THE KITCHEN CONDITION

This new in-depth report – including data gathered from an extensive 2025 survey of 146 chefs in North America – assesses the impact that kitchen conditions have on the wellbeing of workers. It also explores the knock-on impact on recruiting and retaining talent. Finally, it suggests ways to fix it

THE BURNT CHEF PROJECT

Halton®

THE KITCHEN CONDITION:

WELCOME

LET'S JOIN FORCES TO CREATE GREAT ENVIRONMENTS

At Halton, we are passionate about protecting people's wellbeing in demanding indoor environments. That has been our company's mission for many years. And commercial kitchens are very demanding environments, which is why we are proud to support *The Kitchen Condition* survey and report.

Unfortunately, the overall findings in the survey do not surprise us, because we have already conducted considerable research into the impact that indoor air and lighting quality can have on people's wellbeing. But solutions are available to the industry. We just need to collectively ensure that they get applied more widely. We have a job to do.

What we need for this industry to succeed is for passionate people to keep joining it – but also to want to stay in it. That is ultimately how we will create great experiences for customers in hospitality.

Every component of the industry needs to contribute towards that. We are focused on indoor air quality and wellbeing-enhancing solutions in commercial kitchens, but we need to join forces with design consultants and suppliers to create those great environments.

The momentum has started, but there is a lot of work to do. Let's do it together.

Kai Konola
CEO, Halton Group

THE KITCHEN CONDITION:

WELCOME

IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE HOSPITALITY NARRATIVE

The Burnt Chef Project tries to be ahead of the curve with regards to analyzing the data behind hospitality. So, working with Halton and 1473 Media on *The Kitchen Condition* has helped us get some very specific North American data, which will allow us to drive meaningful change moving forward.

The numbers garnered from the survey in this report are quite startling. 65% of chefs reported that it is harder to recruit staff now than in previous years, so we must acknowledge that there is a big problem here. Having said that, there are also positive signs in the report. If chefs are taking an average of 7.5 days off sick per year – double the national average in the US – it's an encouraging sign that they are taking proactive measures to look after their health and wellbeing. Previously, perhaps, they would have suffered in silence for longer, leading to a greater risk of burnout.

But there is a recruitment crisis in hospitality. The numbers of chefs looking to leave the profession are deeply concerning. And there is no one single answer to solve this – it will take a myriad of different solutions. It can be overwhelming trying to fix the wider issues, but taking a pragmatic approach to improving kitchen conditions will help. We also need to look at the positive case studies out there too. Storytelling is what hospitality is all about, so let's drive more of those positive stories. Let's promote the organizations and leaders in this industry that are making those meaningful changes. While the data in this report might be harrowing, I feel positive we can change the narrative.

Kris Hall
CEO, The Burnt Chef Project

THE KITCHEN CONDITION: THE SURVEY

IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE HEAT...

Commercial kitchens in North America are hemorrhaging employees and struggling to replace them. Intrigued to find out why, The Burnt Chef Project and Halton conducted a survey of chefs across the continent. They discovered a profession beset by illness and dissatisfaction, often working in sub-par conditions – but one that is not without hope

More than three quarters of chefs (79%) working in commercial kitchens have considered quitting their job over the past year. That's according to a survey conducted in January 2025 by The Burnt Chef Project and Halton, which canvassed the opinions of 146 chefs working in commercial kitchens across North America. And the picture only gets bleaker once you get beyond the headline figure.

In many kitchens, employees are voting with their feet. Three in five chefs (60%) described the staff turnover rate in their kitchen as 'moderate' or worse, with 17% assessing churn as high and 9% as very high. In most industries, you could assume people would be moving to a similar position – one that perhaps has better working conditions, pays more or offers some form of promotion.

Not so in commercial kitchens. Nearly four in five chefs (79%) assessed their ability to recruit new staff as quite difficult (14%), difficult (33%) or very difficult (21%). Playing out over recent years, the majority of chefs (65%) said recruitment had become more difficult or worse – with 35% describing the situation as much more difficult.

Chefs, then, are deserting the industry. But why would so many people who have invested in a culinary education – about half of our survey respondents – turn their back on the career they dreamt of having?

