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Where have all the cooks gone?

Within the tight network of Chicago restaurateurs exists a pervasive problem invisible to most diners. You hear it in anecdotal evidence shared among chefs, seemingly with increased frequency.

Here’s one: A few weeks back, One Off Hospitality chef Paul Kahan ran into fellow chef Chris Pandel in the Fulton Market district. Pandel — of The Bristol and Balena — was hosting an open call for cooking positions at Armour & Swift, his forthcoming steakhouse inside the new Google building. That day, Pandel collected 12 resumes, 10 from promising candidates. “It’s more than I thought,” he said. “Five years ago, I probably could have counted on 30 to 40.”

Kahan, who operates a number of restaurants in the West Loop, said to Pandel offhandedly: “You got a couple of extra cooks, send them my way?”

Pandel laughed: “Yeah, there’s no chance of that.”

Ask chefs and restaurateurs around the city, and they will lodge the same complaint: They desperately need cooks in their kitchens.

Dave Beran from Next said he has two vacant positions for cooks who could start today.

Giuseppe Tentori from GT Fish & Oyster said he could hire four cooks to start today.

Kevin Hickey, who oversees restaurants in the Rockit Ranch empire, including Bridgeport’s The Duck Inn, said he could hire 11 cooks to start today.

In its 2015 industry forecast report, the National Restaurant Association summarized it succinctly: “Growth in the number of hospitality job openings accelerated sharply in 2014, a development that was out of sync with the pace of hiring.”

Said Kahan: “It’s gotten to the point where if good cooks come along, we’ll hire them even if we don’t have a position. Because we will have a position.”

Not since honeybees, coral reefs and California rainfall has a disappearance proved so precipitous and mysterious. The repercussions for diners? At the best-run restaurants, even if they’re feeling the crunch, you likely won’t see it; kitchens are used to adapting during high-pressure service. At lesser restaurants, it’s harder to say whether staff shortages affect meal quality. Either way, there is perhaps no better time to pursue that fine-dining cooking career than this moment … though the pay will stink and you’ll likely be worked to the bone.
There’s no one tidy answer to the question, “Where have all the cooks gone?” but rather a host of theories:

There are more restaurants, period.
The easiest point of entry is simply there are more restaurants today than ever — a 25 percent increase from a decade ago. In 2005, Illinois had 21,764 eating and drinking establishments, according to the National Restaurant Association. In 2014 (the most recent data available), that number was up to 27,204. Meanwhile, cooking school enrollment has held relatively steady. Mark Erickson, provost at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. — the country’s pre-eminent cooking school — says enrollment rate is roughly 1,400 students annually for the past four academic years, with an 80 percent graduation rate. Chicago’s Kendall College shows a similarly steady pace: 144 culinary arts graduates in 2011; 121 in 2014; 130 in 2015.

Ten years ago, the landing spots for culinary school graduates in Chicago were more limited: Alinea, Ambria, Le Francais, Tru, Charlie Trotter’s, which is to say places focusing on French cooking techniques or the type of restaurant with tasting menus that cost several hundred dollars a person. While many of those types of places still exist in 2015, they’re not the only places a culinary school graduate finds gravitas as a place of employment: Restaurants influenced by the food of Macau (Fat Rice), Korean barbecue (Belly Q), gastropubs (Longman & Eagle) are now earning three- and four-star reviews. Price points of restaurants are also no longer indicators of prestige. You can walk out of Xoco, Pleasant House Bakery or Publican Quality Meats and not pay more than $30 for two, but the kitchen skills required at those places are just as rigorous as the Michelin star-rated restaurants.
Cooks increasingly likely to work at nonrestaurant businesses.
Culinary Agents, a New York based-website founded two years ago, is like LinkedIn combined with eHarmony for the hospitality industry. The site matches up prospective culinary professionals with employers, and in Chicago, advertises job openings with One Off Hospitality, Boka Restaurant Group, The Alinea Group and Whole Foods, among others.

Alice Cheng, the site’s CEO, sent along a telling chart. It shows the 400-plus hospitality businesses the site partners with in Chicago and the number of job posts those companies advertise each quarter. For restaurants, that number has held steady over the last six quarters: In the first quarter of 2014, a Chicago restaurant averaged 2.21 job posts per quarter, rising slightly to 2.39 job posts per business per quarter during the second quarter of 2015.

