

Sizzle

The American Culinary Federation quarterly for students of cooking

Combining lamb with vegetables in this sous vide preparation allows mingling of flavors without the use of excess heat. It prevents the lean lamb from overcooking and drying out.

Fresh beans and peas make this dish appropriate for spring menus.

Slicing the lamb rack makes eating from a casserole easier for the guest.

Whole baby vegetables look natural, eliminate waste and save time.

Fresh herbs provide extra flavor.

Inside . . . All about attitude | A study of Asian appetizers | Personal chef, a viable career



Get Personal

Imagine a culinary career where you set your own hours, select your diners—and purchase ingredients on their dime—while potentially earning as much as six figures doing it. Personal chefs don't have to dream about this career; they live it.

by **Melanie Wolkoff Wachsmann**

Hiring a chef to prepare meals was once considered a luxury reserved for the rich and famous. Times have changed. Ironically, it's the "everyday" people personal chefs can thank for their growing demand.

"*Personal chef* has become part of the American lexicon. The mainstream public now knows more about how to use a personal chef effectively and efficiently than they did 15 years ago," says Candy Wallace, executive director, American Personal & Private Chef Association (APPCA), San Diego. "The services of a personal chef who provides meal support for busy professionals and their families fits beautifully into the need for palate-specific meals prepared from fresh ingredients enjoyed at the client's leisure."

The personal chef industry continues to blossom as professional chefs forgo the high-pressure long-hour

workings of commercial kitchens for the slower pace autonomy of home-based cuisine. Wallace estimates 12,000 to 15,000 personal chefs operate in the United States today, compared to 8,000 in 2005.

Personal versus private

The terms *personal* and *private* chef are often, incorrectly, used interchangeably. A private chef, explains Wallace, is usually a full-time employee for one proprietary employer, who receives a regular paycheck, prepares fresh meals daily and may live in the client's home. (Oprah has a private chef.) Personal chefs own and operate their own business, determine what level of service they offer and select their clients. Personal chefs set their own work schedules and hours. They may have 10 to 12 active clients.

Devin Lowder, personal certified executive chef (PCEC), chef/owner, Makali'i Catering Ltd. and Makali'i

Café, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, considers himself both a private and personal chef. "I did not choose this profession, it chose me," he says. Lowder responded to a blind "chef" newspaper ad that led to his first private-chef position. "I enjoyed it so much that I decided to make it my full-time career."

Now, Lowder mainly provides dinner service to families who own homes at the various resort communities along the Kona-Kohala coast of Hawaii's Big Island.

Patrice Gerard, PCEC, Your Private Chef in Portsmouth, N.H., and Biddeford Pool, Maine, says he became a personal chef "to utilize my skills and experience in a way that didn't lock me in a restaurant or hotel for 70 hours a week." His clients include families, individuals, couples and corporations.

After reading about the APPCA and speaking with Wallace, Harvey Golden, PCEC, executive chef/owner, decided

to leave corporate America to pursue a personal-chef career. "I opened My Personal Gourmet, My Personal Gourmet Catering and a restaurant named Gravy. I still cook as a personal chef, teach classes and do in-home dinner parties," says Golden, who is based in Loveland, Ohio.

Golden describes his clientele as "people who want to eat great food but are very busy" and includes young families, athletes, individuals and the elderly.

The need for private chefs even extends to the military. Culinary Specialist First Class (SW) Michael Hanford, certified chef de cuisine (CCC), certified pastry culinarian (CPC), PCEC, is an enlisted aide in the United States Navy, stationed at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. He has worked as a private chef for high-ranking officers and international dignitaries on board ships, at shore commands and at their homes. Currently, he works for the superintendent

of the Naval Academy in his house, which is a great example of what you can do as a private chef, he says, adding "One of my favorite parts is having the freedom to create and plan menus and cook for all different kinds of events."

Private chefs in the U.S. Navy report to admirals and are responsible for events at the admiral's house, taking care of the upkeep of the personal quarters and preparations of daily meals for the admiral's family.

San Diego-based Enlisted Aide Brandon Parry, CEC, PCEC, loves his position as an admiral's private chef. "I get to cook very high-end with amazing ingredients. It's living a dream," he says. He has produced everything from small intimate formal dinners to receptions for 700.