> "THE MAJORITY OF CHEFS (65%) SAID RECRUITMENT HAD BECOME 'MORE DIFFICULT' OR WORSE – WITH 35% DESCRIBING THE SITUATION AS MUCH MORE DIFFICULT"

80%

ALMOST 80% OF CHEFS CONSIDERED LEAVING THE PROFESSION AT SOME POINT IN THE PAST YEAR

KITCHEN NIGHTMARES

Working conditions are certainly part of the problem. It's an issue that looms large in the thoughts of most chefs; 95% agree that mental health can be affected by poor working conditions (with 75% strongly agreeing), while 97% believe they can be detrimental to physical health (80% strongly agreeing). Of the two thirds of respondents (67%) who replied to a question on how working environments contributed to health problems, 88% cited fatigue as a consequence, while more than half (51%) reported injuries and accidents. Respiratory problems (35%) and heat-related illness (32%) were also mentioned by respondents. The average chef takes seven and a half sick days per year – twice the national average.

That said, only 24% of respondents actually identified their own working

conditions as average or worse – while 54% assessed their working environment as very good or better. Drill down into that data, however, and a nuanced picture emerges. One in six healthcare facilities were perceived as poor, while two-thirds of public sector kitchens and nearly half of corporate dining kitchens were merely average. Although this is played out to certain extent in the recruitment market – where healthcare facilities found things toughest last year – there are anomalies too. Education facilities, which topped the working conditions charts, had the second-toughest time recruiting.

With 64% of chefs saying that working conditions have a significant impact on their ability to deliver food safely and hygienically, it's clearly in everyone's interests to address any impediments to a kitchen's smooth running. On top of this, 90% of respondents believe they are less efficient and less effective when working in poor conditions. In the highly competitive restaurant business, where speed of service is every bit as important as the quality of the food, anything that hampers efficiency in the kitchen can be business-critical – and that's without factoring in staff morale; feelings of futility can easily take root if kitchen conditions have a significant or major impact on efficiency (cited by 26% and 14% respectively).

IT'S GETTING HOT IN HERE

The key culprits? Excessive heat and poor ventilation. More than half of respondents judged these two factors to be the main contributors to poor kitchen working conditions. Flipping this on its head, temperature and ventilation came joint-second in terms of kitchen positives (16.7%), topped only by space. 36% of respondents cite space as having the biggest positive contribution to working conditions.

While space and (lack of) natural light clearly influence kitchen morale and efficiency, solutions are likely to be structural and expensive – if not impossible – in many kitchen scenarios. Heat and ventilation issues, however, are a relatively simple fix – an investment in a smoother-running, happier kitchen that should improve hygiene and food quality and ultimately be felt in the cash register.

DON'T PUT UPGRADES ON THE BACK BURNER

Although the proportion of chefs who were either unaware of local codes and regulations or not at all confident of satisfying them was low – at 7% – the overwhelming reason for not upgrading to be certain of full compliance, cited by more than half (52%), was cost.

Focusing on exhaust hoods, a massive 86% of chefs said their choice of equipment was very important to their cooking style and kitchen setup. And yet more than a

> “90% OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE THEY ARE LESS EFFICIENT AND LESS EFFECTIVE WHEN WORKING IN POOR CONDITIONS”

64%

said that working conditions have a significant impact on their ability to deliver food safely

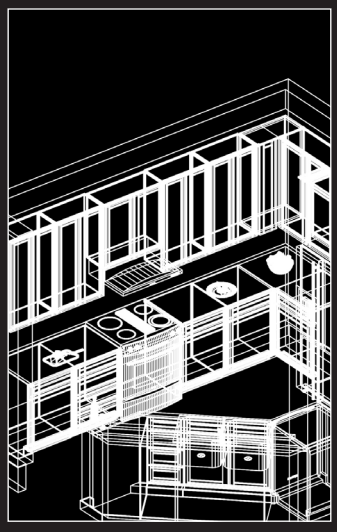
86%

of chefs said that their choice of equipment was very important to their cooking style and kitchen setup, while 28% said that their equipment didn't match their style and setup

STAYING POWER

Asked which kitchen improvements would make them reconsider thoughts of quitting, two thirds of chefs suggested appropriate staffing levels might swing it. Given the struggles relating to recruitment noted elsewhere, the near ubiquity of this issue seems hardly surprising.

A better designed kitchen with improved operational flow was deemed the next-best sweetener (by 60%), followed by newer and more efficient equipment (49%). Better temperature control (30%) and cleaner air (23%) also recorded a significant share of votes.



quarter (28%) said their current equipment didn't match their style and setup. On top of this, 19% of chefs were not at all familiar with the role ventilation systems play maintaining air quality and temperature/comfort in a commercial kitchen.

