

All About Prep Chefs

The prep chef is the lowest chef on the totem pole, doing all the grunt work before the Artiste de Culinaire strolls in and makes the cooking magic happen. A person could probably make a good career out of offering door-to-door slicing and dicing for every John or Jane cooking dinner at home in their neighborhood. What home cook hasn't realized at the crucial moment that nothing is worse than realizing you need to drain and chop the sun-dried tomatoes sitting in the unopened bottle on the counter or uncork a bottle of Pinot Grigio for a pan sauce while you are supposed to be stirring constantly.

Every time Emeril reaches under the counter and magically pulls out a bowl of minced onions or seasoned bread crumbs, a prep chef had a hand in it. Prep chefs never get their own TV show. There's no fun in watching somebody peel, chop, mince, mix, measure, slice, dice, and blend, then store the results in a Tupperware in the fridge. Of course it looks easy for Rachael Ray to whip a meal together in ten minutes. When she needs three quarters of a cup of grated Parmesan, a little bowl of it instantly appears at her fingertips, leaving out the serf behind the scenes who grated the Parmesan and measured it.

Duties

Meats and poultry: Have to be properly thawed, butchered, trimmed, and cut to whatever the recipe calls for. Marinating is also something a prep chef has to think about.

Fish and seafood: Must be scaled and deboned. Shrimp and other shellfish have to be peeled. Other slicing and marinating as the recipe calls for.

Veggies and fruits: May have to be washed, peeled, sliced, diced, grated, deseeded, chopped, or shredded. A salad is 100% prep work. Garnishes are often all prep work as well.

Doughs and mixes are always prepped. Blenders, juicers, and mixers are part of a prep chef's life as well. Anything that has to be done before the ingredients actually get added to the pot or pan, the prep chef lines it all up. The French phrase is "mise en place" and that's just what you'll practice as a prep chef.

Prep work also involves equipment. A pastry pan might need greasing or an oven might need preheating. The home cook doesn't think about this, but even stove pans should be preheated to a specific temperature before the action starts.

Tools of the trade

As much as possible you want to automate everything. There are blenders, mixers, juicers, slicing machines, graters, presses, and choppers.

For measuring there are cups, spoons, and scales. Hopefully you have enough of these, because reusing the same measuring device means you have to wash it and dry it after every use. Don't forget temperature and time are also something you measure, and so there are thermometers and timers!

Knives of every description and category, plus peelers, whips, spatulas, graters, crushers, skimmers, strainers, brushes, ballers, scrapers, tongs, cutting boards, shears, and bowls, bowls, bowls.

The Skills

The biggest asset is speed. A line of prep chefs resembles a factory assembly line or a NASCAR racing track pit crew. There's teamwork, coordination, and planning. Prep chef is a high-energy job, and thinking three steps ahead of the schedule is absolutely required.

One can get by with the basic culinary school background. One area which a prep chef absolutely must be expert at is safe food handling. A prep chef has to be a certified Safe Food Handler and usually be trained in (HACCP) Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point as well.

High energy is always needed. With enough experience, a prep chef will always find work. Usually a prep chef is just one stop in a chef's career, and many places rotate prep work. A novice or apprentice chef working their way through school will usually find themselves doing a lot of prep work.

"The Iron Chef"

The famous TV show "Iron Chef" is instructive in the ways of the prep chef. This show is a competitive cooking event. The show's resident chefs may be picked by a challenger chef for a head-to-head competition to prepare three dishes featuring a key ingredient. The key ingredient is only announced at the beginning of the show after the challengers are "on their marks", and each chef, teamed with two assistant chefs, must race to complete the task in time for the panel of judges to taste their creations and declare a winner. All in sixty minutes!

This format of the show allows one to see prep work in action. While a fully stocked larder of just about every kind of food is on hand to complete dishes with, almost none of the prep work is done and each chef must take into account the preparation time for their meals before deciding what to make.

The action is an astounding circus of kitchen acrobatics. Unlike showman chefs working in themed restaurants, there is no time for flashy stunts for the sake of entertainment here. All the action here has a purpose, and the action proceeds at a feverish pace. Sometimes the chefs start off doing something with a really mysterious purpose, and the commentators will try to explain what they are doing. The show is always instructive to prep chefs to watch.

If at all possible, you should forgo the American version and catch the native Japanese version. While the dubbing in English has kind of a hilarious 1970's kung fu effect, the Japanese version is a much more cooking-focused show. While the American version cuts the camera to the commentators or celebrity guests on the show, the Japanese version almost never takes the camera off of the frenzied activity in the kitchen arena as long as the cooking is happening.

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