



Is it fear or passion that is damaging a chef's career?

I recently became aware of a research paper by Michael J. Gill and Robin Burrow, University of Cardiff, UK ("The Function of Fear in Institutional Maintenance: Feeling frightened as an essential ingredient in haute cuisine")

The findings of the research that "fear" was an essential primary element in the operation of a commercial kitchen suggested to me there is a substantial difference between English and Australian Commercial Kitchen Cultures.

I respond with my reality, which I would like to share with colleagues for perceptions and debate.

Summary:

- *Fear is not a major driver of a contemporary commercial kitchen culture in Australia.*
 - *Is not indicative of current general Australian commercial kitchen practices.*
 - *Is in a substantially declining phase and not a reliable benchmark.*
- *Australian Kitchen culture is now influenced by social protections altering kitchen culture to be substantial different from its historical roots.*
 - *My reality of the ingredient that most negatively influences the Australian scene:*
 - *Passion, commonly promoted as a vital driver in a chef's career, has been excessively encouraged to become obsessive, and now harmful.*
 - *The inappropriate emphasis of passion as a career driver is responsible for many serious issues in commercial cookery.*
 - *Chefs who are obsessively passionate usually ultimately fail or leave the industry.*
- *The trained new age guns are enthusiastic, flexible with good people skills and unlikely to use fear as a behaviour weapon. However suggest inadequately industrially prepared to understand professionalism.*

I am surprised and respectfully disagree with the inferences of the paper that fear is an essential ingredient in the daily conduct of a contemporary commercial kitchen. With only the exception of a very few inexperienced managers (usually untrained, pretentious head or sous chefs) or occasionally in unprofessional work situations; this situation is not valid to modern Australia.

Fear in my opinion is not a fundamental mindset or “modus operandi” in a modern commercial kitchen operation, nor in the development of its contemporary practitioners, nor a factor found in the very much smaller inconsequential sector of “haute cuisine”. Particularly as the industry has generally passed on from the days of real haute cuisine and now operates mainly in mass family dining. (That is also, if we can actually find modern chefs who fully understand the whole notion of “Haute Cuisine”).

“Haute Cuisine” or the esoterically understood “higher kitchen”, only represents a very small and diminishing sector of the industry both nationally, and I would have thought globally, and is not a representative sample to suggest that fear is the main issues that destabilise commercial cookery as a sensible career path.

We find many inhibiting negatives still exist in the pathway to becoming a cook /chef, including examples of relative remuneration, unsocial working conditions, inadequate training, being led by the blind, gender discrimination, rampant wage dishonesty etc.

These factors exist across the whole commercial cookery industry irrespective of the sector, whether fine dining, or in the wider and larger eating styles that now mainly cater for family dining.

Modern commercial kitchens operations are, socially, economically, productively, environmentally and systematically very different from the foundation haute cuisine model, which has very little association to the mainstream current Australian commercial kitchen.

Obviously there have been huge changes; even breakfast, lunch and dinner as an eating patterns is fast becoming anachronistic, as more and more people are now eating smaller portions with an “on a demand when hungry attitude”. (Which I suggest is the next industrial revolution the “chef” will need to respond to).

Notwithstanding; these changes should imply the industry’s psychological conditions should have improved; however, the contrary is the case.

So why?

I would accept that the fear factor was one of a number of fundamental practices in a cookery career in embryonic eras, especially when social protections were unavailable, but that environment changed at least a generation ago.

It's not fear, it's a different common mental condition that is commonly found.

I would argue the foremost influential negative “mindset” is the generally misunderstood and promoted term “passion” that is incorrectly promoted as a unique characteristic essential to be a successful commercial chef.

There are basic issues.

We take a young highly influenceable person, who is usually academically unsuccessful, however, some evidence identifies many as "highly intelligent and unschooled" who are often late developers and bored with the rigid education stream.

Then place them into a highly strung environment where considerable pressures of timelines, multicultural involvements, unsocial conditions and emotional driven experiences conflict with their formative family upbringing.

We then advise a highly persuadable personality, they need to be overtly passionate to be successful, more often than not, without their mentor understanding the inherent dangers of being obsessively passionate or providing counselling to guide them to control and sensibly use their emotions. Then add fuel to the fire; as the young person perceives their leader (usually from "old school") who advises them, is seen as highly successful, passionate with overt emotional bully behaviours and therefore he/she must be correct, then throw in reality TV as final evidence, all of which cultivates obsessive passion.

I do not believe fear is a concern, but suggest it is obsessive passion that has far more a negative influence in a commercial kitchen.

Insecurity is a natural human pheromone and inherent in any human endeavour, basic fear would naturally emerge as the underpinning driving force in any commercial kitchen, as it would in other emotionally driven disciplines, but certainly not uniquely greater or different in commercial cookery.

It is well documented that, obsessive passion results in worsening problems in work, social and relationships often leading to euphoria or depression.

It's not fear that has led to the demise of many chefs, it is the propaganda that has led some chefs believe they need to have an obsessive passionate approach to be successful.

From experience, I find it difficult to accept the main driver to be a modern chef is a fear focused development. I even go as far as to suggest almost the opposite condition abounds, where "fearless" characterises the successful chef.

Even the reasons for the conflicts in a commercial kitchen arise because of the fearless temperament in the brigade, conflicts that are often unjustifiably blamed on multicultural issues.

If anything, in today's professional kitchen, any form of fear is mainly hidden in the head chef, for the fear of losing a good artisan.

It's a question of degree. "enthusiasm", or "passion", or professionally interested vis living and breathing cooking. Let's stop encouraging and expecting cooks and chefs to be passionate at their own expense and teach / encourage professionalism across the industry.

We need to forget the fear factor in culinary arts and concentrate on educating newcomers that love of a job does not equate to being obsessively passionate. We need to educate newcomers how to deal with stress and be satisfied with their occupation, and what it is to be a professional.

I also go as far as to suggest we desperately need to educate both novices and many senior practitioners in Australia what professionalism actually is.
If not; what parent in their right mind would encourage their child to be involved with this career?