DESSERT
IT’S ON THE MENU IN CHICAGO

beyond millennials
genz on the horizon

wedding cakes
rise to the occasion

perfectly seasoned with botanicals
There’s a reason many restaurants call the traditional pre-service staff meal a family meal. Not only is it frequently the only time when back of the house and front of the house share some informal time together, but it plants the seeds from which a unique restaurant culture grows.

Just as the family dinner table is often the focal point for an evolving family unit, so can it be for restaurant personnel, as well. The meal can even offer the opportunity to impact the restaurant menu.

Generally, though, the before-service seating is a way to utilize leftovers and minimize waste, which helps to maintain a fragile bottom line. But for many restaurants, the staff/family meal is an integral part of maintaining a high-functioning operation with dedicated employees.

Made with Love

Arlin Smith is general manager of Big Tree’s three Portland, Maine, restaurants: Hugo’s, Eventide Oyster Co. and The Honey Paw. “You have to retain employees these days. It is difficult to find good help,” he says. “Sometimes, you have to spend a little more time and money to make the job appealing and a quality place to work.”

Smith, a graduate of The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, New York, founded Big Tree in 2015 with partners Andrew Taylor and Mike Wiley, both chefs. “When I was going to school, I wanted to be a chef, because I really loved kitchens,” Smith says. He supported himself during school by working as a server, however, and realized that his back-of-the-house experience gave him a good foundation for front of the house. “I also discovered that I loved it. So, I continued on to get my manager’s degree.”

While Hugo’s, Eventide Oyster Co. and The Honey Paw have separate storefronts and entrances, they share a single kitchen. Each restaurant has its own line, and there is a larger prep area with a walk-in cooler. All three restaurants share the staff meal, which is served at 3:30 p.m. every day and prepared by multiple people.

“From the beginning, we didn’t want our staff meal to be an afterthought,” says Smith. “When I was working in other restaurants, there were days when I would say, ‘Why did I wait around for this?’ The meal was just such a disappointment. It totally defeated the purpose of having a family meal.”

At the three Big Tree establishments, there is always a well-balanced family meal consisting of a salad, a protein and a starch. If there is meat in one of the dishes, a meatless dish is served, as well. Meals are planned and coordinated by prep managers, who

Opposite, clockwise from top: 1) Big Tree Hospitality’s three restaurants share the staff meal, which is served at 3:30 p.m. every day. 2) & 3) Staff come together to share a common meal at Café and Bar Lurcat, where brisket might be on the menu. 4) A salad bar is part of the staff meal at Acadia.
family meal

also often prepare them. There are frequent special theme days, for instance, pizza on Tuesday, which has the added advantage of using leftovers to make a variety of pies.

“We have the meals set up so that even if you are not on that day and you want to come in and grab a bite, you are encouraged,” says Smith. “We look at it as an employee benefit. The fact that our employees can count on it and see that a lot of love goes into its preparation is really good for morale. I don’t know many restaurants that do it on this level, but when we see the way the staff reacts and how they thank the kitchen, we know why we are doing it this way.

“We are conscious of food costs—we don’t overspend. We realize that this is a necessity, and we just factor that into our program.”

HISTORY LESSON ON THE SIDE

Not only do family meals cement a restaurant’s culture, but they can also provide understanding and education on the history and evolution of food and dining.

Ryan McCaskey is chef/owner of Acadia in Chicago’s South Loop. Before opening the restaurant, he worked with Grant Achatz at Trio and Rick Tramonto at TRU, both in Chicago, and served as executive chef at Courtright’s in Willow Springs, Illinois. “I take staff meals seriously,” he says. “Sure, I am not making food that we serve to customers out front, but it has to be good comfort food made well and really satisfying. We also frequently have an educational component to our staff meals. I realized that a lot of the kids in the kitchen just don’t have the point of reference we had as beginning chefs.”

During a meeting, when McCaskey would tell a story about a dish not often served today, most of the cooks had never heard of it. “I realized that they are doing the same dishes over and over, because every station in the kitchen has two or three dishes to produce. It occurred to me that having them cook some of these older dishes would keep them stimulated and they would learn something, as well.”
On Sunday evenings, dishes for the staff meal are assigned to and prepared by cooks who would usually be at a different station. For instance, garde manger may be in charge of making Swiss steak, and the fish station prepares carrots and root vegetables.

Every few weeks, a different cook is assigned to research and create a dish that is not ordinarily on the menu. The dish is critiqued by the staff, given points, and winners get a prize, perhaps a knife, a cookbook or a bag. At the end of the year, the scores are added up, and whoever has the most points gets a free ticket to McCaskey’s house in Maine.

He says the contest forges comradery and brings the front of the house and the back of the house together. “The front gets really excited when we do the contests. They want to see who is the best, as well. It just keeps everyone together—they banter with one another. And on the off-chance someone does a poor job or a station is off, quite honestly, all the other stations make fun of them and everyone learns something from it.”

Sharing a Common Meal

Mike Mueller is executive chef of four D’Amico & Partners restaurants in Naples, Florida—Café and Bar Lurcat, Campiello, Continental and Masa—and two in Minnesota—Campiello in Eden Prairie and Parma in Bloomington. He is, however, primarily in the kitchen at Lurcat. Before moving to Naples, he worked in the New York kitchens of Jean-Georges, Nobu and Andrew Carmellini’s A Voce.

At Lurcat, Mueller uses the family mealtime to educate. He invites restaurant vendors to bring their products to staff and talk about them. “Family meals accomplish many things,” he says. “It is a way to move some product that needs to be utilized, a way to try out new dishes and ideas, and a time when everybody stops their day and comes together to share a common meal.”

Unlike at most restaurants, Mueller often cooks the family meal himself, inviting a farmer or wine distributor to bring in product and talk about it to staff. “We’ve had our produce growers and egg producers come in, and even my truffle farmer talked about history, growing truffles and how to serve them,” he says.

Teaching Opportunity

In the New York suburb of Huntington, the recently opened Jema has at its helm chef Franco Sampogna. Born in Brazil, he moved to Villefranche-sur-Mer, France, at the age of 17, where he learned the basics at La Mère Germaine. He then spent more than five years in kitchens working under Alain Ducasse, Fabrice Vulin and Guy Savoy before moving to the U.S. to launch Jema.

“We eat much earlier here,” says Sampogna, comparing staff mealtimes in the U.S. to those in Europe. “Over there, we ate at 6:30. Here, it is 4:30, and everybody gets together then and has a meal, which is social and fun. We don’t talk about the restaurant at family meal. We come together again at 5:15, and talk about the evening then.”

Sampogna uses staff meals as teaching opportunities for his staff. “When I was younger, the chef used to give me a new recipe every day. To do it, I would get to work a little early to practice,” he says. “And this is something I try to do with my new guys who are just out of culinary school. If they are on, say, garde manger, they can practice cooking fish. If they are on fish, they can make a salad and a vinaigrette. It is fun for them, and it is fun for the rest of the staff.”

Staff meals allow the kitchen to use what may go to waste. At Jema, for example, if there are short ribs on the menu, whatever meat is left after they have been cleaned and trimmed can become enchiladas. Chicken wings and thighs become a meal, as well.

“What I have learned,” says Sampogna, “is if you want to keep employees happy, you pay them well, treat them well and feed them well. That is what we are trying to do here.”

Jan Greenberg, author of Hudson Valley Harvest (Countryman Press, 2003), is based in Rhinebeck, New York.