

THE SIMPLEST KITCHEN ON EARTH

Last summer, my family and I spent a week vacationing in the Rocky Mountain resort town of Breckenridge, Colorado. After a long day's journey, my children, then six and two years of age, were exhausted. They woke early, tolerated two planes that carried them half way across the United States, and then finally endured a ninety minute car ride before we reached our destination. We quickly dropped off our luggage and immediately left in search of somewhere to eat. We needed something simple and quick. The kids were fading fast.

Witness to an Operations Miracle

We found a local restaurant on main street called Rasta Pasta. They had a variety of pasta dishes. The restaurant is small, about 60 seats, but the menu seemed to offer a few dishes that were kid friendly and we were not in the mood for a restaurant scavenger hunt. Just as we had finished reviewing the menu posted outside, it started to rain. We headed inside and were seated in the restaurant which was a little less than one-third full at the time. But with the rain came an onslaught of patrons. By my estimation, there were about thirty people who were seated at the same time. I began to cringe.

There I was with a tired family in a small restaurant. Thirty patrons seated simultaneously. A very small kitchen. Only two servers were on the floor. For those of you with hospitality experience, you can appreciate the mental math that was going through my head. I could not figure out how they were going to pull this off, and to be honest I did not give them very good odds of doing so. I braced for the worst, keeping the kids entertained to the best of my ability, and then hoped for the best as I watched the two servers go to work.

Our salads and garlic bread arrived quickly, as they were prepared in advance. That helped to keep the grumbling tummies in order for a few minutes. With the kids content, my attention began to shift more towards the actions of the two servers and two cooks. The servers moved through the restaurant with incredible precision, while the cooks were busy but not out of control. My attention bounced from family to restaurant staff, back and forth. Within just ten

minutes, our food had arrived. I thought we were fortunate to get our meals first, but when I scanned the restaurant, nearly every patron already had their entrée. It truly was an operational miracle, or was it?

Dissecting a Miracle

When our server had delivered food to all of her tables, she checked back to ask us “so, how is everything. Is there anything I can get you?” My response caught her off guard. “That was a thing of beauty,” I told her. I then had to explain my hospitality background and congratulate her and the rest of the restaurant’s staff on their recently completed performance. And a fine performance it was. Thirty people fed in just over ten minutes in an a la carte, full service restaurant.

Before leaving, I took a closer look at the “kitchen.” This was the piece of the puzzle that pushed my astonishment over the top. The entire equipment package consisted of two countertop six burner ranges, a single six-foot refrigerated preparation table, and a conveyor toaster. That was it. End of story. Being the sick, hospitality geek that I am, I arranged a time to return the following day to the restaurant, during off-peak hours, and interview the manager to find out just how they did it. I wanted to know how they made it work.

The interview was great and incredibly enlightening, because the system was so simple. They had implemented terrific menu planning and cross utilization of product. They had developed a menu of hot entrées that could all be prepared in a similar manner – by sauté on the range. They prepared cold entrée salads from the same refrigerated preparation table used to support the hot a la carte station. The salads were pre-made and the garlic bread was run constantly. With just three pieces of cooking equipment and a refrigerator on the line, they were able to offer incredible service.

And not to be overlooked, I believed that the attitude of the staff played an essential role in the restaurant’s ability to perform. Let me give you one quick example. During my interview with the restaurant manager, I asked what they did when the single conveyor toaster went down. How would they produce their garlic bread? He said that they were pretty fortunate. The toaster was extremely

reliable and did not go down much – maybe once or twice in a season. Usually, he shared, damage to the toaster was a result of an impatient server poking the conveyor to try and get their bread out quickly and, in the process, destroying one of the heating elements. “What would you do then?” I asked as a follow up question. I was then informed by the manager that there were three simple steps to remedy the situation. First, he would berate the server (half jokingly, half seriously) for being so impatient. Second, he would take an unused sheet pan and throw it on top of the back burners, which were raised, on one of the countertop ranges. Finally, when the shift was over, he would spend thirty minutes unsuccessfully trying to find the element he ordered before season for an event such as this before giving up and calling a service technician to repair the unit. I think you see what I mean by attitude playing an important role. The staff all took their jobs seriously enough, but not too seriously.

Lessons from the Miracle

So what can we learn from this dining experience? Plenty. But there are two primary lessons that I derived. Let’s start with the menu planning. The restaurant featured a menu and an equipment mix, despite being limited, that worked well together in total harmony. Both cooks could work on hot or cold entrées at the same time. The method of production was similar for most dishes. The cross utilization of food ingredients had been well conceived. When the menu and the equipment mix are not in harmony, seamless production is a near impossibility.

The next lesson has to do with the planning process as well – planning and design of the restaurant. What helped their success was thinking through the operation during the initial restaurant planning process, but not over-thinking. Some of the clients I have worked with in the past insist that the kitchen will “never work” unless they have every single piece of equipment they can conceive in exactly the right place. I am not sure I agree with this, as kitchens always evolve, and often do so between the time the design is completed and the time the restaurant opens. Then, I have had other clients that have not thought

through their operation enough before engaging in the planning and design of their facilities. This is not good either. I do not mean to sound like Goldie Locks, but the level of planning needs to be just right. Think through the operation, but don't over-think. Keep things simple and logical. Whether in a quick service environment or a five star luxury resort, just the right amount of planning will increase the likelihood for success exponentially.