



# *More than food and drink: Careers in restaurants*

Drew Liming

**I**n restaurants, the food's the thing. But the drinks, presentation, service, and ambience are important, too. And it's up to restaurant workers to provide diners with a square meal that's well rounded.

The hard work of the kitchen, bar, and dining-room staff gets food and drink from menu to mouth. Some of the more visible workers may include waiters and waitresses (also known as servers), busboys, hosts and hostesses, bartenders, and sommeliers. Less visible restaurant staff includes chefs, cooks, managers, dishwashers, and janitorial and office staff. All have a role in helping to make a diner's experience pleasant.

This article begins with an overview of the restaurant industry. It then looks at four occupations—cooks, executive chefs, servers, and bartenders—and describes their job duties; employment, wages, and outlook; and skills and training. You'll learn what working in a restaurant is like, including its challenges and rewards. Suggested resources for additional information on restaurant careers are at the end.

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A photograph of a restaurant interior. The scene is filled with tables set with white tablecloths and striped chairs. Several large, ornate chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting a warm glow. In the background, a person in a dark uniform is visible near a service counter. The overall atmosphere is elegant and well-lit.

## *The restaurant industry*

The restaurant industry doesn't just feed people; it also employs them. In fact, the food and drinking places industry, as defined by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), had more than 9 million workers in 2007, making this industry one of the largest employers in the country.

The food and drinking places industry includes snack bars, fine dining—and everything in between. Limited-service eating places, such as cafeterias and fast food establishments, employ about 43 percent of workers in food and drinking places. The smallest segment of the industry comprises special food services, such as caterers and food-service contractors, and drinking places, including pubs and nightclubs.

Full-service restaurants—in which diners order, are served, and eat while seated—employ almost 48 percent of workers in the food and drinking places industry. It is this

latter type of establishment that is the focus of the occupations covered in this article.

Popular belief holds that new restaurants struggle to survive, and many close their doors within the first couple of years. Although restaurants are difficult to run, their failure rate is reported to be about 60 percent—similar to the failure rate for all new businesses.

## *Restaurant occupations*

The following pages describe the job duties, employment, wages, outlook, and skills and training of cooks, executive chefs, servers, and bartenders. Job titles vary depending on the type and size of the restaurant, but workers in these occupations have some similar responsibilities.

High turnover in most restaurant occupations means that prospective workers usually have excellent prospects. And because restaurants are in nearly every town or city, jobs should be widely available.

## Cooks

Restaurant cooks turn the food orders they receive from servers into appetizing cuisine—often while racing the clock. Some cooks are referred to as chefs, usually because they have additional skills or responsibilities. (See, for example, executive chefs, described in more detail beginning on the next page.)

For cooks, the kitchen's pace becomes hectic before diners arrive. "You're always busy," says Jon Gatewood of Ludlow, Vermont, who has worked as a cook. "There were times when we were finishing prep work even as the doors opened for business."

Cooks follow recipes in preparing, measuring, and mixing ingredients—and, often,

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To fill diners' orders, cooks either prepare a dish from scratch or combine ready-made items.

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testing the final product—to create menu items. And to make some dishes, cooks might need to arrive several hours before serving begins. In addition to cooking, preparations might include a daily briefing from the executive chef on menu changes or kitchen performance. Cooks also use their prep time to ensure that all of the equipment in their work areas is clean and fully functional.

Restaurant cooks use special, industrial-grade equipment to prepare food. For example, they might use step-in coolers, high-quality knives, and meat slicers and grinders. And most restaurants have multiple sets of heavy-duty ovens and stovetop burners that cooks use to prepare dishes simultaneously.

In most kitchens, cooks are assigned to different stations, such as deep fryer, broiler, or vegetables. Some restaurants may also have cooks who specialize in a type of food and work on a single course, such as pastries or soup. Cooks may collaborate on a dish or work individually. Either way, they frequently work together under the direction of executive chefs or their assistants, sous chefs.

The true test of kitchen skills is in efficiently filling orders. Cooks receive diners' orders, called meal tickets, from servers. To complete the ticket, cooks either prepare a dish from scratch or combine ready-made items. Many diners expect that when a server brings their order from the kitchen it will be pleasing to the eye, as well as to the palate. It is the cook's task to arrange the food into an artistic presentation.

