
GREAT

food

JOBS 2

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introduction

“Everyone has an internal compass. Some find it and it points the way to go. Others find it but choose to ignore it. Yet others don’t know it is there. They may trudge along on well-worn paths that lead nowhere.”

—Ann Patchett, author *State of Wonder*

AMONG MY GREATEST joys in life is teaching a course at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY. It is devoted to love affairs.

I am the matchmaker.

My class is entitled Food Jobs. Students tell me what they love to do in their spare time (like riding a bike or playing the guitar or going shopping), and I try my best to find or invent a food job for them. The cyclist is now writing a food column for a cycling magazine, the guitar player has been hired as a personal chef for a rock group, and the student who likes to go shopping locates props for a food photographer.

They use their culinary knowledge and combine it with a passion to do something that will make them happy.

The key word here is “passion.” When you talk to anyone who has been successful, “passion” is the word that always crops up.

I am always pleased when I receive a call from a food lover who is thinking about embarking on a new career in the food world or changing from his or her current job and entering a new corner of the vast food universe. Sometimes together we can figure out a new path that hasn’t previously been glimpsed.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

If you want to work in restaurants, you must love restaurants—and many of us do—but you might also consider employment at a health spa, a museum café, or a kitchen in a hospital. You could work at a country club, where perks might include access to the golf course, tennis courts, swimming pool, or sailing. Perhaps you would prefer to be a corporate chef or a private chef. If you worked in a kitchen at a college, this might allow you to audit classes—tuition-free.

It is important to try to form a link between at least two things that you are good at. If you love drinking beer and can cook, consider opening a brewpub at which small meals are served. But not any old brewpub, a distinctive one. Brew your own beer. Find a farmer willing to grow special hops for you. Make yours the only place to be for the in-crowd.

Deciding what to do is incredibly difficult, because there are so many choices. There is no star to point the way and no map to guide each person’s unique journey. The decision to embark upon a career or apply for a new job involves—or should involve—a lot of serious thinking. *Right now*. If not now ... when? Wait and you’ll miss the bus.

► ► FOOD FOR THOUGHT ◀ ◀

Any business will be more successful if it is well designed. There are three components to ensuring a thriving restaurant: 1) good food, 2) good service, 3) great value. First impressions set up the expectations.

OPTIONS ON THE HORIZON

Many students dedicate enormous sums of money toward earning a degree from a culinary school. Countless hours are spent in classrooms. A phenomenal amount of physical and emotional effort is spent pursuing a degree, yet when graduation day arrives, too little time is devoted to thinking about and planning for what comes next. Too often, the first job offer is accepted because it is the only one on the table. Fortunately (though I fear I sound like Pollyanna), there are indeed many opportunities waiting to be discovered.

SAILING THE OCEAN BLUE

There is nothing more satisfying than charting your own journey and sailing through the storm to your personal port. Having a sense of direction is infinitely less scary than being lost at sea. You have many destinations from which to choose.

You could be a private chef and travel with an international superstar or diplomat or with an athlete who is competing on the world stage. Have you considered cooking on a small luxury yacht? You'd be responsible for preparing three meals a day, but you wouldn't need to worry about car payments or the rent for an apartment. Nor would you have to pay taxes on your income whenever you were at least three miles off shore.

Many major restaurants, fast food chains, and catering companies—including Aramark and Sodexo—have branches in several

countries, as do hotels and food-processing companies. Look into employment at Kimpton Hotels, W Hotels, and other worldwide boutique and resort hospitality companies, as well as the familiar names. Is it possible there might be a job for you at Sundance, Robert Redford's environmentally sensitive property in Utah and home of the famed film festival?

Employment in the United States can lead to many travel opportunities abroad. Supermarkets and food-processing companies engage experts to travel the world in search of coffee, tea, cheese, chocolate, olive oil, pasta, cookies, and other prepared foods and raw ingredients.

Would you like to design vegan wedding cakes (for such clients as Chelsea Clinton) or to create sculptures of butter or ice? Locate your hero and beg for an internship opportunity. With any luck, you may ascend to a permanent position.

Would you prefer to be a career counselor or an event planner? A food scientist or the owner of a bed & breakfast? A TV star or a food cartoonist? A literary agent or a restaurant designer? A recipe tester or a flavor maker? The curator of food exhibits or a culinary librarian?

