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# RECRUIT

## What it takes to attract the best and be a better employer today

**By Jody Shee**

**H**iring solid young chefs is like speed dating. Hopefully you don't have to go through too many to find your perfect match. As it is, two-thirds of operators report not having enough short-order cooks, and 32% say the culinary skill in their kitchen is lower than it was two years ago, according to Datassential's "One Table: The State of the Operator & the Road Ahead" 2022 report.

During the pandemic, experienced workers used the downtime to reevaluate their priorities, and many changed careers, says Alice Cheng, founder and CEO of Culinary Agents Inc., a culinary career website that helps connect the hospitality industry with adept culinary workers nationwide.

As a result of staffing shortages, both skilled talent and those in training have many employment choices. It's time to revisit and repackage your value proposition in order to attract top talent.

### **Sell Your Employer Brand**

"We see cooks of all ages wanting to know up front what you offer — and not just compensation," Cheng says. "Increase the level of transparency in the recruiting process. Explain out of the gate your benefits, available training and career advancement opportunities."

"Think about those things and package your employer brand and value proposition, then put it out there," Cheng



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Alice Cheng, founder and CEO of Culinary Agents Inc.

adds. “You are selling yourself. Make it clear, uncomplicated and genuine.”

Nowadays, there’s more back-and-forth about the growth path with potential employees before hiring them, says **Chef Jeremy Soares**, chef tournant for The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes, Orlando, Florida. Previously, promotion to the next level was assumed after working hard to get there, and that path was not set in stone. Now, he articulates up front what potential staffers will do for the first six months and where they will progress from there.

Casino Arizona in Scottsdale offers an apprenticeship program in concert with college culinary programs and the nonprofit Careers through Culinary Arts Program (C-CAP), which reaches into high school culinary arts programs. The apprenticeship program pulls in aspiring chefs, which helps **ACF member and Executive Chef Andrew Helmandollar**

to fill and replenish his crew of 230 spanning nine food venues.

He is keenly aware that young culinarians have other appealing work options, including gig websites allowing them to work when they want. To answer that, Casino Arizona gives workers something more valuable. “They will get training, certification and have no debt through this program,” Chef Helmandollar says.

The Breakers Palm Beach luxury resort in Florida, sells itself through advertising, periodic on-premises job fairs, culinary school externships, and perhaps most effectively, employee referrals, says **ACF member and Executive Chef Jeff Simms, HAAC.**

When applying for a job, the younger generation frequently asks what The Breakers does for the community, Chef Simms says. A community-minded, giving-back ethos is actually one of the company’s selling points. New hires

spend a half day of their orientation volunteering in the community. This may be at a food bank, animal shelter or Habitat for Humanity, for example. Additionally, each employee gets 16 hours of paid time off per year to volunteer. Sometimes, entire departments participate in a community initiative.

## Convey Your Culture

Your company culture is far less tangible than the fringe benefits you offer, but culture contributes to job satisfaction and retention. “Find ways to creatively and directly give a glimpse into your company culture,” Cheng advises. “What does your website look like? Do you have a social media presence? What are others saying about you? Young cooks look online and on apps to get inspired and motivated.”

Part of culture is the way in which you validate your employees. “They want to feel they are contributing and that they mean something. Everyone wants to feel they are important,” Chef Helmandollar says. Thus, he emphasizes that there are no small jobs in the kitchen. “Every job has a purpose.”

Knowing the culture ahead of time is so important to 19-year-old student **Alxs Norman Galit** that he likes to stage for a day or two before applying to a job in order to get a feel for the environment. He is working on his associate degree in culinary arts at Scottsdale Community College in Arizona. “I love cooking, but I want to make sure it feels like a right fit for me and that I’m in the right spot and being taken care of,” he says.

A culture focus works both ways at The Breakers. The company website describes its team as being full of “driven, compassionate people devoted to giving back.” To achieve that, the company’s No. 1 hiring criteria is a good cultural fit. In fact, Chef Simms chooses

## ACF Career Center

When was the last time you visited the ACF Career Center? As a job seeker, you can search through available job listings, as well as create a visible profile, post your resume and set preferences to receive alerts when there’s a potential match. The ACF Career Center also offers a list of career coaches to contact, as well as resources and consultants for building a new resume or updating an existing one, improving your LinkedIn profile for enhanced search engine optimization (SEO) and much more. As an employer, consider listing your available jobs to attract top talent through ACF; current data shows there are about 9,500 average page views for employers each month. Active ACF members earn discounts for posting jobs. Visit [jobs.acfchefs.org](http://jobs.acfchefs.org) to get started.



