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{ Roasted Seckel Pear
Salad with Blue Cheese
page 41



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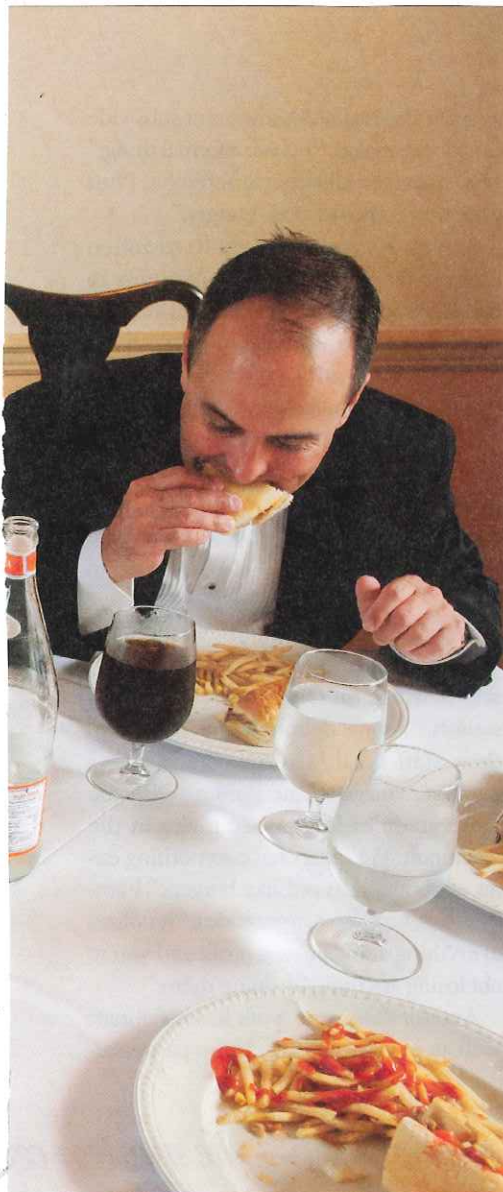
**Five Fresh-Looking Kitchens
Kids and Dessert: How Much is Enough?
What Restaurant Employees Eat for Dinner**



All in the family

'Family meal' is a long-standing ritual in the restaurant industry—a time when kitchen and waitstaff sit down together for a simple meal before the rush of dinner service begins. Writer Tracey Middlekauff takes a cook's tour to see how it plays out in dining establishments all over town.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY VINCE LUPO



This staff meal at Aldo's features a duo of items never to be found on the menu of the Little Italy fine dining establishment: cheesesteaks and french fries.

"Would you care for something to drink? Water perhaps?"

In a flash, as quiet as whisper, the Aldo's server is pouring me a glass of Acqua Panna while I eagerly tuck into my Parmesan-dusted homemade minestrone. But I am not here as a regular diner. It's just 4:30 on a Wednesday afternoon, and I have come to this Little Italy stalwart to take part in the staff meal— or, as it's often referred to in the industry, the family meal.

All over the city, in fact, restaurant staffers take part in this ritual, usually an hour or so before the doors open to the public. It can take many forms, from a half-price employee dinner, to a buffet of repurposed leftovers, to a grab-and-go meal whipped up by the kitchen. Less frequently it's a relaxed, sit-down affair. But whatever form it takes, the meal serves an important purpose: to boost morale and set the tone for service.

Zack Barbour, the server who poured my water, is now sitting and eating with me along with another server, Elan Kotz, and the owner, chef Aldo Vitale himself. There is an easy feeling of companionship at the table, and Barbour and Kotz clearly enjoy this respite before the busy evening ahead. "When we're eating together, we're not really at work," says Kotz. "We're just hanging out."

Regular patrons won't find the minestrone— made with freshly picked vegetables from Vitale's own garden— on the menu, nor, to be sure, our next course, *carne asada* with refried beans and some of the best fresh guacamole I've ever had. Mexican dishes like this are fixtures at the Aldo's staff meal, thanks to the influence of Puebla-born head chef Chris Angel.