Encouragingly, 86% of chefs were keen that their ventilation systems contribute to sustainability goals. However, older systems tend to be thirstier in terms of power consumption. Sensor-controlled variable-speed fans, improved refrigeration and heat recovery, and more efficient aircon and dehumidification means the modern kitchen can be considerably more efficient than they were a decade ago – and that's before you factor in the effect of aging equipment running below par.

Not all the problems facing the industry are easily fixable. The lack of natural light cited as a negative by a sizeable chunk of respondents mostly goes with the territory, as does working in a relatively confined space. An industry always up against the wire, grappling with high inflation, rising labor costs, and shifts in consumer behavior, is far less likely to be splashing out on capacious refurbishing, especially with overall US restaurant visits falling for the first 10 months of 2024, according to recent data from industry analysts Black Box Intelligence, and a surge in industry bankruptcies since the Covid-19 pandemic. But savvy investment into equipment upgrades that could make a material difference to chefs' physical and mental health might just help stop the exodus of talent.

"SAVVY INVESTMENT INTO EQUIPMENT UPGRADES THAT COULD MAKE A MATERIAL DIFFERENCE TO CHEFS' PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH MIGHT JUST HELP STOP THE EXODUS OF TALENT"

OPEN TO IMPROVEMENTS?

It goes without saying that businesses that opt for open kitchens are relying on diners' curiosity, and the added theater of seeing a chef's skill up close and personal, to bring in extra revenue. Scrapping the physical division between kitchen and front-of-house also saves space.

But there are elements of the commercial kitchen that won't enhance diners' experience. The smell of a burnt dish wafting over the floor, for example, could be nothing short of catastrophic. So open kitchens need to prioritize certain elements of their environment – a fact that is reflected in our survey.

Nearly a quarter of chefs (24%) who work in kitchens that aren't open plan point to poor ventilation as the single largest negative contributor to working conditions, for example – compared with just 10% of chefs who work in an open kitchen.

Excessive heat is the big problem in an open kitchen setup, pinpointed by 43% of chefs as chief impediment to their working environment. For chefs working in a non-open kitchen, heat is less of an issue, cited by 30%.

Tellingly, staff turnover is far higher in open kitchens, described by nearly three quarters (74%) of chefs as between moderate and high, compared to 49% working in non-open kitchens. Open kitchen chefs also said that finding new staff had become trickier of late – only 30% said recruitment was the same or easier, versus 38% of chefs working in non-open kitchens. With 43% of open-kitchen chefs citing heat as the key negative factor, upgrading ventilation and air-conditioning systems would seem to be a no-brainer to boost staff retention.

If anything, the extra performance aspect of the open kitchen makes any investment in staff wellbeing and morale one that should repay savvy restaurant owners especially handsomely.

WHY DOES OUR CIRCADIAN RHYTHM MATTER IN THE WORKPLACE?

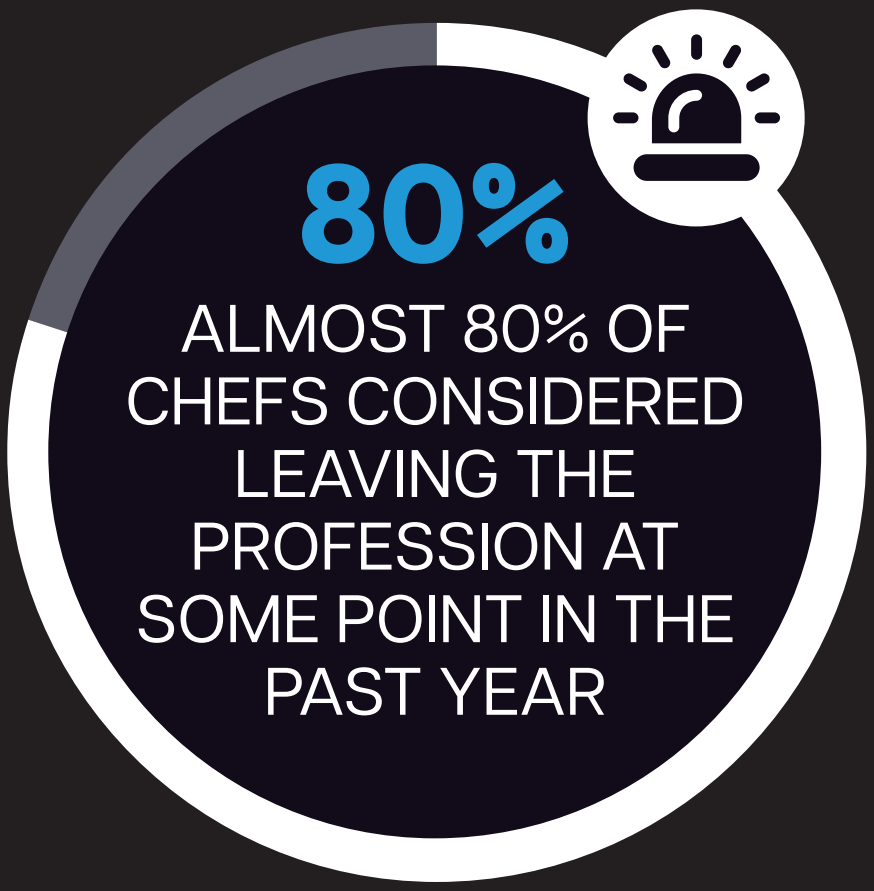
The circadian rhythm is the human body's internal clock. It operates on an approximately 24-hour cycle, regulating various bodily processes, including our sleep-wake cycles, the release of hormones, and our body temperature. It helps our bodies to function healthily.

