

# MANAGING HIGH VOLUME TODAY

University, health care and country club chefs share solutions that address labor shortages while meeting production needs // By Jody Shee



Nowadays you send out a want ad, and you're lucky if anyone responds. Of those who do, only a few meet your hiring criteria. You set up two interviews, and neither person shows up. This dilemma compounds for high-volume foodservice operations such as universities, health care

settings and country clubs. Not only that, but even tenured employees are bailing from the industry.

"A lot has to do with COVID," says **Chef Kristofer Jubinville** (above), executive sous chef for Spring Run Golf Club in Estero, Florida. He knows of a sous chef at a five-star restaurant now working in heating, ventilation and air conditioning for \$30 an hour with no nights, weekends or holidays. The pandemic shutdown allowed him to step away from the restaurant hustle and bustle, and he's not going back.

## HIRING AND RETENTION TRICKS

Spring Run Golf Club, which averages 350 to 500 covers a day in peak season (January through May), along with banquet operations, offers employees a cash reward for new-hire referrals who stay with the club at least 90 days, Chef Jubinville says.

More substantially, country club members formed an employee retention committee a few years ago. "Club members like to have the same person wait on them each time they dine," Chef Jubinville says. Thus, the committee meets monthly to discuss ways to help retain these now-familiar employees, many with large families who sometimes share homes.

The committee has organized food drives for the employees, as well as backpack giveaways for their kids at the beginning of the school year. The committee also assembles Thanksgiving boxes with holiday groceries, including turkey and stuffing, and surveys employees to find out their children's needs — be it a laptop, bicycle or

school supplies. The committee then raises funds from among club members to purchase those items. "This committee always brainstorms ways to engage our staff so that they feel loved and wanted and make them not want to leave," Chef Jubinville says.



During high season (October through May) at Jonathan's Landing Golf Club in Jupiter, Florida, management relies on international workers hired through Peter Petrina of Petrina Group International in Ithaca, New York. "If we depended on local staff, we'd be closed," says **Chef Joseph Watters, CEC** (left),

the club's executive chef. In high season, the club operates three restaurants, banqueting services, a buffet kitchen and two snack bars. Events, tournaments and two clubhouses 13 miles apart compound the labor needs.

This year, the far-flung international workers arrived in October from Jamaica, Romania, Mexico and the Philippines — 15 to serve in front-of-house and 22 in back.

"(Petrina) does the interviewing to create a pool of cooks and servers to facilitate the club's needs," Chef Watters says. The workers arrive on a three-year work visa to handle the club's high season, then move up north to work at another club for the rest of the year during their high season, then cycle back the next year, so they are available for three consecutive high seasons. For a nominal fee, the club provides the workers with an apartment or a room and valet transportation to and from work.

During the summer slowdown, a club near Jonathan's Landing closes for the season, and Chef Watters takes on those employees, which also helps his labor needs.

## OPERATIONAL OVERHAUL

Getting up to staff at Michigan State University in East Lansing this fall required some forethought, says **Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, CEC, CCA, AAC** (opposite top), corporate executive chef. In a normal world, when school starts in the fall, student workers from the previous year resume where



they left off before summer break to staff the university's nine dining units and 20 retail operations. But this year, a return from the pandemic hiatus meant hiring an entirely new and inexperienced crew of incoming freshmen. This unique labor crunch required a meeting of the culinary leadership team,

including managers and executive chefs, to develop a labor prioritization plan.

"We looked at each operation and asked what we could do and do well if we were at 70% staffing," Chef Kwiatkowski says. The team then developed plans for 60% staffing down through to 30% staffing. The answers went from closing platforms or venues to tightening and refocusing the menus. One adopted solution to help the dish-room dilemma was to use paper products to serve food until the new staff was up to speed.

To best utilize labor, the team also looked to quick-serve restaurants and street vendors for some fresh menu ideas and operational know-how. "In one platform, we had to think differently and throw away what we knew and what we had been doing and restructure for what we could pull off," Chef Kwiatkowski says. Instead of offering a selection of several proteins and three sides and a sauce, the team scaled down the menu to include one protein, available in a grain bowl, as a salad or as a wrap. This allowed one person to batch cook the protein and come out and help the other worker serve it in whichever form the customer requested.

## MENU AND PREPARATION SHORTCUTS



For the sake of labor, menus and ingredients have come under the microscope and knife. This is especially true in health care for **Chef Timothy Schoonmaker, CEC** (left), corporate director of nutrition services, Centra Rosemary and George Dawson Inn, Lynchburg, Virginia. He has cross-trained his culinary team to handle multiple jobs

at multiple outlets spread across 150 miles in various venues, including patient room service.

## High-Volume Equipment Standouts

The right equipment, often automated, reduces labor. Combi ovens are a valuable labor-saver for Centra Health in Lynchburg, Virginia, says Chef Timothy Schoonmaker, CEC, corporate director of nutrition services. "We cook our proteins overnight in the ovens, using a probe to cook and hold," he says. The oven then retherms the cooked items. Additionally, for one of the hospital's Meals on Wheels programs, a conveyor meal packaging system allows workers to fill containers with food and place them on the conveyor that seals and packages the meals. "We were able to move away from having three people preparing and packaging meals to one person," he says.

The flexibility of the rapid-speed conveyor oven at Jonathan's Landing Golf Club in Jupiter, Florida, helps to alleviate pressure on the line for certain hot items, Executive Chef Joseph Watters, CEC, says. He can program the time and temperature specifications for various items, like lobster rolls and flatbread, for example. With the machine's conveyor belt system, the staff can manage the cooking of two items at once.

"When we put the flatbread in the [oven], we push the flatbread button. It controls the air flow from the top and bottom, the temperature and the cook time." When the flatbread goes in, the lobster rolls shoot out the other end. The two items can jockey in and out with an automatic time and temperature recalculation. Because of the oven's catalytic converter, there's no need for a hood, and thus the oven can go anywhere, Chef Watters says.

"We have a wide variety of menus and try to systemize everything as best as possible, which includes standardized recipes, technology, purchasing specs and equipment," he says. In some cases, his team switched from all-scratch cooking to speed scratch — as in, mixes to make muffins, scones, biscuits, cakes and sauces. Chef Schoonmaker even purchases some items fully ready to eat, including macaroni and cheese, certain muffins and a few sauces and dressings.

With less labor available, some of the cafes Chef Schoonmaker oversees have closed some food stations and combined a few formats. "A great example is combining our salad bar/made-to-order salad and our healthy bowl program into one large format that has a combination of hot plant-based items, traditional proteins and both salad bar and bowl toppings," he says.

While all these methods help the labor challenge temporarily, Chef Jubinville with Spring Run Golf Club believes it's time to invest in youth, bringing younger workers into the industry, starting in high school and college. Of his own accord, he's gone into a few schools to rustle up interest among students to come in as prep cooks.

"You leave behind your legacy. What are you leaving behind?" he asks. "You don't leave your food behind, but young chefs who came up the right way and learned from you."

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