Are you interested in humanitarian causes? Have you thought about developing hunger relief programs or helping write sustainable agricultural or fishing policy? Perhaps you would consider working for a food-related foundation or charitable cause. Or you may want to work for a local soup kitchen or a national organization like Share our Strength or Meals on Wheels, providing food for the frail and elderly. Investigate FoodCorps.org.

It's admirable to volunteer, but there are many surprisingly well-paid positions to be found creating programs to counter cooking illiteracy.

Clearly these are all vastly different career paths. But if you are able to narrow your options, it becomes considerably easier to focus

your research. If you are interested in science and technology, you may be able to strike art and design from your list. If you want to cook, explore the dozens of opportunities open to you in restaurants and food service. Similarly (or oppositely), if you yearn to become a writer, you may need to seek employment wherever a check can be found.

What Else Can I Do?

- Pastry chefs can make a living reproducing clients' houses, cars, or boats in the form of special-occasion cakes or well-tempered chocolate sculptures.
- Gingerbread-house designers can auction their "buildings" and give the money to worthy causes. It is great advertising and good public relations too. If you are seeking inspiration, look no further than Martha Stewart's famous gingerbread houses as a starting point.

Would you consider taking a highlighter and marking every one of the jobs mentioned so far with a "Nah," a "Huh?," or a "Wow! I could do that!"?

If you find yourself out of breath or confused by these many options, be comforted to know that they are only a few among many more delicious choices. Just remember, if you are doing anything you don't want to do, you are WYMBAT: wasting your money, brains, and time!

CHANGING COURSE: FROM FOOD LOVER TO CAREER CHANGER

You are taking a huge risk if you are thinking about starting a new career. Simply reading these words is a measure of your bravery, your sense of adventure, and your willingness to take charge of your life.

But whether we know it or not, we are all taking risks all the time. Even if we are classified as full-time employees, we are really freelancers. The sword hangs over our heads by a slender thread. The greatest asset we have is our ability to transform our knowledge and experience into stepping-stones to the next opportunity. Knowledge and experience are worth far more than money in the bank (though having money in the bank is very good too)!

Rather than thinking about permanence and security, we should all be anticipating—indeed, hoping for—change. Change is the only constant in the continuum of our lives.

One third of culinary students are career changers in their mid- to late thirties, and some are even older. They come from all walks of life. They are former airline pilots, lawyers, advertising executives, engineers, scientists, nurses, figure skaters, opera singers, and sales reps. They have previously worked in offices, schools, hospitals, and even in prisons. Some have served in the military or civil service. Many have already worked in restaurants and have determined that an in-depth education from a cooking school will advance their careers. *What they all share is a passion for food (though not necessarily for cooking).*

Once you decide to go to culinary school, you almost immediately have to decide whether to specialize in culinary programs or in baking and pastry arts. Be sure to examine the options available at several schools before choosing one over another.

► ► FOOD FOR THOUGHT ◀ ◀

I received a call out of the blue from someone I didn't know. He wanted some advice about his career, so I asked him to tell me about himself. His answer was, "I want to be rich." He went on to announce that he planned to open a restaurant. At this, I recalled a sheep rancher in Colorado who said, "The way to make a small fortune in this business is to start out with a large one." The same can apply in the restaurant business. I didn't relay this information to my caller.

RESTAURANT WORK IS NOT ALWAYS HOSPITABLE

Working in a restaurant (or owning one) is a dream job for many people, but it ranks among the most notoriously stressful things that you can do. It can be as grueling working in a restaurant on Friday or Saturday evening as it is being a member of the surgical team in a hospital operating room, even one engaged in brain surgery. I know, because I have tried both. (Once, after a seven-hour operation, our surgical team—known affectionately as The Nutcracker Suite—hastened to the staff dining room. On the menu was Brains in Black Butter. Aghast, we all went out for fish and chips!)

The good news is that the hospitality industry is the second largest employer nationwide, providing work for more than thirteen million people. Here's more good news: there *is* a job for you. You just have to find it. Think of how many different dates we all go through before we find the one true keeper.