That rhythm is affected by light, darkness, and other environmental conditions, which impacts our body's ability to synchronize with the day-night cycle, so a healthy circadian rhythm is vital for our health and wellbeing. Disruptions – including working in hot, noisy professional kitchens that frequently have a lack of natural light and air – can lead to sleep issues, fatigue, and additional health problems. Busy chefs who also need to skip meals during a long service or have irregular meal timings may also have their circadian clocks further misaligned.

THE KITCHEN CONDITION SURVEY:

7.5 DAYS
were lost to sickness by North American kitchen staff in 2024 (twice the national average)

79%
of chefs reported having difficulties recruiting employees in the past year



36%
cite space as having the biggest positive contribution to working conditions

95%
of chefs believe that sub-optimal working conditions can have a significant impact on mental health and 97% of chefs believe it can have a significant impact on physical health too

THE KITCHEN CONDITION:

THE PANEL

PANELISTS:

- **Kris Hall** (KH), CEO, The Burnt Chef Project
- **Colleen Silk** (CS), founder & owner, Hospitality Bites Media, and ambassador, The Burnt Chef Project
- **Tom Mitchell** (TM), Canadian chief ambassador, The Burnt Chef Project
- **Imrun Teixeira** (IT), award-winning chef and ambassador, The Burnt Chef Project
- Moderator: **Michael Jones** (MJ), 1473 Media

CLEARING THE AIR

In February 2025, four representatives of The Burnt Chef Project took part in a specially convened panel session at the Halton booth at The NAFEM Show 2025 in Atlanta, Georgia. Moderated by 1473 Media's Michael Jones, the panel met to discuss the topline findings of T*he Kitchen Condition* report. Here are some highlights of the discussion

MJ Can you describe some of the biggest challenges that are currently impacting chefs. And what are the consequences of those challenges?

KH The biggest challenge we see is to work/life balance, which has existed for a long time. But it's also about health, and long-term viability. Covid was like holding a beach ball underwater. When you eventually let go, it pops up and everyone's suddenly saying "Wait, what am I meant to be doing with my life? I'm working all these hours, but what am I getting in return?" It was this big 'Aha!' moment. As chefs, we need to be looking specifically at how we create environments and cultures that encourage people to find the balance they've been looking for.

CS: Getting people to come back into the industry once we reopened the world was hard because they had found jobs that were more conducive to having a family life. As a mother,

working 14 hours a day and then going home and caring for a baby isn't conducive to any sort of physical or mental life. So, the biggest struggle is bringing in people that want to be there. Keeping people in the kitchen is the hardest thing. There is a huge turnover. "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen?" That is what happens every day in kitchen life right now.

TM: For years and years, kitchen work was close to slave labor. I know that's a bold statement to make, but kitchen conditions were awful. I've had experiences where I've gone into a kitchen and the staff were complaining about the equipment I'd supplied them with not working properly. I'd look around and I'd notice the hood was running, but they didn't have the return fresh air on, because it costs money to temper, and it's too expensive. So. the equipment was not working properly, the staff all had blue lips, and some of them were even wandering around in a daze. It's a hard environment to work in, and we've got to make it better.