ACF Executive Chef Andrew Helmandollar with apprentices Silvia Urais and Carlos Lagardo at Scottsdale’s Casino Arizona, which offers an apprenticeship program on concert with C-CAP for high school students.



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**We hire great people and find a place to put them** instead of hiring for positions."

Chef Jeff Simms, HAAC

cultural fit over culinary experience. "We know how to cook. If applicants have a great attitude, we can teach them how to cook," he says. "We hire great people and find a place to put them instead of hiring for positions."

## Focus on Training and Mentoring

Anyone aspiring to be a chef wants to work with and for people from whom they can learn, Cheng says. "Put some structure around training and show your new hires that you want to invest in their growth within your company, and you want to support them. Showing them that they will be set up for success is always well received."

Through the C-CAP program, Casino Arizona is currently training 12 high school students via an apprenticeship program that allows them to work positions in each of the casino's nine food venues. "They are learning skills, and they love it," Chef Helmandollar says.

Additionally, he participates in six different culinary education boards from the high school level through college. This puts him in touch with the best rising culinary talent. With the 24/7 casino operation, he's able to work with the students' school schedules.

Chef Soares with the Ritz-Carlton Orlando also prepares local high school and college students for culinary work in the hospitality industry. "This past year we held a culinary competition for local county high schools," he says. "We gave them the ballroom and a one-plate challenge. We were the judges and mentors. These were 14- to 17-year-olds not ready for the work world, but we were sewing seeds to excite them about cooking and for our company."

At The Breakers, Chef Simms cross-trains his team members among three areas (garde manger, banquet kitchen



The 2022 ACF Student Team of the Year, the Culinary Institute of New York at Monroe College

## Lessons Learned from the 2022 ACF Student Team of the Year Award Winners

**ACF Chef Frank Costantino, CEC, CCE, CCA, CEPC, AAC,** knows the recipe for creating a successful student culinary team. “Of course, you have to have skilled students;

that goes without saying,” he says. “But even more important is attitude and how coachable the students are. A lot of it is chemistry within the group members.”

Chef Costantino, dean of the Culinary Institute of New York at Monroe College, certainly put together a winning team at his school: The team took home the ACF’s 2022 Student Team of the Year Award at the National Convention in July last year in Las Vegas.

Since there were no regional qualifiers for the national competition last year, Chef Costantino knew he had to mold his team through practice and individual competitions to be prepared to compete for the first time together at convention.

“We began qualifying competitions for the team in December and started training camp in April for the national event,” he says. “I always liked our chances of winning the [ACF] national competition. The key was for them to work together and to stay focused. They were able to do that and to focus on the drama of accomplishment rather than the drama of day-to-day challenges.”

Student Chef Kennedy Graves, the team’s student leader and captain, says it’s “impossible to sum up the experience in just one word. It was fun, it was harrowing, it was challenging. Of course, I was trying to keep everyone together and focused.”

“Speaking for the team, this was definitely an accomplishment,” she adds. “When I began here as a freshman almost two years ago, I couldn’t even imagine this. It’s just such a great feeling.”

Chef Costantino says the honor is something the team’s members can laud when they begin pursuing positions in the profession. “It’s a great calling card,” he says. “This experience really accelerated their learning. It’s a big boost for their careers.”

It’s a major boon for the college and its culinary program, too, he adds.

“This is a validation of the type of program we run here at Monroe,” Chef Costantino says. “This will certainly help in the recruitment of future students.”

and pastry operation) so that all can fill in where needed. Additionally, after six months of employment, team members can apply for another position within the company, which includes cross-training or job shadowing, he says. This freedom of movement within the company may be one reason the company has an 80% average retention rate, according to internal data.

## Improve the Hiring Experience

Tighten up your entire hiring process from the job post to how quickly you respond to potential candidates, Cheng says. “Every interaction counts and leaves an impression.” For large operations, this requires concerted coordination with the human resources department so that everyone understands and agrees on procedures and timeframes.