What’s notable is the line charting nonrestaurant hospitality businesses, such as specialty retailers and markets, caterers and hotels. In that same period, the number of job postings per business increased from 1.25 per quarter to 3.12 — a 150 percent rise in roughly 18 months. Put another way, in the first quarter of 2014, for every job posting from a restaurant, there was less than one posting — 0.57 to be exact — from a nonrestaurant business. Today, that ratio is 1.31 nonrestaurant openings for every restaurant job posting. It simply says cooks today have a wider selection of job opportunities — opportunities that aren’t necessarily in traditional restaurants.

Employment numbers from Kendall College graduates show the restaurant and retail routes trending in opposite directions. Of the March 2011 culinary art graduates, 48 percent found employment in nonhotel restaurants, with 13 percent in specialty food retailers and bakeries. By March 2015, 37 percent of Kendall’s culinary arts graduates found work at a nonhotel restaurant, while retail/bakery jumped to 20 percent.

Many cooks opted for Eataly when it opened in November 2013; right now, 82 line and prep cooks are employed at its River North location, said company spokeswoman Daltyn Little.

Mariano’s has become another intriguing option for local cooks (and as some restaurant chefs admit, an increasing competitor and a source of consternation). Jess Terry, group vice president and chief human resources officer for Roundy’s supermarkets, said the company’s hiring strategy includes seeking candidates in the restaurant world and that 35 percent of Mariano’s food service managers have a degree from a cooking school such as Kendall College or Washburn Culinary Institute.
Terry notes that cooking positions aren’t just for the supermarket foods of yore, like preparing pasta salad in the deli case or making lasagna for the hot bar. Every Mariano’s contains a sushi counter, and a number of locations have an oyster and shellfish bar, or a barbecue stand that requires a pitmaster who can proficiently operate a Southern Pride — a finicky smoker favored by barbecue professionals. Though Terry won’t reveal specifically the number of cooks employed at each supermarket, consider the chain’s growth: Mariano’s entered the Chicagoland market in 2010 in Arlington Heights. By the end of 2015 it will have 34 locations in the area.

Sean Grady, who graduated with a culinary degree from Johnson & Wales University and worked for Lettuce Entertain You group for nearly nine years, made the leap to Mariano’s after a short stint working at an independent restaurant.

At Pl8 in Barrington, Grady said he’d spend 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. in a kitchen six days a week. It was a brutal schedule for a father of a newborn son. So two years ago, Grady left the restaurant and found employment at a Mariano’s two blocks from his home in Arlington Heights. He began part time behind the meat counter, moved up to produce manager, and now works on various culinary projects at its newest Glenview West store.

“I can get home by 6 p.m., cook dinner for my family, take my son to the park now,” Grady said. “When I can find balance in my work and personal life, I’m a happy guy.”

The advantages of these nonrestaurant options are clear, at least in the short term. Benefits and pay packages are better than at stand-alone restaurants, shifts are typically eight hours and operating hours are less likely to involve nights, weekends and holidays. At restaurants, it’s not unusual for cooks to work 12-hour shifts, and because restaurants operate on such tight profit margins, many cooks’ salaries hover around minimum wage (as of July 1, $10 an hour in Chicago for nontipped employees such as cooks).

Hickey, who spent nearly 20 years with the Four Seasons group before joining Rockit Ranch, said it’s not unusual for line cooks at corporate hotel chains to be paid 40 percent more than cooks at independent restaurants, and almost always with more robust benefits. Still, even hotel restaurants are having trouble recruiting and retaining cooks. Said Thomas Lents, executive chef of Sixteen at the Trump Hotel: “The days of a stack of resumes on your desk waiting for the next position to open don’t seem to exist anymore, anywhere.”

**The millennial effect**

Less quantifiable is what restaurateurs claim are shifting attitudes among 20-something cooks.

“No one wants to hear the old man with the battle scars, I understand that,” said Bill Kim, executive chef of Belly Q. “But I’m from the yuppie generation. I don’t want to say (kids today) are entitled, but we had to work for it.”

Kim’s exasperation rings true for many of his generation — that is, chefs who worked their way up in the kitchens of Charlie Trotter’s, Jean Banchet, Tony Mantuano and their ilk. It’s not just a general feeling of “kids these days!” — restaurateurs can point to specific trends in the past few years.
For one, they’ve seen resumes with multiple employers over a short time span. Said Hickey: “You’ll see a very professional looking resume, and the list of jobs will be three-month, six-month stints. They’re completely oblivious to the concern why they haven’t put in a reasonable amount of time anywhere. It’s not like they got fired, but what are you learning in four months? You know how much it is for me to spend time with guys who work for only four months? So we end up constantly hiring and constantly rehiring.”