IT: People have to understand the kind of mental and physical toll it takes to work in these kitchens, whether it's quick-service, fine-dining Michelin restaurants, whatever... There's so much strain on the body and mind with the pressure of working in those environments. It's like being a professional athlete. We are on our feet for multiple hours a day. We are in high-stress environments. We are moving hot things and working with sharp knives. But we're not training ourselves like athletes. We're not thinking about our recovery. We're not thinking about food, water and things that make our body run efficiently. A lot of the time we're maybe drinking more alcohol than we are water. We're eating out of the deep fryer, over a garbage can in the back corner – if we even have time to do that. So, it's about prioritizing those things to make sure our body can run efficiently to work those hours.

KH: It also translates into productivity from a business owner's perspective. Staff turnover is anywhere between 60 and 125%. That's very high. The insurance or finance sectors have 10% turnover rates. To put that into context, for every single person that leaves an organization within the first 90 days, it costs that organization $4,500. If you've got a workforce of 100 you could be losing 125 people over the course of a year. Operationally, we need to do what we can to make sure that people are staying, that they're performing at their best, and they have no reason to leave, because net operating profits of 2-3% is unsustainable. We need to start looking at servicing those in the service profession so that those turnover rates reduce and that it is sustainable. And that includes health, wellbeing, and mental health benefits and support.

MH: So, how do we fix this?

KH: We've got to start thinking about kitchen design and layout; whether lighting is interfering with peoples' circadian rhythms; whether fans are constantly giving them audio stress; introducing induction hobs that produce less heat but are easy to clean – which means that people are going home sooner. Using cushioned rubber matting for flooring. We need to make sure we are continually looking at how we create long-term, meaningful change, but it will require investment. An induction hob isn't cheap, for example, but if that reduces your turnover rates by 10% then it pays for itself in year one.

TM: Manufacturers are working overtime on automation. Robots are a nice idea, but it's not going to be the answer. We're not going to replace skilled jobs in the kitchen for the most part. Automation will replace entry-level roles, where it's hardest to get somebody to stay.

IT: A happy chef makes happy, loving food. Happy people offer a happy service. If you're treating your staff well and making sure it's a happy environment, they are going to create a happy environment for your guests. And that's going to keep guests coming.

CS: We're not breeding a generation of soft people. It's more that we have a tolerance now to be able to do our job the right way. In an efficient way. There's tools and resources to do that. And more of us are being more vocal about it. We're implementing these structures from the top down. For new restaurant owners, I just encourage you: if you're looking to invest in a business, it's all about the people that you're bringing in. They all share a purpose. Don't just put 'a body' in there. It's the same with equipment: everything should have a purpose. But I do think that there is positive change. There's going to be a constant evolvement. It's not going to happen overnight, especially, in the US – we've got a lot more work to do – but it's happening.

MJ: I'd like to really thank Halton and The Burnt Chef Project for showing such fantastic leadership in this extremely important area and for their support today.

TALES FROM THE PASS: A CHEF OPENS UP ON CHOOSING A DIFFERENT PATH

Rose Cowell, culinary applications manager, Blodgett Oven Company, discusses her decision to leave restaurant kitchens behind for the stability of working for a foodservice equipment manufacturer

I grew up in the age of the Food Network and celebrity chefs, and that's really what drew me to restaurants. It tapped into things I knew to be true about myself – it seemed a viable opportunity for people who were creatives, but also workhorses. So, I decided to go to culinary school, get a job and work in restaurants.

Kitchens attract certain types. People who have substance abuse issues or relational issues find this companionship there – it's like the Island of Misfit Toys. I've suffered from mental health conditions my entire life, and I think that's honestly a part of why I fell into the kitchen space.

I had a naivete back then, believing every portion of my life pie was equally being fostered. But if I was doing really well at work, I was probably neglecting my home life. If I was sharpening my knife skills, the skills of my life were probably being negatively affected.

I was struggling so deeply in my personal life, and the kitchen was the worst place to be. The long hours, the lack of weekends, holidays and health benefits, the minimal pay – none of this encouraged any sort of recovery. To the point where I knew I had to quit my job. I had to reach out to my chef de cuisine, very embarrassingly, to say, "Hey, I think I'm falling apart – actually, I don't think, I *know* I'm falling apart – and I can no longer sustain this level of functioning in your operation."

