

Excerpts from **Food Jobs** by Irena Chalmers

Food Lover

Recipe for Success: Soup Peddler

By David J. Ansel, the Soup Peddler

A scant three years and four months ago, an idea occurred to me whilst sitting on a porch swing at a magical house in South Austin, Texas. What if I could make a living cooking food and taking it to people's homes? At my wits end with trying to figure out anything I could do for a living instead of being a mediocre computer programmer, I figured it was worth a try. Though I had no culinary training, I had dabbled with cooking dinners for large groups and had started spending a little time at the restaurant supply store. There I espied some little white buckets that would be perfect for taking food to folks' houses. But what would fit best in those buckets? What is the most form-fitting food in the history of the universe? What was the only thing I knew how to cook halfway decently? Soup!

Once I had the menu taken care of, I had to set my thoughts towards the delivery mechanism. Well, I figured would probably have to spend a lot of time in a car, which I don't much like. I much prefer to bike. I decided to deliver soup by bicycle around my neighborhood.

Rare Job: Chewing Gum Chewer

Cadbury's employs a professional chewer to report on the taste of its gum. It is not known if this is a full-time position nor whether it is required for the chewing to take place on the premises only.

I needed a name for the business. I retreated to the porch swing, where I get most of my best thinking done. Soup Subscription Service for Savory Soul Sustenance? Probably not. The Soup Man. Eh. Need something cute. How about Soup Peddler? Soup Peddeler? Which spelling to use? I'll use Peddler, just in case this thing gets too big for bicycles.

I sent out an e-mail to my friends and neighbors describing the service. Sunday afternoon, I'll bring you a bucket of soup on my bike. Seventeen generous customers took me up on the offer. I went out and bought an eighty-dollar pot and made gumbo in my own kitchen (not entirely legal but I had to start somewhere). Three short years later, my staff of soup makers, peddlers, and I cook and distributed ten thousand gallons of dozens of different varieties of soup to the porches of Austinites over the course of an eight-month soup season. We work out of a commercial kitchen. I have been featured in such disparate media as The Christian Science Monitor and Punk Planet. I have become the Ferris Bueller of Austin, liked and respected by hipsters, soccer moms, and tattooed punks equally. I have been referred to as an "American folk hero."

How did this happen? The task of describing the breadth and depth of the entrepreneurial effort is nearly impossible. Boot camp for the Army? Nothing. Swimming the English Channel? Yawn. Raising a child? Yeah, sorta. Spending an eternity pushing a boulder up a hill? You're starting to get there. Of course, most of those comparison cases have their rewards, and entrepreneurship does too. Most of them change you on such a deep level that you never look at the world or the people around you the same way again. The same goes for starting your own business. It takes every ounce of your soul, and the risk is that you'll be left a desiccated shell of a human being with nothing to show for your efforts. The potential reward is huge, though, not the least of which is having your destiny under your own control as much as is humanly possible.

A Job on the Line

By Mat Nugent, *culinary student*

“Fire 21, 34, 10, 11, and 27,” screams the chef as he sauces and wipes the order of scallops. I look at the tickets to see what to plate for each table. I have no table 21 or 34 on my board. A sick feeling overcomes me. I stand motionless and stiff. A bead of sweat drips off my forehead in slow motion. The sound of the chef bellowing in my ear wakes me from my trance: “Where is my food,” demands the chef. “I don’t know.” “Find it. Now!”

Sure, this scenario is nothing new to the experienced line cook, but for the novice, the sound of a screaming chef instills panic, anxiety, and fear. It is my first night on the grill and I’m going down in flames. What do I need on the grill? I look at the tickets on the front of the line and quickly toss on the fire a chicken and three filets. I cover the meats with pie pans like I have seen others do in the past and reconfirm that I have everything I need to complete all the fired tables. Just then the sound of the ticket machine sounds like an alarm. More orders are coming in. “We’ve got two ten tops walking in,” announces the runner. “Order five filets — two medium-rare, three well-done, three chicken, four lamb and five strips — all medium-rare,” shouts the sous chef. Numerous profanities enter my head as I dive into my reach-in refrigerator for all the meats. As I begin filling up the grill with protein, I notice that my fire is dwindling away.