Joe Gancarz, a cook who’s spent 2 1/2 years working under chef Phillip Foss at EL Ideas, considers his relatively long tenure the exception to today’s rule.

“We just had a cook the other day who said his friend’s plan was to travel the world for five years, working six-month stints,” Gancarz said. “Then he’d open his own restaurant after. That’s definitely not the path I would take. I’m more of an old soul. There’s four seasons you can learn from a chef.”

Gancarz, 29, said less than half of the members of his culinary school graduating class are still working in brick-and-mortar restaurants.

Dave Beran said, in his kitchen, there are three cooks who’ve been with the company longer than 18 months. The other six cooks have worked at Next for under three months.

“Of our two last hires, one moved from Cleveland, and it was a two-month process of emailing back and forth, finding him a place to live,” Beran said. “One month into working, he walked out. He said, ‘I’m not the cook I thought I was.’ The other guy moved here from Milwaukee. He worked for us for two weeks. Then at 1 p.m. one afternoon, he left.”

Beran adds: “Back when I was at Alinea, we had guys coming in from The Fat Duck (in Britain) and The French Laundry (Napa Valley). Now, we’re looking at resumes with previous jobs at Applebee’s and Jiffy Lube.”

Belly Q’s Kim: “I’ll take someone from Chipotle over someone from a great restaurant. Honestly. They’re the ones who will stay. The impressive-looking ones on the resume, all of a sudden it’s too busy, and they go.”

Tentori says a troubling recent trend is that cooks don’t show up for their tryouts. In restaurants, new cooks typically come in for a one- or two-day tryout (usually unpaid) called a stagiaire.

“For every five or six people who are scheduled to stage,” Tentori said, “maybe one will show up?”

Said Paul Kahan: “Five years ago, I can’t ever remember a stage not showing up.”

“A lot of cooks have that millennial effect,” said Carrie Nahabedian of Naha and Brindille. “They have the strong desire, they have the passion, but they don’t necessarily have the dedication. They want to work but under their terms. I like balance in people’s lives, but not when you’re just out of culinary school.”
Food television and pop culture undoubtedly have glamorized a profession that was historically regarded as blue collar. The Food Network portrayal of working kitchens, every chef I talked to notes, is romanticized and misleading.

“A lot of people hear excitement of culinary profession, and they pursue it because it sounds good,” said Erickson of the Culinary Institute of America. “We have that discussion at orientation of every incoming class. We don’t necessarily want students to come in because they saw it on TV. Certainly we believe it takes years to become a chef. Someone who graduates from business school doesn’t become a CEO immediately. You can’t just graduate from culinary school and become an executive chef.”

Cooks are looking beyond big cities.
Look no farther than San Francisco and New York, traditional city centers of high gastronomy, where the shortage of cooks is many times more apparent. The biggest culprit? A historically low-paying position in a historically expensive city, and it’s only getting costlier.

“Everybody is talking about it and has been for a few years,” San Francisco Chronicle food writer Jonathan Kauffman said of the shortage of restaurant cooks in his city. “It’s been particularly bad the last four years because rent in San Francisco has nearly doubled.” (According to Zillow, the median rent of a San Francisco apartment is $4,000.)

The median one-bedroom rent in Chicago is now $1,880, the sixth highest in the country, according to a July report from national real estate site Zumper. So chefs are flocking to cities where the cost of living is far cheaper. A list of the country’s most lauded restaurants in 2015 will include Husk in Nashville and Charleston, S.C., Qui in Austin, Spoon and Stable in Minneapolis and L’Etoile in Madison, Wis.

The five states with the largest restaurant sales growth in 2015? The National Restaurant Association has Arizona topping the list, followed by Florida, North Dakota, Texas and Colorado.
Cheng said cities experiencing a boom in restaurant job openings include Philadelphia, which she describes as “growing like gangbusters,” as well as Denver/Boulder.

The goal used to be to go to New York, said Balena’s Pandel. “Now why not go to Minneapolis or Austin? You can make the same wage, and it goes a bit further there.”

In the meantime, Chicago restaurants continue to hang “Help Wanted” signs and will do so for the foreseeable future. Ask any chef of a busy restaurant, and he or she will tell you a frequent phone conversation to a fellow chef will begin like this: “Can you spare anyone tonight?”

The National Restaurant Association projects that, in the next decade, the number of restaurant cook positions will grow by 175,000 jobs.

“A cook moving to Chicago won’t have to worry about getting a job,” Nahabedian said. “They’ll get hired almost immediately.”

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