> "WE NEED TO FOSTER MORE ACCEPTANCE OF THE PROBLEMS CHEFS FACE – AND BETTER CONVERSATIONS

THE BASIC PYRAMID OF STABILITY

I now have one job, working a very standard working schedule of five days on, two days for a weekend. I have holidays to spend with family and friends. And I have health insurance, I have a retirement plan. I didn't have health insurance in restaurants. And if you don't have health insurance, that's another hit to pretty minimal wages.

Paying chefs more money isn't the answer to everything – poor lighting and ventilation in most kitchens can also make them pretty unpleasant places to work. But how can you expect a chef working 80+ hours piecemealing together jobs, like I was in Chicago, to stop and think: "Maybe I need to pursue my mental health right now?" Or "Maybe I need to be a part of a 12-step program or go find some therapy?"

I was so caught up in the nitty gritty of just needing to wake up and go to work. When you don't have the basic pyramid of stability in your life – if you can't even put a roof over your head and buy yourself food – all additional qualities in life just fly out the window.

When I told my boss I had to leave, there was no judgment or shame. But, across the industry as a whole, we need to foster more acceptance of the problems chefs face – and better conversations.

If a chef presents to their boss that they're struggling and need some time off, who will fill in? It's hard to backfill because we have such low retention of employees. But chefs need to know they could maybe take off a week or two without them being replaced.

The job I have now is something I never thought would be granted to me as a chef. I wake up every morning filled with gratitude. I hope the people I interact with, the people I hug every day, feel that.

Rose Cowell is based in Chicago, Illinois

THE KITCHEN CONDITION:

OPINIONS

TALES FROM THE PASS: **WHY THE CHEF BECAME THE CONSULTANT**

Matthew Anderson, associate principal-hospitality, Rippe Associates, addresses why treating people properly is pivotal to capturing hearts and minds in hospitality

I have been fortunate to work in and out of kitchens over the past 25 years, ranging from fast food and neighborhood bistros – where I really got the taste coming out of culinary school – before jumping headfirst into white tablecloth fine dining as the general manager. Later, I worked in corporate restaurants, where I'd dive in on a station when needed, before working in stadiums and arenas throughout the country and amusement parks and hotels as director of food & beverage. I always tried to stay close to what was happening in the kitchen along the way.

I learned pretty quickly that this wasn't the environment (or sometimes culture) that I wanted to work in and gravitated more towards a balance between being engaged in the kitchen and menu development and creating experiences for guests. Some kitchens were fantastically appointed – a new stadium was wonderful, but it had its own challenges – while others were in the basement or barely big enough to have two people pass each other on the line. I think people would be surprised to see some of the kitchens – some at the highest level – and what those kitchen conditions might be, with A/C not working properly, or at all, equipment in disrepair, and not enough of the needed tools to execute.

> “PART OF BUSINESS IS ALLOCATING RESOURCES TO ENSURE IT RUNS PROPERLY... DON'T DEMEAN PEOPLE... IT'S HARD WORK

THE HUMAN SIDE

The other side of this is how people treat each other and, often, I saw that as a greater impact on working conditions. It's not just how they're treated by guests but by each other inside those spaces. You can handle the physical environment when you're treated well – not that it's okay to let a facility deteriorate – but how each person is treated as a human being is essential (back-of-house, front-of-house, and the relationships between the two).

It wasn't until very recently that I made my choice to be in a 'support' role as a design and management consultant rather than in a kitchen/operation, and it was much more about how the team that I led was treated and less about the space.

How does the industry fix these issues? First and foremost, someone needs to acknowledge that people aren't being treated properly – from the general manager, the chef, or even amongst the team. Ideally the leader steps in and makes certain the culture is positive, while still holding people accountable to high standards, but, even then, sometimes the leader has someone above them that doesn't support that.

The kitchens have limitations and so do the people. That needs to be respected, and I don't believe it always is.

But I understand that it is also a business. Part of that business is allocating resources to ensure it runs properly. Fix the oven. It's someone's tool for success. Don't demean people. Have enough staff. It's hard work. Say 'thank you' and 'please'. It's kind.

Matthew Anderson is based in St Paul, Minnesota

THE KITCHEN CONDITION:

OPINIONS

TALES FROM THE PASS: **FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE CATERING COMPANY, TO CONSULTANCY**

Joe Schumaker FCSI, founder and CEO of Foodspace, is a former chef turned catering company owner, and now a foodservice consultant. He shares his views on why he retains a strong connection to his kitchen brethren and why the industry must do more

I wasn't even halfway through culinary school when I realized I wasn't ever going to be a long-term restaurant chef. The hazing and getting locked in the walk-in, getting snapped with towels, and screamed at when you screw up ... the "Yes chef" thought process – I lived in that world for close to a year and a half. Part of the reason I started my own catering company was myself and a colleague thinking: "Hey, we could do this better. We could treat people better, do better food, make more money, and provide a better environment for our people."

