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Managing People in Commercial Kitchens: A Contemporary Approach

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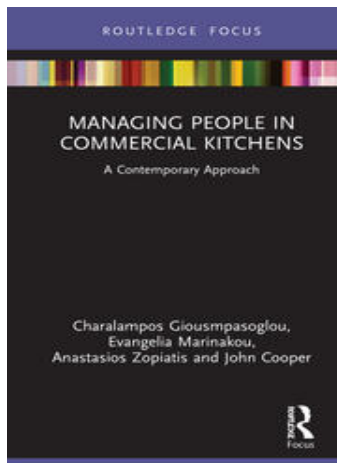
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BOOK REVIEW

Managing People in Commercial Kitchens: A Contemporary Approach, by Charlampos Giousmpasoglou, Evangelia Marinakou, Anastasios Zopiatis and John Cooper, Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2022, 186pp, 38 B/W Illustrations, ISBN: 9780367749101 (also available in e-book format).



As part of the Routledge Focus on Tourism and Hospitality Series, offering “small books on big topics”, *Managing People in Commercial Kitchens: A Contemporary Approach* presents topical arguments, focused research and analysis from the vanguard of contemporary professional kitchens.

This book represents a joint publication by Dr Evangelia Marinakou, Dr Charlampos Giousmpasoglou, Dr John Cooper and Dr Anastasios Zopiatis. Marinakou is a researcher and educator with international experience in the UK, Bahrain, Switzerland, France and Greece while Giousmpasoglou manages the M.Sc. in International Hospitality and Tourism Management at Bournemouth University. John Cooper completed PhD research on “The Occupational Identity and Culture of Chefs and Cooks in United Kingdom Haute Cuisine Restaurants” at the University of Strathclyde in 2012. Anastasios Zopiatis is Head of Department and Associate Professor in Hospitality Management at Cyprus University of Technology and has published widely on chefs’ competencies, hospitality internships, leadership and burnout. The expanse of expertise and varying locations where the authors gained professional experience and completed academic research confirms the global perspective from which this text is written and provides the context in which it should be read.

Initial chapters evaluate the organisation of kitchens past and present, alluding to the diversity of contemporary kitchen operations across the global hospitality sector.

Such diversity may contribute to the intrinsic difficulty of managing people successfully in the plethora of business models, service styles and dynamic markets that chefs operate in daily. In harnessing the perspectives of personnel managers and head chefs and by examining case studies of some of the challenges that face the sector, this text proposes how to meet those challenges for the benefit of all stakeholders; the objectives of this publication are both ambitious and thought provoking in equal measure.

Discourse on occupational culture and professional chef identity abound within this book, with people management, leadership in commercial kitchens, education, skills and competencies for a successful chef career appraised in detail. Many new entrants to the chef profession today are Gen Z, the most ethnically diverse generation to date who expect diversity to be proportionately reflected in the workplace. This generation prioritise favourable work–life balance, roles with a sense of purpose, a living wage and employers who adhere to moral and environmental responsibilities. This book argues for head chefs to differentiate people management practices from the age-old “meritocracy” to address the changing times. For head chefs and managers, delivering these variables is no small feat, particularly due to current economic challenges.

Chapter 3 portrays the enduring challenges and inadequacies in managing employees in professional kitchens and offers tangible, research-informed solutions. The authors acknowledge that no ‘one size fits all’ management approach exists and recognise a need for constant adaptation of work practices and nurturing staff to achieve greater quality of service and productivity. The importance of forecasting staff requirements, onboarding and engaging senior management and head chefs in staff motivation techniques is conveyed; topical issues at present, as many kitchens struggle to recruit and retain talent and control labour costs. Effective leadership, mentoring, emotional intelligence, incentivising kitchen teams, constructive criticism and recognising accomplishment are concepts that many head chefs grapple with due to not being adequately trained in personnel management; having honed their leadership style through methods they experienced as trainees. Whilst acknowledging the need for head chefs to be directive and achievement oriented in managing their brigades, Giousmpasaglou *et al.* suggest entrusting responsibility and empowering staff to perform tasks to agreed standards through intrinsic initiative. This may be challenging for some head chefs as it relinquishes a certain amount of control.

