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YUM! Careers in Food

By Laura Daily

• Are you a food fanatic? Sink your teeth into these jobs.

Talk about job security. As long as people need to eat, there will always be plenty of careers in the food business.

In the United States, some 878,000 restaurants serve more than 70 billion meals every year and employ 12 million people, making food service the nation’s largest private-sector employer. The number of food service managers is projected to increase 15 percent over the next decade.

In fact, the entire food industry should see continued growth well into 2014, says Meredith Brassil, a food career specialist with Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I., a career-focused university that includes a college of culinary arts. “The good news is, there are lots of opportunities in the culinary world. And cooking food isn’t the only option,” says Brassil. “As long as you have a passion for food, you can succeed.”

Brassil advises anyone considering a culinary career to remember that food is much more than broiling, basting, or sautéing. It’s big business. That means biology, chemistry, and accounting courses are as important as How to Boil Water 101. Career World met five people who have whipped up successful careers in food.

Executive Chef, Matthew Zappoli

“Always cook as if you are cooking for yourself. That’s the best advice,” Matthew Zappoli says. Zappoli got his first job at age 13 at a neighborhood pizzeria and worked his way into the kitchen of several Italian restaurants.

(See picture, “Zappoli, Matthew, Executive Chef.”)

“After high school, I decided culinary school was the best course, so I enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America,” he says. After apprenticing under some of the best chefs in the United States, two years ago he became the executive chef at Fresh Seafood Restaurant in La Jolla, Calif., where he not only runs the kitchen, develops menus, and buys ingredients but also oversees a staff of 40. Not bad for a 26-year-old.

Zappoli tells aspiring chefs that it’s not easy. “People see Emeril Lagasse and think, ‘That’s what I want to do.’ But it’s not that easy.” Being a chef means hard work, long hours, and low pay at the entry level.

Where to start? Zappoli advises aspiring chefs to get restaurant experience, even if it’s in a pizzeria or a deli. “Any kitchen is OK as long as you are serious about the work,” he says. Though he’s come far fast, he points to culinary school as the key. “You can go much further in a shorter period of time. Six years after culinary school, I’m an executive chef. Without it, I would still be on the cooking line, taking orders instead of giving them.”

Food Editor, Elisa Bosley

Elisa Bosley spent hours making a Thanksgiving gravy from scratch. Then, with 30 seconds to go...it scorched. Argghh! Toss one ruined gravy. “I lost track of it amid all the other preparations,” admits the 43-year-old senior food editor of Delicious Living magazine. Lesson learned? Even good chefs can make mistakes. “So I added a note to the recipe saying, ‘Watch carefully to avoid burning.’”

(See picture, “Bosley, Eliza: Food Editor.”)

In college, Bosley assumed there were no careers that combined food and words. She had never heard of being a food editor or writer until she took a job as an administrative assistant at Delicious Living. Today, Bosley supervises food-related stories for the natural-lifestyle magazine published in Boulder, Colo. That means testing every recipe before publication, no matter how easy it looks—even a seaweed salad recipe that Bosley reveals “was awful, like eating it right out of the ocean.”

Still, for every scorched sauce or sickening salad, there are gazillions of fun food samples that land on her desk—a box of baking chocolate, bags of walnuts, frozen blueberries. In addition, Bosley travels the country, meeting chefs and checking out restaurants and culinary trends. Her secret to success is simply that there’s nothing she won’t eat. “I like it all,” she says, laughing. What about that seaweed salad?

Chocolatier, Marilyn Lysohir

In 1997, Marilyn Lysohir took a chance. Providing her own recipe, she ordered 40 pounds of truffles from a local chocolate manufacturer. Success! Within a year, she was ordering 2,000 pounds at a time. Now Cowgirl Chocolates sells 6,000 pounds of its spicy candy bars and truffles every year from its base in Moscow, Idaho.

(See picture, “Lysohir, Marilyn: Chocolatier.”)