During mealtime in a busy restaurant, cooks are constantly in motion and must often change tasks while working on multiple meal tickets simultaneously. It's a steady pace that lasts awhile. "We'd be very busy for 3 or 4 hours," says Gatewood of his work as a cook. "There really weren't any breaks."

Even with all that activity, cooks must ensure that their work areas remain tidy and hygienic. Doing so saves time and money: It allows them to work efficiently without having to search for utensils or ingredients, and it prevents the need to remake a meal ruined by unsanitary conditions.



After serving hours, cooks also must clean the kitchen. Depending on the restaurant, cooks might supervise cleaning workers or do the cleanup themselves. And cooks sometimes use this time to prepare for the next day's work.

**Employment, wages, and outlook.** According to BLS, there were almost 700,000 full-service restaurant cooks employed in the United States in May 2007. Their median annual wage was \$20,970 in May 2007, with the lowest 10 percent earning \$15,040 or less. The highest paid 10 percent earned \$29,610 or more.

Employment of restaurant cooks is projected to grow 12 percent overall between 2006 and 2016, about as fast as the average for all occupations.

**Skills and training.** Restaurant cooking requires a combination of skills and knowledge. Some of these are best acquired on the job, but others may be learned through formal training.

Some kitchen skills, such as basic cooking ability, may be expected even for entry-level workers in these jobs. But succeeding as a restaurant cook requires more than culinary talent. For example, collaborating with other cooks requires strong communication and teamwork skills. Good manual dexterity, attention to detail, and the ability to do many tasks at once, often quickly, are also essential.

Finding a mentor is a great way for young cooks to learn. And, contrary to popular belief, not all chefs are temperamental. "My first mentor never exhibited that classic chef temper you see on television," says Gatewood. "He was always very level-headed and never lost his cool on the line, and I modeled my career on him."

Because many cooking skills are learned on the job, a good mentor can impact a cook's development. A mentor is also useful as a career resource, providing both introductions to other chefs and recommendations for jobs.

To refine skills and gain credentials, cooks may also attend culinary schools and other credential programs. Culinary schools and programs teach different cuisines and tech-

niques—and may help give young cooks an edge in jobseeking. Even experienced cooks may benefit from taking classes to hone and update their skills.

As with any job, however, a cook's success might start with a lucky break. Dean Thomas of San Diego, California, got his first cooking job while working as a restaurant dishwasher. One day, he was asked to fill in for a cook and was told to join the line. Thomas, now certified as both an executive chef and a culinary educator, has been in the kitchen ever since.

## *Executive chefs*

The domain of executive chefs spans both the kitchen and the office. Executive chefs usually have years of experience as cooks and, after finding success on that level, are ready to assume responsibilities outside of the kitchen.

Although both executive chefs and cooks are kitchen experts, executive chefs are also responsible for behind-the-scenes work. "The primary difference between a chef and a cook is paperwork," says executive chef Steve Armstrong of Enfield, North Carolina. "An executive chef does all the things to keep the restaurant running that you don't see on the plate."

Thomas agrees, specifying the executive chef's broad range of possible duties. "Any executive chef in any operation needs to be a jack-of-all-trades," he says. "Sometimes you're a chef. Other times, maybe a human resources consultant, purchaser, businessman, or health inspector." In some establishments, these tasks are handled by restaurant managers or owners.

Executive chefs are divided into two categories: "working" and "nonworking." The two types differ in how much time they spend in the kitchen and on administrative duties. Working executive chefs prepare food alongside their cooks during mealtime. Nonworking executive chefs, especially in larger restaurants, are busy with administrative duties.

Executive chefs make most of the restaurant's administrative decisions. These decisions include designing the menu, setting



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Executive chefs delegate some tasks to sous chefs and cooks.

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prices, reviewing food and beverage purchases, and planning special menu items. Most executive chefs are also responsible for interviewing and hiring prospective kitchen workers and investing in employee development and training.

During mealtime, the chef may do administrative work or, depending on how busy the restaurant is, help the cooks in the kitchen. Executive chefs can't oversee everything that occurs during mealtime, so they must delegate some tasks to sous chefs or cooks.

After the day's cooking shifts are complete, the executive chef gives and receives feedback from cooks, initiates cleanup, and logs the day's sales.

