

Fighting an image problem

Even as the industry grows to the second-largest private employer in the United States, negative perceptions of dead-end restaurant jobs persist

By GARY SEMAN JR.

Don't tell Jim Sahene restaurant work is a dead-end job. Once the manager of a lone TCBY store in Little Rock, Ark., he is now chief executive of Bruster's Real Ice Cream, a Bridgewater, Pa.-based premium ice cream purveyor with more than 260 units.

"It was truly a great experience — from running a single store to maintaining 3,000 stores and connecting pretty well with the franchise community," Sahene says.

Even in the age of the celebrity chef, with TV shows spotlighting the industry and multimillion-dollar openings given the same fanfare as Hollywood premieres, the restaurant business still is regarded as transitional for workers, one that's best suited for students and aspiring actors than anyone who's serious about a career.

Yet experts say foodservice is as wide and diverse as any industry in the world, embodying a variety of talents and salaries. This year, the industry will employ 13.1 million people, making it the second-largest private employer in the United States, says Annika Stensson, manager of media relations for the National Restaurant Association. Health care is No. 1, she adds.

Stensson says Sahene's story is not uncommon. Nine of 10 salaried employees started out punching a clock.

"We're an industry filled with individuals who started in the dish room and ended up in the board room," she says.

Sahene says an incentive from higher up in the company helped influence his career decision.

"It was interesting," he says, "the founder of TCBY [Frank Hickingbotham] spoke at one of our manager meetings and said, 'One day, I'm looking to you to take my job.' That kind of inspired me to pursue his challenge."

Nine years later, Sahene ascended to

the role as president of TCBY Enterprises, which was sold to Mrs. Fields Cookies in 2000. Two years later, he went to Bruster's.

The demand for people with culinary and foodservice management skills is growing — and not just from traditional restaurants. Test kitchens, corporations, law firms and sports teams are among the diverse entities seeking qualified professionals and, in some cases, dangling six-figure salaries to land them.

"There are so many opportunities," says chef Steve Shipley, director of culinary relations at Johnson & Wales University's Providence, R.I., campus.

Today's students can find training in such diverse fields as marketing, nutrition and entrepreneurship, Shipley says.

"We're trying to graduate foodservice professionals, not just chefs," he says. "We teach those kids how to work with their eyes open, their ears open and many times, their mouths shut."

Generating a professional workforce has gone a long way in helping the restaurant industry shed its low-level status, experts say.

The National Restaurant Association is committed to underscoring restaurant and hospitality industry professionalism, and offers several programs for professional and workforce development, Stensson says.

ServSafe is one of the industry's leading food safety training and certification programs, and is accepted by more federal, state and local jurisdictions than any other food safety education and training program in the country, Stensson says. To date, it has certified more than 3 million individuals worldwide.

Its sister program, ServSafe Alcohol, is a similar program to train front-of-the-house staff in responsible alcohol service.

Another, ProStart, is a state-based, career-building program for high school students, linking a classroom curriculum with workplace mentoring.

Stensson says better education gives restaurant employees an edge in the industry.

"A knowledgeable workforce

is key to good business and vital to provide guests safe and enjoyable meals as well as great experiences each time they dine out," she says.

Restaurants are finding that battling negative stereotypes sometimes starts with their own employees. Showing them they can advance internally can motivate workers and inspire loyalty.

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NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION

Rock Bottom Restaurants Inc. selects workers with "aptitude and attitude" for its management-training program, says Sugi Randall, senior vice president of human resources and training of the Louisville, Colo.-based chain. She says employees with three to four years experience at Rock Bottom are recruited for the internal internship program. Qualified candidates then move onto the management-in-training plan, which if successfully completed, leads to advancement.

Randall says 70 percent to 75 percent of those who are recruited for the five-month process stay with it. She adds that roughly one-third of the chain's managers are hired from within.

"It's saying that if you're with us, you can be with us in a different way — and grow," Randall says.

Grunt work earns little admiration from the public, but there's no substitute for ground-level experience, says Sahene of Bruster's.

"I was literally the guy behind the counter, serving the cones, mopping the floors and doing the schedules," he says. "That gave me credibility with the franchise community. That gave me the ability to lead them."

Setting a career course and having real-

istic expectations will help employees weather restaurant fatigue, say those who have persevered.

"First and foremost, you've got to find something you love to do and have a passion for," Sahene says. "And another thing I did was have a goal, so all my actions and activities over the nine years were in pursuit of that. So I had an endgame in mind. But I also had patience."

Meanwhile, the restaurant industry is growing, adding more opportunities for more people, the NRA says. In 1955, the industry had a 25-percent share of the food dollar; it's now 48 percent, and annual sales are projected to reach \$558.3 billion in 2008. Restaurants across the nation are expected to add 2 million workers over the next decade.

Restaurant consultant Ron Santibanez believes recent battles over minimum wage have created the perception that the industry joins other low-paying professions that require little skill. However, restaurant work isn't unlike others that pay a "premium for premium employees," says Santibanez, president of Qualified Solutions Consulting, based in Los Angeles.

"I think that the way restaurant employees are treated, and sometimes in front of customers, gives the industry a bad name," he says.

Reality shows such as "The Restaurant," "Hell's Kitchen" and "Kitchen Nightmares" help demystify some elements of the industry but also glamorize other aspects of it. Meanwhile, many of the TV shows have done little to dissuade the public of the negative perception that the chef is a rebellious outsider with a tongue as sharp as his newly honed cutlery.

"There is a dynamic that glorifies that attitude," Santibanez says. "I've worked hard all my life as a manager and as a consultant to mitigate that situation that occurs in restaurants."

Shipley of Johnson & Wales said attitude is not welcome in his kitchen, and neither are jewelry, makeup or tongue rings. Jackets are pressed, shoes are all the same color and kitchens are immaculate.

"You have to learn to respect people and you have to understand you're there to learn," he says. "I tell students all the time it's better to take a deep breath and step away for a second instead of saying, 'I'm out of here.' That's something — you learn to be humble in this business."

There are some elements to the industry with which potential workers must get accustomed, such as high-stress environments and long hours on one's feet. Most will work weekends, evenings and holidays, and managers routinely log in 50-plus hours a week.

"It will never be a 40-hour workweek job," says Randall of Rock Bottom.

Yet, there's good news out there. The restaurant business withstands a bad economy like no other, says Santibanez, the restaurant consultant from Los Angeles.

"People always go out to eat," he says. ■



High school students can start to build a career in professional foodservice in the NRA's ProStart program.