

Everyone should be required to work in a restaurant at some point in their lives. Not only is the work enjoyable and rewarding, there are many valuable lessons to be learned in the food service industry. You learn about food itself, the quality and the importance of fresh, natural ingredients. You also learn about people. If one can master the art of charming a hungry person, all other lessons pale in comparison. See, everyone has to eat, so you meet all kinds of people while working in a restaurant.

My own father may be one example of someone who should not be allowed to eat in a restaurant. For as long as I can remember, he is an absolute terror before he gets his supper. "Wait until after dinner, Madeline," were my mother's words of wisdom. Now, I am a master at timing my conversations with him according to his blood sugar level. He may have been my unknowing trainer when it came to handling an irritable, hungry customer.

Going out to dinner with my father is the ultimate test of patience. After years of wincing and cringing through dinner in a restaurant, I have perfected my strategy. I balance his short temper by being as charming and polite as I can possibly be. I slip an extra five dollar bill onto the table to pacify our poor waiter after my father turns his back. After my father has his dinner, presto! Meet the world's most charming, affable man.

My father never dared to complain to my mother about her cooking, and certainly he had no reason to do so. After being raised on a very traditional meat and potatoes diet, he fully enjoyed and appreciated her exotic culinary creations. As a Californian transplanted to the upper midwest, my mother's theories about food were often quite different than our neighbor's. She grew most of her own produce, baked bread and made salsas, tomato sauces, and jams from scratch. My first "job" was working with my mother on her twenty two acre farm. We grew all kinds of organic fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Planting, weeding, harvesting, washing and packaging the produce were the parts of my responsibilities. Gardening with my mother was my foundation of food knowledge and she was a teacher who inspired admiration. Her passion for food was contagious. Food became a form of personal expression, a venue of experimentations, a way to visit a foreign country, a joy to be shared. While my grandfather was less than thrilled at being served eggplant couscous and lamb chops, he did discover a fondness for Italian cuisine.

These early days inspired me to enter the restaurant industry. Waitressing at the Country Kitchen when I turned sixteen was the beginning of my career as a server. After growing accustomed to the peace of the garden, this change was certainly, well, different. As a child, my mother forbade McDonalds and all other fast food (with the exception of Subway once in a great while). Can you imagine how strong her dedication to healthy, natural foods must have been to prevent her from not once succumbing to the time-saving, kid-pleasing phenomenon known as fast food? Now that I am older I can fully appreciate and marvel at the work that went into mealtimes and the dedication of avoiding McDonalds that lasted through my entire childhood. Needless to say, when I started at Country Kitchen there was a bit of a food shock. White bread and boxed egg whites were a bit revolting to me. Frozen soups and iceberg lettuce just seemed so wrong. After all, my mother taught me at a young age that iceberg lettuce has the nutritional value of a piece of paper.

The people who ordered french-fries, smothered with cheese and ranch on the side were a curiosity – they wanted to eat that mess? Nevertheless, I grew to love the frantic hustle of restaurant work. Waitressing came naturally to me. I thrived during the “busy” hours, loved the manic energy and panic that came on a Sunday morning during the church rush. Not only was I able to charm my customers, I was able to manage the information overload associated with a busy rush of customers. “Four-top at table A-5,” our hostess would holler at me when she sat a table in my section. “Two O-J’s, one milk, one coffee with cream.” Simultaneously, I had food to deliver, tables to bus, bills to prepare, orders to be taken. I developed my own mantra concerning customer service: kill ‘em with kindness. Yes, lay it on until you feel like a bad actress in a B-movie. The ruder the customer, the nicer I became. I soon learned this approach was extremely effective.

Sadly, the River Falls Country Kitchen closed right after I graduated from high school. After working there for three years, I had learned to cook on the line and I loved it. I had the freedom there to work where I wanted. I could waitress, hostess, or cook depending on my mood. The thought of starting from scratch at a different restaurant was discouraging. That was before I met Glen, my next boss at a local coffee-shop. I have always loved coffee. Learning the intricacies of espresso and frothed milk became my new passion. I read books about the process of roasting coffee, the differences between robusta and arabica beans, and the importance of finding the perfect grind of an espresso bean. I loved the smell of fresh ground coffee. I absolutely loved my new job.

The atmosphere of the coffee-shop was much different than a regular restaurant, although we did serve food there. Bob Marley crooned in the background, the espresso machine hissed happily and the aroma of fresh Columbian coffee permeated the air. My dad was a frequent customer and I loved our cook, Pam, who took such special care with his eggs. Cooking an egg over-easy is the true test of a great chef, and she never failed to impress him.