"This is *really* good," Barbour comments. "Oh yeah, it's fine dining!" adds Kotz.

It is rare, though, that the entire staff can find time to

sit down together to a family meal. "In the old days, that used to be more of a thing," Vitale says. "Now, [the family meal] is a little more on the run." Hurried or not, the meal's effect is clear: "It makes you feel appreciated," Kotz says.

But family meals aren't *all* about altruism: There are some very practical reasons to have a happy, well-fed staff. Workers who are happily fed tend to get more done and be more pleasant to customers than those who are starving. And knowing that the owners and management care enough to feed them can set a positive tone among the staff, a vibe that undoubtedly trickles down to patrons.

Bettina Clair-Perry, pastry chef at Blue Hill Tavern, says, "We are very lucky, the bosses here are very generous. A lot of times our family meals are a bit heartier than our menu food. We cook lots of pastas, stews and one-pot meals," she says. "Every now and then I make a pizza dough ... And more often than not we make lots of hot sauces, and we sneak bacon fat in wherever possible. You know—only the good stuff! We eat like chefs."

But this largesse is not something she takes for granted. "Most places I've worked offer a free shift or family meal, but I have

heard that is not always the case. I have heard secondhand stories of having to pay for soda, having to pay if you want to eat the shift meal, and one place where they just took money out of your check whether you ate or not."

At B&O American Brasserie, the servers usually eat together, but the kitchen staff rarely has time to take a break and sit. "That only happens at mandatory quarterly meetings," says general manager Marcus Garner. "We turn that into a potluck."

TONY FOREMAN, OF THE FOREMAN WOLF restaurant empire, says the routine is similar at his restaurants mainly due to a difference in the rhythm between the front and the back of the house. "Servers come in, they hustle to get set up, and then they sit and eat to re-set," he says. "But the kitchen never stops. We have to force them if we want them to sit!" But there is one thing the entire staff at Cinghiale has in common: a love of Kobe beef hot dogs. "That is everyone's favorite staff meal," Foreman says.

The point of a staff meal can also be to educate employees, as at Jack's Bistro, where chef/owner Ted Stelzenmuller puts out the night's specials before service—dishes such