Thinking Ahead

Deciding to change your career, to embark on a new venture, or even to just change jobs are all major undertakings. Doing so means thinking ahead and anticipating where you want to be in the short term, not the long term. This is because you will probably change your mind *and* change jobs several times. Most people do.

Remember: you're in charge.

You exchange your time for someone's money, but you are not an indentured servant.

To quote Robert Kennedy, "All of us might wish at times that we lived in a more tranquil world, but we don't. And if our times are difficult and perplexing, so are they challenging and filled with opportunity."

WHAT IS SUCCESS?

I was seated next to a stranger at a luncheon. Searching for a topic of conversation, I asked him for his view on the subject of success. “My son is a success,” he volunteered without a moment’s hesitation. Inwardly I groaned. “Crumbs, now I’m in for it,” I thought. I resigned myself to hearing about my companion’s wildly successful hedge-fund manager son and his adorable grandchildren. Having no means of escape, I said, “Do tell me about your son.”

So he did.

He said that his son had been a rotten kid from the day he was born. By the time he was twelve, he had already been in trouble with the law. By seventeen, the boy had dropped out of school and become a drug dealer. He made so much money that he was able to buy himself a hugely powerful and expensive motorbike. Three days later, he lost control of the bike and hit a tree. In an instant, he became a paraplegic. He would spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

Since his accident, the son has invented several valuable tools designed to help people with disabilities. He has testified before Congress on behalf of handicapped people. And yes, he is married and has three adorable children.

My luncheon friend said his son had achieved success in his journey through life.

I agree. Success comes in many guises.

FINDING YOUR NICHE, NOW

The urgent need to find a job is at the top of many minds. Even the *crème de la crème* are worried. We all have friends who are either actively looking for work or fear that they soon will be. But as has been said, “Out of crisis comes opportunity.”

Maybe we should all actively dream about what we secretly *want* to do and cast aside all those horrid, nagging fears about what we think we *have* or *ought* to do to make ends meet. When I am asked to give advice, the most important suggestion I can offer is: If you don't ask for what you want, there is close to zero percent possibility that someone will come along and offer it to you.

Your monumental task is to figure out what it is that you want. Keep an open mind. If your goal is set, figure out who can help you to achieve your objective. Everyone has dark days. Only you can brush away the inevitable doubts that will cloud the horizon and keep going.

The reason an athlete wins a tennis championship is because he has prepared his body and his mind—and hit ten million balls—before winning the final match. Along the way, he loses a few games too. Everyone does. (When an avid supporter declared that a certain politician could walk on water, the cynic replied, “Sure, but can he swim too?”) Even saints suffer.

A ONE-WAY TICKET

I very much enjoy my role as a mentor. Sometimes complete strangers call me. They sound agonized. They don't know what they want to do next. One day, a young woman made an appointment to visit me. She arrived in my office and slumped into a chair. She looked really miserable.

“I hate my job” were her first angry words. Pause. “I hate the commute.” Sniffle. “I hate the restaurant where I'm working. I hate the people I am working with. I hate the weather here. I *really* hate my boyfriend.” I waited a moment. She looked up and said tearfully, “I want to go to Florida.”

“Aha,” said I.

“It’s my grandmother,” she volunteered, “She throws a fit every time I say I want to go to Florida.” I asked her grandmother’s age: sixty-three. I then made a little calculation. Her grandmother could live thirty or thirty-five more years.

I had the answer to her problem. I suggested that either she could stay with her grandmother and throw away the next thirty years of her life, *or* she could buy a one-way ticket to Miami, find a job, and invite her grandmother to come and visit her for a vacation.

Three days later, she threw open my door waving the boarding pass for her flight to Miami. She was beaming. Her grandmother had hugged her and was already planning a vacation to Florida. Ta-dah!

FIRST THINGS FIRST

In Adam Gopnik’s book *The Table Comes First: Family, France, and the Meaning of Food*, Fergus Henderson, the creative genius of the London restaurant St. John, complained, “I don’t understand how a young couple can begin life by buying a sofa or a television. Don’t they know the table comes first? The table comes first. The table comes first, before the meal and even before the kitchen where it’s made. It precedes everything in remaining the one plausible hearth of family life, the raft to ride down the river of our existence even in the hardest times.” *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik agreed with Chef Fergus Henderson and used the concept as the title of his excellent book.