Pam made fresh pop-overs every morning. I had never heard of such a thing. A pop-over is like a tall, hollow, flaky biscuit. She would fill them with eggs, scrambled with provolone cheese, peppers, onions and garlic. Or if she was feeling Italian that day, my pop-over was stuffed with eggs, mozzarella, basil, and sun-dried tomatoes. It was heaven. I would literally dance my way around the kitchen, so happy to be at work, where I belonged. I was soon promoted to manager and I thrived. Once again, I had the freedom to work where I wanted. I loved to work in the kitchen, chopping vegetables and flipping pancakes. When the line for coffee grew, I would move to the espresso machine, filling drive-through orders for tall lattes and homemade muffins. I loved my co-workers, and why not? I had hired and trained most of them so our bond was strong. I loved our customers as well. I would pick my way through booths and tables, filling coffee cups and clearing dishes. The faces were all familiar and I knew everyone’s name.

I met my husband-to-be at the coffee-shop. He would come in with a book or a newspaper and we flirted over the cash register. He was spending so much time at the coffee-shop that he eventually got recruited to work in the kitchen. We worked well together. He was so handy, fixing the leaky sink and the temperamental dishwasher. He could cook an over-easy egg perfectly so he quickly gained my father’s approval, to my delight and relief.

Unfortunately, they say all good things come to an end, and my time at the coffee-shop was no exception. Glen's health was taking a turn for the worse and he eventually closed the coffee-shop. I was devastated. "What now?" I wondered.

Well, my friend worked as a debt collector. He told me his company was hiring, so I decided to try a new type of work. What a miserable way to make ends meet. Arguing with angry people about a debt is about as rewarding as stubbing your toe. Needless to say, I did not last long in this job. I missed the happy days at the coffee-shop and I longed to return to the restaurant industry. At least an angry customer in a restaurant is easier to appease than an in-debt angry person who you are paid to harass. A hot slice of apple pie, my cure-all solution in a restaurant, did not solve any problems that occurred while spending eight hours a day arguing on the phone.

I soon found seasonal work selling produce for a local farmer. "Real Fresh Sweet Corn" was the advertisement painted onto my trailer of fruits and vegetables. My new boss (also named Glen) sold corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons, muskmelons, peaches, peas and a variety of other goods. And I got a discount! Talk about a match made in heaven. I drove to his farm every morning to collect the truck and trailer that held my produce. There were about ten trucks that would leave his driveway every day, each heading to their own destination. When I arrived at my designated spot, I would spend the first part of my day bagging the potatoes and the peaches and checking ear after ear of sweet corn for silkworms. When business was slow I would lay in my chair, soaking up the sun or reading a book.

I got to know the locals quickly after the local newspaper interviewed me and put my picture in the paper. The customers grew to trust my judgment when it came to picking the best tomato or watermelon. Perhaps my early gardening career paid off because I have always been able to tell what the best produce is thank you, Mom. I taught countless children how to pick a perfect watermelon. "The bigger the better and the darker the stripes," - I would tell them. A watermelon can be tricky because it also has to have the perfect, hollow sound when you pat it. If you can't feel a vibration after giving it a nice tap that means it is no good.

It always amazed me how little most of my customers knew about food. They would call a sugar-snap pea a green bean, ask me if the pineapples were local (I would like to tell you they were joking, but sadly they were not) and refer to a peach as an apple. While some of these slips are easy to forgive, I felt bad for the people who apparently did not eat fresh fruits or vegetables. It was a little shocking to learn about the poor eating habits of so many people on a daily basis. I felt worse for the kids who had never tried a real cherry (no, maraschino cherries don't count), so I gave free samples every day.

Occasionally I would have to deal with an angry customer, but they were few and far between. Mostly, I was bombarded with questions when people came to my stand. "How do you cook the corn?" they would ask me. Well, I soak the whole ear (in the husk) in cold water for ten to fifteen minutes, throw it on a medium heat grill for ten more, turning the ears two to three times. Peel the husk off carefully, avoiding the hot steam. I love this method because there are no dishes to wash; it is quick and easy. The husk and the silk inside the ear come right off after they are cooked so it's much easier than peeling them before you cook them.

Great food doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. Fresh corn, fruit salad, and brats boiled in beer are my recipe for a great summer meal. I make the fruit salad, with a touch of honey and lemon juice, while my husband Brian barbeques the brats and the corn. My dad sits in his favorite chair on the deck, soaking up the sun and chatting with the family. I think to myself that I could be working at any job as long as I could come home to this: family, friends and food.