, presentation ideas.



Photo galleries at work-stations show cooks how each dish should look when it's served.