Although significantly, the authors propose that cooks want to work in kitchens where head chefs operate as role models and mentors, imparting knowledge and experience through leading by example, clear communication and advising on how to operate efficiently in fast paced, stressful environments. Such traits are associated with a transformational leadership style that enhances job satisfaction, improves organisational performance and increases competitive advantage. It is these proposals around management style that distinguish this publication from recent commentary

and overtly negative studies on professional kitchens, resulting in a refreshing contribution to the body of culinary knowledge.

In the current era of social change transitioning from an industrial to a knowledge-based society, head chefs and managers now expect accomplished culinary graduates that possess the knowledge, skills and ability to operate effectively in a contemporary kitchen. Many culinary schools are struggling to deliver graduates who possess these attributes. Reasons for this include dwindling interest in professional cookery careers, a paucity of quality indicators or competence-based assessment within culinary programmes and the fragmented relationship between industry professionals and education providers. Chapters 4 and 5 recommend the development of a pedagogically sound and holistic culinary education experience that reflects the modern realities of kitchen life and warn against the inherent risks in nurturing an “academic bubble” through more liberal culinary education models. Such a paradigm shift may compromise the sustainability of professional cookery as such models, paired with market saturation and the influence of celebrity chefs, cultivate unrealistic career expectations in students resulting in a distorted portrayal of the values and norms of professional kitchen life.

Concluding chapters contemplate gender and diversity issues within kitchens along with kitchen deviance and the use of alcohol and /or drugs as a means of coping with work related stress. A wealth of research has been published previously on these topics. This text transcends these studies as it not only collates frank research-based accounts of the “dark side” of industry, but again offers viable solutions for head chefs and managers. Many head chefs, managers, academics and aspiring cooks have grown weary of reading the mounting qualitative studies on the “banter, bollockings and beatings”¹ that harness fear as an apparently essential ingredient in kitchens. Equally, papers abound on the reasons why chefs who are women must open their own restaurants to circumnavigate hierarchical sexism in (un)professional kitchens.² It is these issues, along with poor working conditions and inept management practices that result in high staff turnover. Some senior chefs, both men and women, continue to embrace the traditional, hierarchical structure of the brigade as a rite of passage with authoritative management styles, oblivious to its ineffectiveness in motivating and engaging young employees. Consequently, the authors state that for many aspiring chefs, the passion and interest that attracted them to this sector pales in comparison with long hours in poor working conditions, so they leave.

¹ Charalampos Giousmpasoglou, Evangelia Marinakou, John Cooper, “Banter, Bollockings and Beatings’: The Occupational Socialisation Process in Michelin-starred Kitchen Brigades in Great Britain and Ireland,” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 30, no. 3 (2018): 1882-1902. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-01-2017-0030>.

² For example, see Mary Farrell, “A Critical Analysis of Gender Inequality in the Chef Profession in Ireland” (PhD diss., Technological University Dublin, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.21427/y2hb-ce27>.

Danny Meyer, American restaurateur and bestselling author of *Setting the Table* (2006), observes that the only way a hospitality business can grow, stay true to its soul and remain consistently sustainable is to attract, hire and retain great people. Hospitality is all about how you make people feel. It is that simple and that hard. Successful managers and head chefs realise that the right personnel are their most valued asset. What the authors of this book show is that the hospitality sector is now almost incapable of attracting the requisite talent, portraying as they do, the (at best) mediocre prospects offered. This raises questions around what meaningful steps are being taken by the responsible authorities to change this dynamic?

Managing People in Commercial Kitchens is an informative resource for culinary students, researchers, head chefs, hospitality managers and aspiring professional cooks who will benefit from the authentic appraisal of current issues experienced in many professional kitchens across the globe. Only by understanding the challenges and errors made in managing people in the kitchens of the past, can the next generation of chefs make the sector more attractive and rewarding to work in. Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, Zopiatis and Cooper are to be commended for providing a good starting point to do so; exhibiting achievable pathways to improved working conditions in kitchens before the crisis hospitality is experiencing becomes irreversible.

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