“Creativity will come along. Nowadays, they look for the glamorous parts now, **but it takes experience and time to get to that point.**”

Chef Jeremy Soares, chef tournant for The Ritz-Carlton Orlando, Grande Lakes, Orlando, Florida

Quick and professional responses are just as important for busy smaller chef/owner operations. “Remember, you and the candidate are both trying to find a fit. You have the upper hand. Put your best foot forward,” Cheng says.

When hiring, Chef Soares is now more focused on making better use of the interview set-up phone call. Rather than spend a few minutes on the phone finding out candidates’ availability to meet, he spends more time asking them to tell him about themselves. Besides gathering information more informally, he’s able to gauge their conversation comfort level. “If they aren’t as vocal, maybe I will set up our in-person meeting in the lobby, so they feel more comfortable and less targeted,” he says. “We’ve all seen people who are not good in interviews but are great employees.”

Hiring technique aside, Chef Soares is clear on one point. “We are losing a lot in culinary technique ability,” he says. “I emphasize they must hone their craft. Creativity will come along. Nowadays, they look for the glamorous parts now, but it takes experience and time to get to that point.”

## What These 3 Up-and-Coming Chefs Want Hiring Chefs to Know

You're a trained, experienced culinarian charged with hiring tomorrow's professional chefs. Their idealism is not only commendable, it's instructional. Check out the mindset of a few emerging chef hopefuls, including what they wish you knew about their generation.

When **ACF Young Chefs Club President Isaiah Gerrard**, 20, graduates from the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in Napa Valley, California, he dreams of a positive work environment in several ways. He desires a hiring chef who will give him advice and discuss what he wants to do in the future. It would also make him feel more valuable if he was asked for ideas for specials or given the opportunity to provide input on the chef's ideas, he says.



Gerrard also thinks kitchen staff family meals are important — even if it's just 20 minutes. He says this fosters camaraderie and a better kitchen environment.

"Be patient with us," are Gerrard's words of advice to those hiring. "Leave room for mistakes, and understand they most likely will happen. Guide and mentor from there." To lessen the mistakes, he suggests plenty of one-on-one time with the chef guiding the new employee in a task. Gerrard recalls how one chef timed him on a task, urging him to complete it in a specific timeframe. "That motivated me to push myself further," he says.

The biggest pitfall to avoid when working with new young employees is "putting too much on their plate all at once. There are a lot of responsibilities in the kitchen. Incorporate more responsibility once you see their potential in everything," Gerrard says. Burnout for new hires happens when they are thrown too many things to remember all at once. "Leave room for growth."

In culinary school at Scottsdale Community College, Scottsdale, Arizona, **Alxs Norman Galit**, 19,



hears his classmates talk about the industry and what they would change if they were the ones doing the hiring. "Most of them say that our generation is looking for meaning, learning, growing, developing new skills and finding community," he says. "We are the future industry leaders, and we want to learn from the best and leave an impact for the next generation to come."

He likes to vet a potential job by staging first. Otherwise, in the past, he's felt like he was thrown into a pit of fire. "There was no appropriate training and no learning being done. That's not a place you want to work at," he says.

**Chef Julia Spondike**, 24, is used to working hard, having already entered the culinary work world. A spring 2021 graduate of the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, New York, she was recently named executive sous chef at The Hotel at Oberlin in Oberlin, Ohio. "I really feel young people need to be incentivized. If there's a reward for good work and praise and encouragement, that goes a long way," she says.



Those in her generation are easily bored and spend hours on their phone watching 15-second videos before moving on to the next thing, she says. She advises culinary employers to provide opportunities for cross-training and learning different stations and tasks on the line in the hot kitchen. "Keep their mind occupied and learning. If I'm not learning in a position, I start to phase myself out of that position."

Chef Spondike knows the work-life balance suffers in the culinary field. "But what burns people out is not being able to take time for themselves and having to work too long and hard." Have an acceptable set work schedule for good morale. "I want a place that makes me and others happy."

A previous bad experience with a yelling boss left her in tears. "I don't like the preconceptions of kitchens being hard with screaming and yelling at each other. That shouldn't be what kitchen life is like. Encourage and work collaboratively."

She's also keen on competitive pay, meaning she would value three- to six-month job performance reviews. Those who work hard and show improvement should make more than those who are not willing to improve themselves, she says.