

Secrets of the staff meal

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The biggest social change awaiting anyone contemplating a career in restaurants, whether as a chef, waiter, manager or proprietor, is growing accustomed to the daily ritual of the staff meal – particularly its timing.

In most restaurants staff lunch takes place at 11.45 or 12.00 at the latest when, usually in two distinct places somewhere in the kitchen and at an unmade-up table in the restaurant, all the cooks and kitchen porters eat together as does everyone on the waiting staff. The same happens again around 18.00 before dinner.

For the restaurateur and senior management there is no time for lunch before service but instead there is usually something to eat around 15.00 or a little later when most of the customers have left or have reached the coffee stage. After a decade of lunch around 15.00 in my restaurant-owning days, I had come to believe that this was normal despite the fact that it plays havoc with any dinner plans with friends or family.

Staff meals have significant consequences. They are a considerable cost for most restaurateurs who want to look after their staff properly but they are one of the few occasions when various members of the whole restaurant can actually meet one another and they can therefore be used to build a strong 'esprit du corps'. Romance has, I have seen, blossomed over the staff meal and it was during one that the idea was mooted for our annual staff outing which proved hugely popular.

But the biggest anomaly about staff meals is the huge difference between what and how the chefs and waiting staff eat no more than thirty minutes or an hour before they are cooking and serving dishes from their restaurant's menu. The staff meal is invariably one dish, served in copious quantities, from which everyone helps themselves as quickly as possible (with, increasingly, provision made for vegetarians). Anyone who wants to understand why cooks would be, in my opinion, the only serious rival to journalists in any competition to find the world's fastest eaters should watch chefs eating their staff meal with one eye on the clock.

I experienced perhaps the biggest such variance between what the restaurant staff and their customers eat, when Julio Soler, the restaurateur behind the now world-famous El Bulli in Roses, Spain, allowed me because of our long friendship to become the first outsider ever, to join his kitchen staff for their evening meal recently.

When I arrived at 17.30 Soler was looking anxious and I was concerned that he might have regretted his decision but in fact something far more serious was afoot. A forest fire was burning out of control over the hill and if the *tramontane*, the strong local wind, did not stop it would reach El Bulli which lay directly in its path. Happily, it did.

There was no sign of any such concern in the kitchen where the 35-strong brigade was hard, and quietly, at work. The main section of the kitchen comprises five parallel surfaces, three stainless steel tables for preparing and assembling the food, and two runs of cooking surfaces on which the chefs can cook from either side. In front, at ninety degrees to these surfaces, is the long, thick wooden table, complete with the statue of the bull's head, at the right of which the renowned chef Ferran Adria or his deputy Oriol Castro call away the orders and from which the waiting staff collect the food. Within ten minutes this was to be staff canteen.

The first sign of this transformation came with the arrival of 60 black and white plastic chairs. Then as 18.00 approached the chefs started to put away their work, brush down their surfaces and the floor underneath and place long sheets of blue paper as temporary tablecloths over the main wooden surface on to which a large tray of cutlery had been placed.

As I was watching this take place, Soler came and grabbed my hand and led me out of the main kitchen to one of the main prep kitchens on the left which in turn led out and up a flight of stairs to an outside area used for storage, in particular for the tanks of nitrogen that are a crucial part of Adria's culinary magic (one dish this year is nitrogen pistachios, freezing cold on the outside but still crunchy in the middle). Along this entire route had suddenly formed a polite queue of the restaurant's entire staff anxiously waiting, plate in hand, for their well-earned dinner.

On the menu that evening were bowls of gazpacho, tomato and mozzarella salad incorporating the skin of the cheese – Adria told me the best part was kept for the customers - and a vast pressure cooker full of 'albondia con sepia', a hearty

Catalan dish of meat balls made from pork and beef with peas and chunks of squid. The staff came through at speed, helped themselves to bread and bowls of crisps, another two items not seen in the restaurant itself, sat down in groups and started eating and gossiping.

Soler explained that he and Adria ate every night with the staff or 'our big family' as he kept referring to them and while Adria confessed that feeding your staff well was one of the lessons that had been inculcated into him by his very first Head Chef, the more pragmatic Soler alluded to some economies of scale. "It is obviously expensive to feed 60 every night and this year we have eaten a lot of chicken because Ferran's version of tandoori chicken wings is on the menu and a lot of mackerel too because so too is a mackerel dish. What we actually serve has changed considerably as our staff has more than doubled in a decade."

I managed to glean all this during a ten minute period of frantic eating before most of the chefs had finished their main course and went off for a coffee, a smoke and their last view of the Mediterranean for at least seven hours. As he expertly peeled an apple, Adria outlined his main current preoccupations. "Freeze drying,' he replied somewhat unromantically, 'continuing to use techniques that have been common in industry to maximise flavours and to introduce a new world of textures into gastronomy which will only benefit."

Looking more relaxed, albeit for only the next ten minutes, than at any time since I have known him, he also confessed to the intense pressure he works under. "People come here expecting the best meal of their lives and we have to live up to this. My brother Alberto and I and our core team produce 160 new recipes in our laboratory in Barcelona over the winter and it is becoming increasingly difficult. I just don't want to be in a position where we are serving the same dish twice. If I can't bring anything new to my cooking, that's the end. I still have a 'dream restaurant' where cooking and art would play equal parts, that would encompass only one table, four or five chefs, in a restaurant that would be open 50 or 60 nights a year." But we both agreed that satisfying demand would be even more difficult than it is at El Bulli, sadly.

Half an hour later the transformation of the staff canteen into the pristine kitchen began. Plates were removed; chairs stacked and taken out; bread put back into sacks; floors swept; and the work surfaces wiped and cleaned. The chefs went back to their particular stations while the waiting staff went off to change ready for their briefing from Castro on the new dishes that would be appearing on that evening's menu because new dishes appear most evenings. Adria now assumed the role of benevolent school teacher and went off to his desk in the corner to bury himself in the most recent file of recipes (he has produced 7,000 pages of recipes to date) and his laptop.

As he did so, he said that I was free to wander the kitchen and watch whatever I wanted to and it was in a far corner that I discovered Tony Secviar from San Diego, California and, via him, I established one of the truisms of restaurant staff meals – that in feeding any large number, especially of professional chefs, it is not possible to please everyone all the time.

Secviar was delighted with his season at El Bulli, having first applied two and a half years ago (the restaurant receives 4,000 applications from chefs offering their services every year) but was particularly displeased with 'the ton of mackerel' the staff meals had involved. "I used to love mackerel sushi but I'm not sure I could face it any more. I have heard that Adria has been trying to improve the staff meals this year but I haven't been terribly impressed. We had five Mexican chefs here for a while and that was great because they produced some mole dishes and lots of guacamole, but it's a gruelling eleven-hour shift here from early afternoon to early morning."

As I left El Bulli at 1am after a more than 40 different dishes, of which a steamed brioche topped with bone marrow and caviar and a 'dessert from the desert' which incorporated a soft 'rock' of meringue and liquorice topped with a chocolate cactus were sensationally good, I saw the first wave of staff leaving too. Presumably, and justifiably, they were heading for a bar and something to eat.