We also wanted to create an environment that was more diverse – gender-wise and internationally. In Northern California, where we were at that time, there was not a single woman in the kitchen then, not one. So, we thought long and hard about getting that balance.

For me, you can look at kitchens like a three-legged stool. Each leg needs to be equally supported or the whole thing topples over.

The first leg is the physical conditions. We've got to have ergonomic workstations. We've got to have flooring that's supportive and helps with knees and backs. We need to design kitchens that are thoughtfully ergonomic and friendly to the movement, the positioning, and even just the physical weights of things that are being moved around.

> "WE NEED TO RALLY AS A COMMUNITY, BECAUSE ONLY PEOPLE WHO'VE BEEN IN THOSE TRENCHES CAN REALLY UNDERSTAND

Let's use design to make people's jobs safer, easier and more comfortable.

The second leg of the stool is the way the management structure deals with onboarding new people – how it manages that transition for folks who are trying to learn what it means to work in a commercial kitchen. I'm not saying we need to baby people, but there's a right way and a wrong way to help people deal with that mental and physical shift. And folks should also be able to learn how they like. You won't get Gen Z to read a 40-page training manual, but they'll watch 10 short videos.

PROVIDE THE SUPPORT – AS A COMMUNITY

The third leg is mental health – providing resources and support both inside and outside the kitchen, so people have an outlet for when something does go wrong. That might mean outside resources, internal resources, or just training people to identify the warning signs. I've seen some crazy stuff. I've seen the drugs, I've seen the drinking, I've seen all the outlets people find. Whatever your path, there's a decompression that needs to happen after a 14-, 15-, or 18-hour day on your feet.

Managing this doesn't mean coming down with the hammer. It's about noticing the signs, providing support, and trying to understand where people are coming from, as opposed to saying: "You messed up, man."

We need to rally as a community, because only people who've been in those trenches can really understand that need to decompress. I'd like to see a similar support system to the one we have for military veterans, because there's definitely PTSD in a lot of chefs' lives.

Back to that stool, it's really hard – in fact it's damn near impossible – but we've got to work equally on all three pillars to make it balance.

Joe Schumaker is based in Boise, Idaho

THE KITCHEN CONDITION:

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THE OPERATOR'S VIEW: **WHY THE WHOLE SUPPORT NETWORK NEEDS TO IMPROVE**

Shaunya Noble is CEO of The Noble Restaurant Group. She operates a restaurant in a food hall in Atlanta, Georgia. Here, she talks about the daily challenges of running a restaurant, where "your brain is everywhere"

I own a restaurant called Pastaholics in Atlanta. Before that, I interned for a year with a foodservice management consultant. Then I opened a ghost kitchen, before opening the storefront to it.

I'm pretty much everywhere I need to be in the restaurant: in the kitchen, or front-of-house. I feel that an inefficient kitchen lowers the productivity of not only the kitchen itself, but the staff too. They are prone to getting overheated and overstimulated. If they feel like they can't breathe, because the ventilation is poor, they're also more likely to walk out. Kitchens are always going to be noisy, in my opinion, but a lack of light means you can't read tickets properly.

If it's too hot and steamy, employees might start to feel like you don't care, because "Well, just look at the state of the kitchen."

Personally, my mental health has plummeted with my restaurant. Physically, my back, knees and legs always hurt. I usually have a headache. Whoever did the electricity in my kitchen did a very bad job, so that has an impact too. There's a lot of stuff I could do faster, but I can't even run my air conditioner because it tricks the breaker. So, not only does that affect me mentally, but it also affects me physically because I'm either hot or extremely cold. I've paid the money for the equipment, but I can't use it properly.

> "AN INEFFICIENT KITCHEN LOWERS THE PRODUCTIVITY OF, NOT ONLY THE KITCHEN, BUT STAFF. THEY'RE PRONE TO GET OVERHEATED

EASING THE BURDEN

How does the industry fix these problems? A lot of them can be traced back to the actual buildouts. We need a hands-on approach from the equipment manufacturers – although some equipment companies that I've worked with have excellent communication – and more mandated guidelines would help.

