

## Rules of Engagement

Helping students grasp the real-world stakes of a lesson is a struggle that many teachers face. As culinary instructors we try to simulate a live service, but demonstrating all the responsibilities of a chef, all the decisions that a chef needs to make, all the people that a chef needs to direct, and all the stress that a chef needs to manage can be challenging. A colleague in Hospitality was having similar issues stressing to students the importance of various service standards that lead to guest satisfaction. To solve this problem, we borrowed from the TV show, *Top Chef*. At the beginning of the semester, we break our classes (one culinary, one hospitality) into two teams of about ten each, create two bigger blended teams between both classes, and task the two teams with creating their own restaurants to run for a shift at the end of the semester. At stake are bragging rights and, more importantly, a free pass out of our end-of-semester deep cleaning. It has become our own, community college version of the *Top Chef* challenge, “Restaurant Wars.”

The first requirement of the project is to have a communication plan established for the group. We want the groups to run as autonomously as possible, but we still need a way to make sure that everyone is pulling their weight. This emphasizes the importance of communication and making sure that everyone is on the same page. Yes, there are disagreements, but part of being a good co-worker is acknowledging the issue and reaching a compromise that benefits the greater good of the group.

Next, the groups have to come up with a name and theme for their restaurant. The theme for their food should be well represented through the music, drink selection, service style, and décor. We remind students that we are asking them to put together a full restaurant, not just a menu. Sometimes a music selection just does not fit—“Enter Sandman” and steak frites anyone?—or the menu items do not correspond with the dining room décor—seashells and water features but no seafood would not make much sense. The communication and leadership in a group reveals itself here, and often this is where we see the most issues. On execution day, you can tell which team truly worked together and which team had too many chefs stirring the pot.

Teams receive a budget of \$400—which they must apportion between food and décor—to present their vision to 25 guests and three judges. The guests each pay \$15 to help cover the cost of the project. We offer restaurant

reservations to the students’ family and friends first, but then open it to the public if they do not fill the seats. Menus for each restaurant must have three courses with two selections per course. Our students quickly realize that their favorite dish is more than just ingredients on a plate. Budgeting your money wisely across an entire menu is challenging, and even more so when you have to share it with the front-of-house staff as well. This is where we’ll usually see some creativity and cross-utilization. Does the dish require Gulf Red Snapper or can it use “by-catch” for a cheaper, more sustainable option? Can ingredients be fully stretched—can the tops of carrots from a main selection be used for a vinaigrette on a salad course? Our students have also fundraised, secured donations, and even brought in decorations from home, the same tactics that are employed by savvy restaurant owners trying to make their opening date.

Students have to learn to budget not just money, but time as well. Communicating a vision clearly and concisely so others can follow it is essential in the professional world. Too many chefs learn too late that they can’t be in two places at once. During this project, students learn to write and follow prep lists far enough in advance that they’re not chained to a prep table for 24 straight hours before opening. On the dining room side, it takes time to transform a blank room into a dining room that matches a chosen theme and reservation list. Cleaning, lighting, centerpieces, napkin folds, tablecloths, and polishing glasses and utensils are not one-person jobs—teamwork and communication are vital to accomplish these tasks. Budgeting and scheduling so that you do not run out of time or resources during pursuit of the perfect dining experience is at the crux of the service industry, and may be one of the toughest aspects to teach in our industry. Even successful restaurateurs get it wrong sometimes.

Scheduling the staff for service the day of opening is another fun wrinkle in the project. A little humility and honesty are needed when accurately assessing one’s own skillset as well as the skills of their teammates. In addition, students navigate how to work with someone they may have disagreed with on a previous detail of the assignment. We even have the presenting team schedule their opponents to work with them as servers, cooks, bussers, dishwashers, or whatever other roles need to be filled before, during, and after service. The presenting team is charged with training their staff and making sure all duties are being performed well. This helps awaken our students to the real-life concern of working with people on different levels of buy-

---

in. Effective training, proper motivation, delegation, and supervision are all concepts at work here. My colleague and I will and do step in to combat negative competitiveness by alerting both teams that anything less than their best effort will result in a failing grade and having to clean, regardless of which team wins. This also helps us to teach a little humility to our students. Working hard, and with pride, at bussing tables or washing dishes gives them a better understanding of what those entry-level jobs do, how important they are to the function of the restaurant, and why those employees should be valued.

Even as restaurant service begins, the learning continues. Did teams order enough food? Have they done enough prep? Can they navigate an allergy concern? Is there a station that is overloaded that needs to rotate people over to help elsewhere? Did someone's grandma just punch someone else's mom to get the last roll? (Okay, that hasn't happened yet, but the students have to deal with it if it does!) To help us judge, we invite a panel of industry professionals to dine with us. This helps the students get a fuller assessment of their project beyond the grade given them by my colleague or myself. The judges grade the food on taste, appearance, execution, and creativity. The dining room is graded on everything from ambiance, how attentive the server was, and whether judges were thanked upon their departure. We do a post-service meeting with the presenting team and give them the judges' feedback. We also ask them what they felt went well or what fell flat. The feedback and self-reflection help to reinforce the learning outcomes for the project.

The competitiveness this project induces is another key characteristic and experience that successful restaurant owners need to succeed. Throughout the semester, we hear the smack talk and see students trying to break into the other team's meetings; we recognize when students have heard something in other classes that help their team in Restaurant Wars, so it is evident that they are more attentive in other areas of their curriculum as well.

Our Restaurant Wars project has become the talk of our program. Other students come in to cheer on their friends or volunteer their time to help. Some of the students involved ask to come back as judges or sign up for the opposing class in a subsequent semester so they can go through it again! Students become energized by the stress and high stakes and want more. This works for us, and we know it can work for other programs too.

**Matthew Palamara**, *Culinary Instructor*

**Elizabeth Boehm**, *Hospitality Instructor*

For further information, contact the authors at Coastal Alabama Community College, 3301 Gulf Shores Pkwy., Gulf Shores, AL 36542.

Email: [matthew.palamara@coastalalabama.edu](mailto:matthew.palamara@coastalalabama.edu) and [elizabeth.boehm@coastalalabama.edu](mailto:elizabeth.boehm@coastalalabama.edu)