**Employment, wages, and outlook.** BLS data show that in May 2007, there were about 50,000 chefs and head cooks—the occupation that includes executive chefs—employed in full-service restaurants in the United States. They had a median annual wage of \$34,970 in May 2007, with the lowest earning 10 percent making \$20,720 or less. However, chefs and head cooks may also earn bonuses, based on sales volume and revenue. The highest paid 10 percent earned \$60,770 or more.

Employment of chefs and head cooks is projected to grow 8 percent overall during the 2006–16 decade, more slowly than the average for all occupations. But most of the new jobs for these workers are expected to be in full-service restaurants.

**Skills and training.** Running a kitchen requires both general skills and specialized knowledge. Most executive chefs have gained these skills and knowledge through training or experience working as cooks or in other restaurant jobs.

Communications skills, especially for leading and directing the kitchen staff, are important for executive chefs. “Long-term success results from awareness of other people,” says chef Scott Neuman of Portland, Oregon. “You have to be able to get your staff to work well as a team and convince them we’re all in this together.” Executive chefs also need to be effective communicators to negotiate with vendors and suppliers.

Prospective executive chefs should also learn the business of restaurant work. Administrative skills, such as accounting and employee counseling, are important to keep the restaurant running. Executive chefs must also know how to direct staff and delegate tasks. Many executive chefs first gain managerial experience by working as sous chefs.

Cooks who are interested in advancing to executive chef positions should commit to practicing new recipes. Because executive chefs are often responsible for developing a menu, they must be able to create unique meals that are easily reproduced.

As with cooks, executive chefs don't necessarily need to attend school. However, credential programs provide their students with specialized knowledge. And continued learning keeps chefs updated with new techniques, business models, and recipes.

## *Servers*

Servers are a restaurant's frontline workers. Their interactions with customers may turn new diners into regular ones. What comes from the kitchen may get diners' attention, but

the serving staff gives them the restaurant's first impression.

As the link between the dining room and the kitchen, servers affect a diner's experience. Servers interact with diners several times per visit, but knowing when and how to approach each table isn't always easy. "Consumers have an internal clock that says when they expect to receive service," says server Paul Paz of Beaverton, Oregon. "Anticipating customers' needs is a difficult skill to learn."

Shortly after diners are seated, servers greet them and may take orders for drinks and appetizers. Because servers attempt to customize dining experiences, they tailor their behavior to diners' preferences. For example, some diners enjoy conversing with their server; others prefer more restraint. The best servers figure out their customers' preferences and adjust accordingly.

Servers usually stop by a table several times during a meal: to take food and drink

orders; to present drinks and food, sometimes in several courses; to check on diners during the meal; and to bring the bill after everyone has finished eating. In most restaurants, dining tables are divided into groups, or stations, based on the number of servers working the shift. Servers wait on the diners seated at tables in their assigned station.

When diners are ready to order, servers must be prepared to answer questions about menu items—and to ask diners to choose among options that may be available to them, such as types of salad dressing or side dishes. Diners who are indecisive may ask servers for advice. If this happens, servers use their knowledge of the restaurant's dishes to suggest items that fit the diners' tastes.

Servers bring food to diners' tables, sometimes with flourish. Knowledgeable servers might describe how the food was created in the kitchen. "It's not just about how the food tastes," says Bernard Martinage, president of

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To customize the dining experience, servers assess diners' preferences and tailor interactions to match.

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the Federation of Dining Room Professionals in Fernandina Beach, Florida. “Diners want dinner theater.”

Servers check on tables throughout the meal to ensure that diners are satisfied and to remove any finished items. Toward the end of the meal, servers may take orders for desserts or after-dinner drinks. After these are finished, the server brings diners the bill and collects payment.

The extent of service provided by servers may depend on the type of restaurant, its volume of business, and the availability of floor staff. For example, some servers know which wines fit well with certain foods. But at other restaurants, such suggestions are the job of the restaurant’s sommelier, an expert in pairing food and wine. In addition, some restaurants focus server duties more narrowly by assigning different staff members to deliver food, refill water glasses, or clear tables.