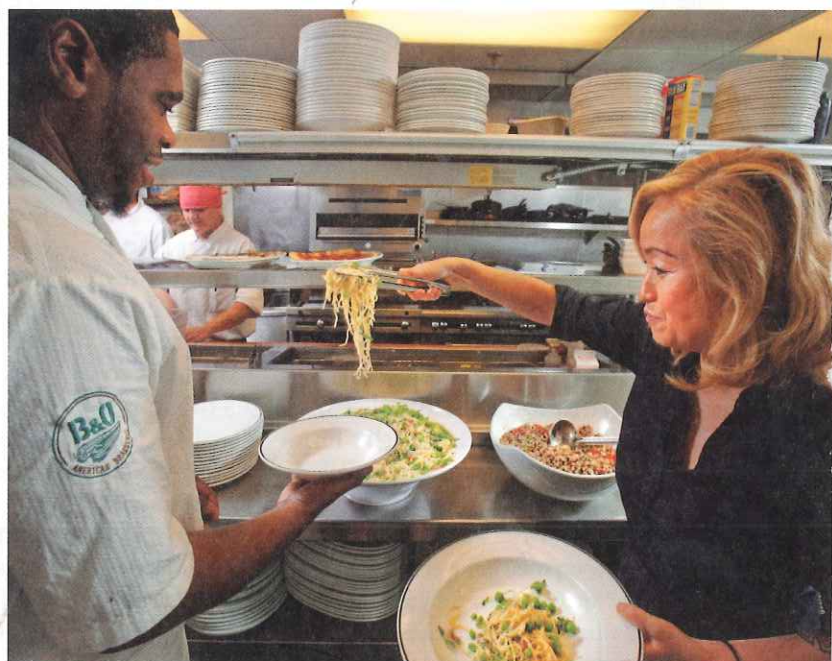
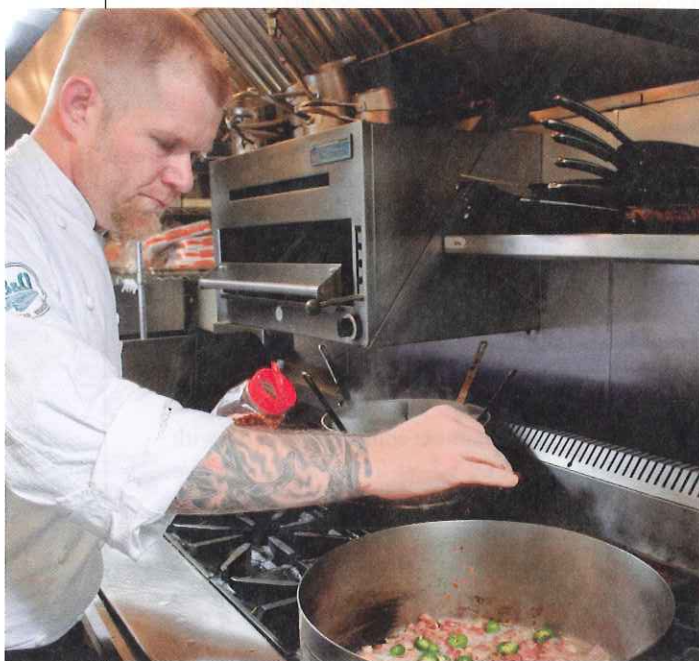
as spicy cheese curd hummus or sous vide duck breast salad. "It's not a formal thing," says manager Christie Smertycha, "but everyone comes to work hungry."

At Vino Rosina, chef Sajin Renae often uses the family meal as an opportunity to try out new ideas on the staff. "If I'm playing around with a new recipe—for instance, quinoa with royal trumpet mushrooms, thyme, confit shallots and spinach—I'll make a test batch and serve that with their meal to get feedback," she says. "I don't care what chef you are, if your staff is not enthused or educated on the food you make for them to sell, then how are they going to sell it?"

Staff meals also can be an economical way for restaurants to use up leftovers and scraps, which isn't necessarily as bad as it sounds. "People definitely look forward to their staff meal [at Café Troia]," says kitchen manager Dane Wilfong. "It's the same grade of food as we make in the restaurant. We either have something extra, or it's just a day old, like burgers." Family meals, he says, are a great idea. "It utilizes everything, it maximizes profit and you're not losing anything by doing them."

And for those who work in a restaurant with an in-house pastry chef—particular-

"We have a Peruvian prep cook who makes amazing chicken soup—he made a ceo"



ly, according to Foreman, a female pastry chef—leftover scraps are sweet, welcome and plentiful. Case in point: Blue Hill Tavern's Clair-Perry. "I offer up things like day-old cookies, cake tops and bread pudding scraps, and from time to time a new experiment when I am changing my menu," she says. "Last week the staff got to try the yuzu curd tarts I am working on for the fall menu."

But given how pressed for time most cooks are, it's no surprise that being tasked with coming up with a staff meal day after day can be looked upon as something of an inconvenience at best, and a punishment at worst. "It's hard sometimes when you're really busy," admits Joel Price, the kitchen manager at the Brewer's Art. "But you've got to get it done, and knock it out in an hour and a half."

Regular staff meals at Brewer's Art include red beans and rice, lasagna and the always-popular flatbread pizzas. "We have a Peruvian prep cook, David, who makes amazing chicken soup," Price says. In fact, he once made a ceviche that was such a hit it made it onto the regular menu. "That doesn't usually happen," says Price. "That was an exception."