Rare Job: *Egg Peeler*

Barbara Dale-Avant, an employee of Atlantic Food Inc.’s cooked-egg division, in Hemingway, South Carolina, holds the record for number of hard-boiled eggs peeled per minute. Her best total was 48, which means that she dawdled away exactly 1-1/4 seconds on each egg. And her boss, Wilbur Ivey, is not a man to tolerate bits of shell among the eggs, which are shipped to East Coast restaurants. To get these perfect results, he is willing to allow 3 seconds per egg, but that’s only when peelers are first starting to peel on the job.

“A real clumsy person couldn’t do this,” remarked one of Avant’s peelers, somewhat unnecessarily. Another confided that the members of the six-woman team (who together once peeled 10,000 eggs in an eight-hour shift,) sometimes throw eggs at each other, recreationally, although Mr. Ivey does not entirely approve. On the other hand, he is clearly no spoilsport, as he is credited with devising the initiation rite for new egg-peeler: he slips a raw egg into a recruit’s first batch.

The sous chef glares at me. “You better get that fire up quick, the dining room just got flat.” I have no idea what he means, but I know it can’t be good. (Later, I find out that “flat” means every available seat in the restaurant is filled.) Within minutes, the grill looks like a scene from Satan’s Alley, the back half is ghost-white and one of my chickens is on fire. The chef returns and calls for tables.

“Break it down.” Relief fills my entire body. I feel like I just ran a marathon at a dead sprint. I walk back into the prep area and gulp down a pitcher of

water. The chef appears and says “Its fun, huh?” I consider this. I lost three steaks, one lamb and I incinerated a chicken. I am dead tired. The hair on my right arm is scorched and the burn on my right wrist is filled ash and grease. It’s midnight on a Saturday and all I want to do is go home and pass out. But I didn’t quit – I stuck it out and held my own. So was that fun? Hell yeah!

Career Changer

Recipe for Success: Grape Advocate

By Jim Howard

Most intelligent people fail to see how working as a criminal defense trial lawyer is the perfect training to promote grapes. But there's actually a strong link between the two. Getting a jury to find your client not guilty often means finding a compelling story about how fate, bum luck and bad police work has led to an unjust criminal charge. Getting jaded New York magazine writers to write about a product that has changed little in the past 10,000 years requires telling a compelling story about, well, whatever you can think of that is new, exciting and of interest to their readers. Still, I did not set out to represent the California Table Grape Commission. I set out to be a lawyer.

One year when my wife and I were living in Iowa, I made Thanksgiving dinner for a dozen people, including a newspaper editor who was impressed with the meal. When the job as restaurant critic for the paper came open, this editor figured I knew food and suggested I throw my name in to the mix.

After writing an essay and competing in an anonymous reviewing contest I landed the job. Suddenly, I was being paid to eat and my legal career was doomed. A few years later, we ended up in Fresno, California, and while I worked there as a restaurant critic, pickings became slim once the chain restaurants moved in. One day, I received a call from the California Table Grape Commission.

Frankly, I'd never heard of the commission. I didn't know what a commodity group was and I could only guess at exactly what they meant by "table" grape. Incredibly, the job requirements turned out to be an ideal fit with my varied background — food, writing, reporting, photography and law.

The back-story to my current world is intriguing. The California legislature created the commission in 1967 to increase demand for fresh California grapes. As the person in charge of domestic promotion, I still write — just switched from stories and reviews to news releases, brochures and speeches. The complex issues facing a billion dollar agricultural industry requires the strategic thinking I'd learned in law school and I soon discovered that the best way to get magazine editors to write about your product was to take them to dinner. Once again, I was being paid to eat.

Rare Job: *Garbage Anthropologist*

William Rathje is professor of anthropology at the University of Arizona, where a study called The Garbage Project has existed for many years. Says Rathje, "The food that we throw away can be very revealing."

Among the study's findings:

- Halloween garbage contains candy wrappers but no candy, while Valentine's Day garbage contains both wrappers and candy. "On Halloween what's important is the candy; on Valentine's Day what's important is the gesture," Rathje concludes. (One could also conjecture that children do not throw away candy, but some adults do)
- The more repetitious a family's diet is, the less food they throw away. (They keep buying the same limited number of foods and eating them without wasting any surplus)
- Paradoxically, more food that is considered in short supply is discarded than foods considered abundant. This is because consumers tend to overbuy the "scarcer" foods, which then go bad before they are eaten.