For example, my general manager has no idea about restaurant equipment, so there is work to do on the education and training side of things. Communication is really important. I told my GM that our hood was not going to pass inspection because it wasn't connected properly and he said, "I don't even know what that means..."

The whole support network could be better for operators. Customers see the good side of the kitchen, but they don't see the bad. They don't understand what we go through, daily. Job retention, dealing with labor, inventory, customers, having equipment that doesn't work – that is a lot of weight on your shoulders.

You're talking with customers, and having to guide your staff, then answer emails and phone calls on top of that. Your brain is everywhere. You're on your feet all day and that starts to get to you.

Shaunya Noble is based in Atlanta, Georgia

THE DESIGNER'S VIEW: WHY GOOD VENTILATION MEANS GOOD VIBRATIONS

Ken Schwartz FCSI, president/CEO at SSA, is a highly experienced foodservice design consultant. He addresses the impact that ventilation can have on the conditions of kitchen employees

Ask people what the most efficient item in their kitchen is and they might guess at some sort of slicer or processing equipment. But the simple fact is that good ventilation is hard to match. An ASHRAE study found that if your temperature moves by 10°F (5.5°C) above the comfort level, productivity drops by as much as 30%.

That's roughly one extra person you'll need for every three – versus spending a little more on putting in better equipment that creates a better working environment. So, this idea that you can put in a cheaper hood and save money is pie in the sky, because anything that can't keep you in that comfort zone is going to cost you more in labor. And that's for the lifespan of your operation.

And in that better environment, people are more likely to stay too. Cut corners on ventilation, though, and you'll have to go through the cost of training and onboarding again and again – it's rinse and repeat. I tell that to every client. Put in the Rolls-Royce of ventilation systems and your first-in capital cost will be a little bit higher, but your forever labor costs will be much less.

Let's say you have a hood that is 30% less effective than the best equipment on the market. Where that top system would be pushing out 10,000 cubic feet per metre (CFM) and typically bringing in and treating 80% of that – so 8,000 CFM – the lower-grade system would need to push out 13,000 CFM and bring in and treat 10,400. So, 2,400 CFM more.

When you share the calculations with an operator who is fairly astute – and show them how much harder a lower-spec machine would have to work to create the same comfortable environment, how much extra air it would need to condition – they tend to go with the higher-spec machines we specify.

> "THE MONEY YOU INVEST IN A HIGH-QUALITY VENTILATION SYSTEM WILL PAY YOU BACK MANY TIMES OVER

PEAK PERFORMANCE

But it's not just about creating a more comfortable working environment. Sometimes I go into a kitchen where it's super-hot and people are sweating near or on whatever they're prepping. And they're also worn out. You can tell they're not performing at their peak and they're not thinking or processing clearly either. An owner might be sitting there thinking "How come the orders are coming out wrong?" not realizing that this is why.

Heat is not the only problem here either. If you don't have the appropriate ventilation system, kitchens get humid, because they're just bringing in outside air rather than treating that air, so you're bringing all that humidity into the building. That's when you start to get mold. You don't necessarily see it. It can be blowing around in the air. It can be on surfaces that you can't see, or it might be small enough that you can't see it with the human eye. So, all of a sudden, you just have people who are constantly sick and missing work.

Overall, the money you invest in a high-quality ventilation system will pay you back many times over in staff retention, employee wellbeing and food quality.

Ken Schwartz is based in Tampa, Florida

“OPERATIONALLY, WE NEED TO DO WHAT WE CAN TO MAKE SURE THAT PEOPLE ARE STAYING, THAT THEY’RE PERFORMING AT THEIR BEST, AND THEY HAVE NO REASON TO LEAVE... WE NEED TO MAKE SURE WE ARE CONTINUALLY LOOKING AT HOW WE CREATE LONG-TERM, MEANINGFUL CHANGE, BUT IT WILL REQUIRE INVESTMENT”

KRIS HALL, THE BURNT CHEF PROJECT

Produced by 1473 Media, with the support of Halton Group and The Burnt Chef Project.

The full video of the panel session, which took place at The NAFEM Show, can be viewed at halton.com/the-kitchen-condition.

Many thanks to the chefs who took part in this survey for giving us their valuable time and insight. Please consider donating to The Burnt Chef Project, which delivers a huge impact to the global hospitality ecosystem with free tools, support systems, and training.

But it continues to need your help.

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