**Employment, wages, and outlook.** According to BLS, there were about 1,750,000 waiters and waitresses (servers) employed in full-service restaurants in the United States in May 2007. Their median annual wages, including tips, were \$15,800 in May 2007. The lowest earning 10 percent made \$13,090 or less, and the highest paid 10 percent earned \$27,700 or more.

Those data include wages for many servers who are in the occupation temporarily; career servers at upscale restaurants have the potential for higher earnings. For most servers, higher earnings result from receiving more in tips, not higher hourly wages. Because tips are usually calculated as a percentage of diners’ bills, servers at expensive restaurants generally earn more.

Employment of waiters and waitresses is projected to increase 11 percent overall during the 2006–16 decade, about the average for all occupations.

**Skills and training.** Most servers receive their training on the job, but when hiring, employers often seek out applicants with some basic skills. These abilities include interacting well with others, following safe food-handling procedures, and carefully

maneuvering through a busy dining room. Servers must also be personable, well groomed, and neatly dressed and should enjoy interacting with diners.

Restaurants may differ in their specific practices, but many serving techniques are common. And some techniques that are taught on the job may require practice outside working hours. For example, maneuvering trays full of food can be difficult. Paz trains by carrying a tray with multiple plates, each with several golf balls on it, to simulate a sauce or delicate part of a dish. As he walks around a room, Paz keeps the tray balanced to prevent the golf balls from rolling around on the plates.

Many servers gain experience in informal restaurants and use their experience to advance to more prestigious—and pricey—restaurants. Skilled servers are more likely to make a career in fine dining.

In addition to getting on-the-job training, servers can enroll in certification programs. The number of these programs has been increasing as restaurants place more emphasis on training their dining-room staff. “The industry has been becoming more formal,” says Martinage. “And the number of education programs is rising to meet the needs of restaurant managers and servers.”

Not surprisingly, the number of career servers with culinary and college degrees is also increasing. Upscale restaurants may prefer servers who have culinary degrees: The training helps servers translate diners’ desires into kitchen terminology that cooks can understand. And sometimes, culinary school students might start training to be chefs but discover that they prefer interacting with diners.

In some States, servers must pass an alcohol server education course before being certified to serve alcoholic beverages. States also vary in their minimum age requirements for serving alcohol.

## *Bartenders*

Bartenders in restaurants pour and serve mixed drinks, beer, wine, and other beverages

to restaurant diners and bar patrons. Although they're working hard, bartenders also enjoy the social scene. "It's almost like being a rock star," jokes bartender Christopher Shelley of Bethesda, Maryland, adding, "You meet a lot of people, and it can be a ton of fun."

During busy periods, many people might order drinks at the same time, and servers also place drink orders from diners. So, bartenders must know how to mix a variety of drinks quickly and efficiently, because they usually don't have time to consult recipes in preparing orders. Their task is even more difficult when they receive large numbers of drinks, all of which may require different ingredients and procedures to make.

Attending to diners at the bar or in the lounge area requires the bartender to perform the duties of a server: taking food and drink orders, relaying food orders to the kitchen, serving the order, and delivering the bill.

In addition, however, bartenders are responsible for preparing and serving drinks—not only for those customers, but also for others in the bar and restaurant. "Sometimes, I'll be serving several cocktail customers and the bar at the same time," says Shelley. "I have to make sure everything is running smoothly at all locations."

Because bartenders focus on preparing drinks and serving customers, they have few administrative duties. And during a slow shift, a bartender may take stock of supplies and write a list of needed items for the barbacks—bartending assistants who don't serve customers. Most administrative decisions involving the bar are made by executive chefs or kitchen managers.

**Employment, wages, and outlook.** There were almost 200,000 bartenders employed in full-service restaurants in the United States in May 2007, according to BLS. They had median annual wages, including tips, of \$17,550 in May 2007. The lowest earning 10 percent made \$13,850 or less, and the highest paid 10 percent earned \$31,890 or more.

Like servers, bartenders depend on tips for a large part of their earnings. These tips vary, depending on the shifts a bartender



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Bartenders perform the duties of a server when attending to diners seated at the bar.

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works. In a popular restaurant bar on Friday and Saturday nights, tips may be substantial. But there is keen competition for these lucrative shifts, and they may be assigned based on seniority. Bartenders at upscale restaurants also usually earn more because their tips, based on a percentage of the bill, are likely to be higher.