Breaking in
Personal chef duties typically include grocery shopping, menu planning, recipe development, meal



Courtesy of the American Personal & Private Chef Association

Candy Wallace, founder and executive director of the American Personal & Private Chef Association, San Diego, (center) was honored as Sullivan University's 33rd Distinguished Guest Chef last year by Tom Hickey, director of Sullivan University's National Center for Hospitality Studies and Kimberley Jones, chair of the professional-catering degree program.

preparation, writing handling instructions, kitchen clean-up and sometimes party planning and formal affairs. Personal chefs must also possess nutrition knowledge and be able to modify recipes for clients with high blood pressure, allergies, wheat/gluten intolerance, diabetes and diets such as Weight Watchers, South Beach or vegan and vegetarian.

Possessing a strong understanding of world cuisine and cooking trends is essential. “You can never forget that your clients are well-traveled and have

eaten in the world’s finest restaurants,” Lowder says. “I read trade magazines and food articles to stay current and inspired.”

Unfortunately, a personal-chef career is not recommended for the new graduate. “You need to be seasoned and work the line at a restaurant first. It took me 15 years to gain enough experience to do this,” Parry says.

Don’t dismiss the culinary degree. Many skills acquired during culinary school—such as good knife, cooking and sanitation skills

and ingredient and cuisine knowledge—will lay the foundation for a successful personal-chef career.

Remember, personal chefs aren’t just cooks, but business owners. Gerard recommends researching business laws and regulations and networking with personal-chef organizations before starting your own business. “Besides being a good cook, you have to be a good marketer, self-promoter and small-business manager. You are the product being marketed,” he says.

Liability insurance is a must. “We live in a litigious

society, and it is imperative that both the client and the personal chef are protected,” Wallace says.

Challenges and perks

While some chefs embrace the self-employed status, working alone—and for multiple clients—is not for everyone. “You need to check your ego at the door,” Parry says. “If a client wants meatloaf every night, that’s what you cook them.”

On the flipside, being your own boss provides tremendous freedom. You determine how frequently you work and

A Certifiable Profession

The American Culinary Federation (ACF) and American Personal & Private Chef Association (APPCA) began offering personal certified chef (PCC) and personal certified executive chef (PCEC) certifications in 2004.

Certification signifies that the personal chef career path is indeed viable, says Candy Wallace, executive director, APPCA, San Diego. How does one qualify to become a PCC- or a PCEC-certified chef? According to ACF director of education and professional development Kristy Begley, a PCC is a chef who is engaged in the preparation, cooking and serving of foods on a “cook-for-hire” basis. The individual must also have knowledge in menu planning, marketing, financial management and operational decision making and must have at least three years of cooking experience and one year of personal-chef experience.

The PCEC certification is available to advanced chefs who fulfill all of the same requirements as a PCC-certified chef, but must have at least three years experience as a personal chef.

Harvey Golden, PCEC, executive chef/owner, My Personal Gourmet, My Personal Gourmet Catering and Gravy, Loveland, Ohio, believes certification sets him apart from other personal chefs. “It lets my clients know that I care enough about them to study and take the necessary steps to become certified,” he says.

“Certification lends credibility when meeting new and potential clients. It has definitely furthered my career,” adds Devin Lowder, PCEC, chef/owner, Makali’i Catering Ltd. and Makali’i Café, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii.



Courtesy of Harvey Golden

After learning about the American Personal & Private Chef Association, Harvey Golden (center), PCEC, decided to leave corporate America to pursue a personal-chef career and opened My Personal Gourmet, My Personal Gourmet Catering and a restaurant named Gravy. He cooks as a personal chef, teaches classes and does in-home dinner parties. Here he works with client, Jerri Sthrom and employee Moises Galindo.

for whom. You control your earnings level by the number of clients you serve and the level of service provided. The national-average earnings of a personal chef providing Monday-through-Friday meal support for one client daily ranges between \$60,000 to \$70,000, but can be as high as six figures, Wallace says.

“I make in one evening what I used to make in one week cooking for 20,” Gerard says.

“Life as a personal chef is satisfying on a spiritual, as well as a financial, level and is relatively easy to start up,” says Wallace. “We are literally

paid to shop, cook and nurture and are operating our own small businesses.”

And personal chefs are paid to make a difference in their client’s life. “The personal connection with my clients is the best part of the job,” Golden says. ■

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