Lysohir didn’t set out to be a chocolatier, though her first job happened to be boxing candy at a chocolate factory. She studied art and became a sculptor. Her favorite medium? Chocolate. “I used to make huge sculptures, like an 8-foot-tall rabbit, for the chocolate factory,” she recalls.

(See picture, “Chocolates.”)
Her idea of adding cayenne pepper to dark chocolate seemed a bit nuts until a national television show profiled her company and the orders started pouring in. As president and "head cowgirl" for Cowgirl Chocolates, Lysohir develops new flavors (such as tequila-lime and espresso), handles ordering, pays bills, and supervises packing and shipping.

Her best advice to food entrepreneurs: Be curious, be dependable, be confident, and be brave. Lysohir says, "Everyone thought spicy chocolate was a terrible idea. Now my customers won't even buy the plain stuff."

Food Scientist, Christine Chu


(See picture, "Chu, Christine: Food Scientist")

Food scientists study the physical, microbiological, and chemical makeup of food. Because food scientists have special skills, they are in demand and command high salaries. Some scientists develop ways to process, package, or store food. Others specialize in food safety and nutrition. Still others, like Chu, work with panels of professional tasters to develop new foods or improve existing ones.

If someone wants to change the formula for Hawaiian Punch or add a new ingredient to Mott's apple sauce, for example, Chu and her team make sure the quality of the final product stays the same. "It's interesting to be part of the development of a new product and then see it on the shelf," says Chu.

You don't have to be a good cook to be a food scientist, though a strong stomach helps. As part of a college class in meat processing, Chu had to slaughter and butcher cows, sheep, and pigs. Though she thought it was gross then, Chu laughs about it now. "I figured if I could do that, I could do anything."

Restaurateur, Austin Haley

Restaurant owner/chef Austin Haley says he has one foot in today and one foot in next week. If he had a third foot, it would be in next year. "You always have to be looking ahead, reinventing your product," says Haley, 40, the owner of Barrister's Board Room, a private dining club, and of the Say Cheese! gourmet cheese cafe, both in Tupelo, Miss.

(See picture, "Haley, Austin, Restaurateur")

Being a restaurateur wasn't Haley's original plan. He started out wanting to become an actor. But after having a string of restaurant jobs—dishwasher, bartender, waiter, cook, manager—he realized that the food business was second nature. And he knew that with his unique ideas—such as a private gourmet restaurant or a place that dishes up every imaginable type of cheese sandwich as its main course—he could profit even in a tough market, where more restaurants fail than thrive. Granted, there's been a huge learning curve. "I came into this walking backward. It took me twice as long to achieve success because I didn't take classes in marketing or business management," Haley admits.

(See picture, "Cheeses")

Haley makes up for any business shortcomings by hiring a winning staff, delegating responsibility, and working side-by-side with employees. "You have to pull in people who are reliable," he says. "You can train someone to make a milkshake, but you can't train [the person] to have a good attitude." And even with 12-hour workdays, the bottom line is that he's the boss, with total creative control. "I'd rather be an owner making $40,000 than a manager making $80,000," he says. "With ownership comes pride."

Cool Jobs in Food

No matter what your interest, there's a tasty career option for you! Check out these choices.

(See picture, "Teen Food Service Worker")

**Baker/pastry chef:** Plan, design, prepare, and sell breads, pies, cakes, cookies, candies, and pastries.

**Caterer:** Plan and prepare menus for events, such as weddings and parties. Over 70 percent of caterers work for themselves.

**Food service manager:** Oversee food and beverage operations in restaurants, hotels, or cafeterias; develop menus, work with suppliers, and manage staff.

**Food stylist:** Prepare food for television, film, and print photography. Stylists use all sorts of tricks and procedures to make food look perfect for photography, such as using dental tools to move tiny peas. Stylists also rely on an artistic eye to combine colors and make attractive arrangements of food.

Citations

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