Employment of bartenders is expected to grow 11 percent overall between 2006 and 2016, about the average for all occupations.

**Skills and training.** Bartending requires a mix of personality, skills, and on-the-job training; experience is also helpful. Formal training programs are available, but attendance in them is largely voluntary. Bartenders also might have to meet State requirements.

Bartenders should be friendly and approachable. Those who are not are unlikely to be tipped well and will find it difficult to advance to more prestigious restaurants. "A bartender's success is largely determined by personality," says Shelley. "I've known people who were extremely fast and could handle large-volume orders but just didn't have the right personalities."

Some skills are necessary for bartenders to have before they come to the job. For example, they need to have excellent hand-eye coordination to work in a small area surrounded by glass. Bartenders must also be



able to memorize complicated drink orders and reproduce them without hesitation.

Bartenders learn other skills, especially those specific to the occupation, on the job—often through practice. To make mixed drinks, for example, bartenders must master the pour count: the number of seconds it takes a bottle's spout to pour one ounce of liquid. Because every type of spout pours at a different rate, bartenders practice until they are comfortable with pour counts.

Restaurant experience isn't necessarily a prerequisite for bartending jobs, but it helps. Many bartenders have previous experience interacting with customers as servers, for example. Shelley was a senior server when he was approached about a bartending position. He first worked as a bartender on slow shifts, to familiarize himself with the bar and its duties, before taking busier shifts. Other bartenders may start as barbacks to gain experience.

Bartending schools are another way to learn basic skills and recipes. These schools, however, are not formally recognized and are not a substitute for practical experience. But bartending schools may offer classes in specialized skills. For example, flair bartending, in which bartenders entertain guests by manipulating bar tools and bottles in creative ways, might be difficult to learn without instruction.

Like servers, bartenders must be of a legal minimum age to serve alcohol; age requirements vary by State. Some States also require that, to serve alcohol, bartenders have certification from State-approved schools.

## *The restaurant lifestyle*

For those who want to make a career in restaurant jobs, satisfying diners makes the hard work rewarding. Restaurants play host to many important life events, including engagement proposals, business meetings, and birthday and anniversary celebrations. "We help create memories for people," says Martinage. "Every day, we are a part of those memories."

But making a career in a restaurant isn't easy. Workers in both the kitchen and dining room are subject to two major challenges common in restaurant jobs: high levels of stress and often-erratic schedules.

## *Stress*

Satisfying the different demands of many diners can create a stressful environment for restaurant workers. Many restaurant employees enjoy the adrenaline rush, but even longtime workers admit it can be overwhelming at times.

Different restaurant occupations have different sources of stress. Cooks, for example, need to produce quality food consistently. And unlike many jobs, which may have deadlines every couple of days or weeks, kitchen work must sometimes be completed within minutes—and successfully—every time. "You have to get excited about every order, day in and day out," says chef Neuman. "You're only as good as the last plate you've put out."

But it's not only cooks who feel the kitchen's heat. Executive chefs have even more responsibility. To many chefs, the added authority is appealing, but it can also be stressful. "When you're the executive chef, you're the king," executive chef Armstrong says. "But that means when something goes wrong, it's always your fault."

To experience kitchen stress during its busiest time, Neuman recommends job shadowing. He suggests that would-be cooks, especially those considering culinary school, contact a local restaurant and ask to shadow a chef or cook to get a feel for the kitchen's atmosphere during mealtime.

For servers and bartenders, interaction with customers is a common source of stress. These workers rarely have downtime, yet they are expected to display a pleasant demeanor in all circumstances. "We're performers, and we have to keep a smile on our faces even when we're stressed or working hard," says server Paz. "It can be very difficult, especially for new workers."



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Even with the stress of a restaurant's fast pace, many workers enjoy the friendly atmosphere.

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## *Schedules*

In most restaurants, staff schedules are variable. Workers must cover shifts on weekends and holidays, as these are often restaurants' busiest days. And on these occasions, creative workers still find ways to please diners. Server Paz, for example, brought a digital camera to work one Thanksgiving and offered to take family pictures of his diners. "Everyone was thrilled by the offer," Paz says. "It's what the hospitality business is all about."