It may be hard to fathom, but not every-

one appreciates a free meal. At Bluegrass Tavern, employee grousing led to the end of a good thing. Explains executive chef Ray Kumm, "We tried [to serve family meals], but I quickly grew tired of complaints, cooking something different for our non-meat eating staff members, and certain staff members always taking more than their fair share. ... In my experience, someone on the waitstaff always had something negative to say about the *free* food that was made available to them." Kumm's solution? "We just allow all staff 50 percent off of menu items during their shift."

SOME ENTERPRISING COOKS CHOOSE TO approach the staff meal as a challenge to their creativity. Josean Rosado, the executive chef at the InterContinental Harbor Court Hotel, recalls that in his early days as a prep cook, his job was to prepare the staff meal. "This was the way the executive chef would test me ... to see how creative and experienced I was in cooking food," says Rosado. "I can tell you that the first day that I walked in and they gave me 20 pounds of ground beef and told me to make the staff meal, I got nervous." After a few weeks, Rosado says, he got the hang of it. "One of the most memorable staff meals that I made

was a taco lasagna," he says.

At some area restaurants, your gourmet dinner may very well have enjoyed a previous incarnation as a staff meal. At B&O, the staff meal is used as a way to give line-level chefs the opportunity to flex their culinary muscles and have one of their dishes make it onto the menu. Each week, the most popular staff meal is chosen to become a "Sunday Supper" dish. Recent selections have included a crispy skinned rockfish with foie gras fried rice and mixed Asian vegetables. Popular staff meals regularly make it onto the menu at Dogwood as well, including braised calamari with tomatoes and garlic and a hearty lamb stew.

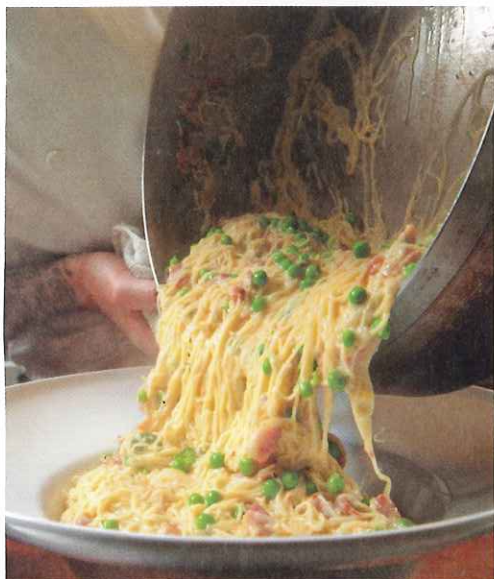
At the Prime Rib, late-arriving diners might just find that to eat like a staffer is their only option. "We've had diners come in long after the kitchen has closed and all that's left is the employee meal," says general manager David Derewicz. "Next thing you know, they're ordering it for a dinner party!"

The staff meal can also be a chance for employees to come together and enjoy a more "authentic" version of a cuisine than what is offered on the menu. At Joey Chiu's, where the staff eats together for both lunch and dinner, a typical meal may be sautéed spare ribs, tofu with Napa cabbage and sea cucumbers, or beef with bitter melon. But, according to manager Andy Chiu, "Twice a month we have spaghetti and meatballs!"

At Matsuri, the entire staff regularly comes together to eat, but the meals aren't necessarily off-the-menu Japanese cuisine. "We have kitchen staff from all over, so it could be Chinese, Thai or Indian depending on who is cooking," says host Aaron Reinhart. "The meals almost never repeat over the course of a month."

The family meal—both how it is prepared and how graciously it is received—may reveal as much about character as it does about cuisine. As the great American chef Thomas Keller wrote in his *French Laundry Cookbook*, "Staff meal. Only the staff sees it. If you can make great food for these people, create that habit, have that drive, that sincerity and keep that with you and take it to another level in the staff meal, then someday you'll be a great chef. Maybe." □

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Left to right: B&O American Brasserie chef Thomas Dunklin at work preparing a staff meal that includes a creamy pasta dish served up to cooks and waitstaff, who enjoy it in the dining room before the first guests show up.