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The Art of Recipe Writing

Mark Keinhofer, MBA ♦ Today's Restaurant Contributor

There is something missing in the restaurant industry. The culinary and management teams have a strong passion for the menu items that they place on the menu. They indeed spend a significant amount of time to ensure that the dish or drink has the proper flavor profile, quality and presentation. The process is a true art. Yet, there is a critical piece that in many cases is either incomplete or even worse, does not exist. That missing piece is the art of recipe writing. Too many cases, the proper documentation for what we are all about is either incomplete or missing all together. The operators that do not have the documentation in place are the ones that may struggle or even worse fail.

Documented recipes provide so many benefits that it is important to understand why they are needed. Recipes first provide a standard that is expected every time it is executed. The recipe ultimately becomes a training tool not only for new employees but to also ensure quality and consistency with all employees. Consistent performance of the recipe is critical and the documentation becomes the standard that all live by. Recipes also become the means of how we identify the costs. Without a complete recipe, you cannot identify the cost. A simple review of the completeness of the recipes can tell you so much.

Recipes are more complicated that some imagine. There is quite a bit that can be maintained on a recipe depending on how much detail you desire. The more detail, the better the standard becomes. Let's first look at what we would call the header information. This is the general information regarding the recipe including the title of the recipe, prep times, cook times and the yield of the recipe. Although this seems basic, in many cases the most important piece of data that goes undocumented is the yield of the recipe. The yield plays an important role not only in determining what the end result of the recipe is but it is also needed to determine proper costs and to account for any associated processes and losses.

Documented ingredient line items need to have greater detail too. In many cases when recipes are written, the ingredients are documented very generically. As an example, a recipe will have an ingredient called 'tomatoes'. When looking at the produce order guide, you will see many variations of tomatoes that are being purchased (i.e. roma, heirloom, pear, cherry, beefsteak, green, yellow, etc.). By being documented generically, not only are you not able to communicate the proper standard, you also cannot assign the proper cost.

Another ingredient level mistake that is made is documenting the processes. Let's say that the line item that is listed states "diced tomatoes", now we have two issues. The first, of course, is what type of tomato is being used. The second is who is actually dicing the tomatoes. If we are dicing the tomatoes in house, we need a recipe to account for the process and possible loss. Too many times internal processes go undocumented. Although it may be a simple process (i.e. dicing tomatoes), we need a recipe to account for the

loss and time it takes to process the ingredients. Although it may be a simple process and a recipe may not be needed for training personnel, it is needed for costing. Think about all the processes that are conducted internally where we may want to account for the process: blanching, dicing, chopping, julienning, thawing, etc. If purchased pre-diced, then we need to identify that as well.

As an effective training tool, the recipe must also have a method or how the recipe is executed from start to finish. Ideally, the ingredients should be listed in the order used and the method should match the process. Without a documented method, the recipe cannot possibly become an effective tool to train and create a standard to abide by. The methods become a critical part of standardization, quality control and consistency. It is important that they are documented well and match the process.

The methods become a critical part of standardization, quality control and consistency.

Writing a recipe with portion control tools is very common and should be used. One missing component is the effect it has on costing. In many cases recipes are writing utilizing various utensils (i.e. cup, tablespoon, teaspoon, spoon, etc.) but the quantity of product is not identified. The density of the product comes into play. A cup of basil does not weigh the same as a cup of granulated sugar. For costing we want to identify what the proper amount of the ingredient is being used.

There are many other aspects of recipe maintenance that create greater detail to the above areas such as identifying the tools and equipment, storage instructions, food safety, pictures, and with systems, training videos. There are many aspects to a properly documented recipe and the details matter. The recipe becomes an integral part of what the business is all about. Unfortunately, too many times the recipe is either incomplete or missing altogether. It facilitates training, creating performance standards, and ultimately is the necessary tool for costing and the menu engineering process. Yes, the creating and passion for food is an art. Writing a recipe is an art as well. Without the documented recipe, the business will not have a critical piece to succeed. The recipe ultimately affects the success and profitability of the company.

Mark Keinhofer is the President and CEO of Return On Ingredients LLC and has over 20 years in management accounting experience including ten years in restaurant industry. He is an international speaker on recipe costing and menu engineering. He can be reached at (614) 558-2239 and Mark@ReturnOnIngredients.com.