Working on holidays may sound difficult, but even normal days in a restaurant are long. A cook's shift, for example, may require being at the restaurant for up to 10 hours—with little time for rest in the rush to meet diners' demands.

Executive chefs frequently work even longer than cooks. Most do their inventory and planning work in the mornings and stay until dinner service is finished. Many culinary students, unprepared for an executive chef's workload, find the experience an eye opener. "These are long hours," warns executive chef

Thomas. "It's not all the glory you see on television."

Servers and bartenders usually have flexible schedules, and some may work a couple of shifts at multiple restaurants each week. Bartenders' shifts are both long and unusual. Shelley, for example, tends bar for 12-hour shifts on Fridays and Saturdays, from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. And because weekend nights are usually busy, Shelley frequently finds himself on his feet the entire time.

The inconsistent work has other drawbacks for restaurant workers. Many, especially servers and bartenders, receive hourly wages plus tips instead of salaries, and few get benefits through their employers. The result is that many restaurant workers are paid only for the hours they work and aren't paid on days they are sick, for example. Usually, large corporations are the only employers that may provide benefits.

Still, not all restaurant workers regard the stress and long hours of their jobs as drawbacks. For example, many cite the strong bonds between coworkers that result from the challenging circumstances. "At times, the



pressure can make working in a restaurant very regimented and militaristic,” says executive chef Gatewood. “But the atmosphere can also be relaxed and family-like, because everyone usually becomes good friends.”

## For more information

To learn more about jobs in restaurants, begin paying closer attention to the work atmosphere when you dine out. But you'll also want to visit your public library, school counseling office, or career center. To find a career center near you, go to **www.servicelocator.org**; call toll free, 1 (877) US2-JOBS (872-5627) or TTY 1 (877) 889-5627; or e-mail [info@careeronestop.org](mailto:info@careeronestop.org). The Web site also has links to career exploration tools and other job-related resources.

Another helpful source for career information, available at many libraries and career centers, is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* is also available online at **www.bls.gov/ooq**. This resource has detailed descriptions of hundreds of occupations, including some of the ones described in this article.

Articles in previous issues of the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* describe occupations related to restaurants. “You’re a *what?* Sommelier,” online at **www.bls.gov/ooq/2003/summer/yawhat.pdf**, profiles a restaurant worker whose expertise is pairing wine with food. “You’re a *what?* Research chef,” online at **www.bls.gov/ooq/2002/fall/yawhat.pdf**, describes the work of a chef who develops new recipes for a restaurant chain.

For first-hand information about what it's like to work in a kitchen, contact a local restaurant and ask to speak with the workers there. Job shadowing, in which you observe a trained worker in an occupation that interests you, may help you decide if a restaurant career is for you.

The following associations provide general information for those interested in restaurant jobs:

National Restaurant Association  
1200 17 St. NW.  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 331-5900  
[info@restaurant.org](mailto:info@restaurant.org)  
**www.restaurant.org**

Food Service Interactive  
7702 E. Doubletree Ranch Rd., Ste. 300  
Scottsdale, AZ 85285  
(623) 433-9690  
**www.foodservice.com**

The following associations provide certification information:

National Restaurant Association  
Educational Foundation  
175 W. Jackson Blvd., Ste. 1500  
Chicago, IL 60604  
Toll free: 1 (800) 765-2122  
[info@restaurant.org](mailto:info@restaurant.org)  
**www.nraef.org**

American Culinary Federation  
180 Center Place Way  
St. Augustine, FL 32095  
Toll free: 1 (800) 624-9458  
[helpdesk@afchefs.net](mailto:helpdesk@afchefs.net)  
**www.acfchefs.org**

Federation of Dining Room Professionals  
1417 Sadler Rd., No. 100  
Fernandina Beach, FL 32034  
Toll free: 1 (877) 264-FDRP (3377)  
[info@fdrp.com](mailto:info@fdrp.com)  
**www.fdrp.com**

National Bartenders' Association  
(770) 864-7811  
[bartender@craver.org](mailto:bartender@craver.org)  
**www.bartender.org**

WaitersWorld  
14314 SW. Allen Blvd., No. 507  
Beaverton, OR 97005  
(503) 524-0788  
[tips@waitersworld.com](mailto:tips@waitersworld.com)  
**www.waitersworld.com**

