

Taking It *Personally*

A career as a personal chef may take away the crazy hours of a “normal” job, but not the excitement and fulfillment chefs crave.

BY JODY SHEE



Rob Corey, CEC, has built his business around high-end dinner parties in people’s homes, an experience he describes as, “a show. It’s great theater.”

One day four years ago, Dale Pyle, CEC, of Orlando, Fla., came home from his restaurant job and admitted to himself that he just couldn’t take it anymore. He’d

started working in restaurants at age 13, and climbed his way up to executive chef and then food-and-beverage director. But his career path had taken him into administration and away from what he loved most—cooking.

Pyle searched the Internet for other culinary-career options and came across the term “personal chef,” something he’d never heard of. Further research led him to the American Personal Chef Association (APCA), San Diego, which helped him get set up.

“I was amazed at how easy it was to get into being a personal chef,” he says. “I just loved it. I got a few big clients right off the bat.” He found he could be as slow or as busy as he wanted to be, and there was plenty of work. It also allowed him time to pursue a secondary culinary career as an instructor at Orlando Culinary Academy.

His story is similar to that of Candy Wallace, founder and executive director of the APCA. After years of working on a line in a restaurant and as a corporate executive chef, she became disenchanted. “Why don’t I have a life? Why am I always in this restaurant? Why am I always working nights, weekends and holidays?” she asked herself.

She became a personal chef, conducting assessments of clients’ meal desires and needs, developing their menus, shopping, cooking in their homes and packaging and storing the meals

for them. After training a number of people as personal chefs, she founded the APCA in 1996.

Wallace says there are basically six types of clients who use personal chefs: single, young career professionals; married professionals with or without children, but with no time to cook; people with a medical problem, such as diabetes; professional athletes or other high-profile celebrities; seniors; and those who just want fine dining that they don't have to cook.

The number of personal chefs in the United States is now about 10,000, and Wallace estimates that it will double in five years.

The allure

One day, partners Dennis Nosko and Christine Robinson of Lexington, Mass., received an e-mail asking if they were satisfied with their careers.

"The e-mail looked like spam—something we'd never open—but Dennis clicked on it," Robinson says. "A member of the APCA sent it, and it said, 'If you're tired of long hours, you need to check this out,' with a link to the APCA Web site."

Nosko, who has two culinary degrees, had worked as an executive chef for many years. "The hours and lack of creativity were driving him crazy," Robinson says. "I was in student finance, and I hated it."

They scrutinized the industry for several days, and wrote a list of pros and cons. "The pros so outweighed the cons. We couldn't find a bad angle," Robinson says, adding that initially she was just going to do the marketing, but then became involved as a personal chef.

Now Nosko and Robinson operate A Fresh Endeavor Personal Chef Service, with a base of 22 regular clients, from singles to married professionals, for whom they cook a week's to a month's worth of meals. Robinson

says they enjoy the challenge of creating unique menus, playing with ingredients and setting their own hours.

"And the fact that it's allowed us to build a business that represents our personalities and beliefs, and it benefits other people," she says.

Jessica Leibovitch of San Diego turned to the personal-chef business when she was 24, after working for high-end catering companies. "They could get cheap labor from Mexico, so the pay wasn't good," she says of the catering business in San Diego.

"People sent articles to me on personal chefs, and I felt it would be something I'd be good at. I could customize my food, and be my own boss."

Leibovitch says it was tough getting clients at first, because people thought personal chefs were only for the rich and famous. "Now it's changed a lot," she says. "My clients mostly aren't the richest people. They are just busy people who want to eat well, and have no time to cook fresh meals."

She loves feeling appreciated by her clients. "Unless you're an executive chef at an amazing restaurant, people don't know who has been cooking their food," she says. "And with catering big-name clients, I was in the kitchen all day beginning at 5 a.m. The people working the parties were temporary employees, but they were the ones getting the credit and appreciation. Now it's nice that I'm appreciated and they like what I do. It feels good."

Making it work

After getting started in the personal-chef world, some have customized their businesses. John Deatcher, who operates Foodini's Catering and Personal Chef Service based in Asbury Park, N.J., discovered that his New York clients had tiny kitchens that were difficult to work from. So he rented a commercial kitchen, and now

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brings the meals already prepared to the clients.

He is still considered a personal chef rather than a caterer, because the meals are personalized to the client, says Wallace.

Deatcher also takes on special-occasion dinner parties, and he sells gift certificates that realtors buy for clients or employees buy for their bosses during the holidays. He says his next goal is to expand his business by hiring someone to do the cooking while he works more on marketing.

In the Denver area and in Boulder, Colo., Rob Corey, CEC, is well-known in high-society circles as a personal chef, and he has built his business, The French Manner, around high-end dinner parties in people's homes. In addition, he teaches classes in classic French cuisine and how to run a restaurant at the Art Institute of Colorado in Denver.

He advertises his personal-chef business on his Web site, and sometimes buys an ad in a local magazine. But he says most of his business comes from word-of-mouth, and he estimates that about 35% of his work comes from repeat customers.

For large dinner parties, Corey hires extra help. "I have a staff of 30 people, all contract labor. My clients pay for labor, food and alcohol," he says. Each event takes him 15 to 20 hours.

Though he says he loved the excitement and energy of the restaurant kitchen, he can have the same experience at someone's house, but the pace is less frantic. "It's a show," he says. "I did theater when I was young. It's stage—people milling around, and you serving great wine and having servers and doing a bar. It's great theater."

Expert advice

Jim Davis of Gaithersburg, Md., listened as his son, Bryan, complained about the long evening hours he put



A chance conversation with someone who wanted a chef-cooked meal in a private home encouraged Jim Davis, (r.), and son, Bryan, to enter the personal-chef business.

in as a restaurant chef. So one day, as he was playing around on the Internet, Davis perked up when he came across information on the per-

For Further Study

- In a partnership between the American Culinary Federation and the American Personal Chef Association, certification for personal chefs is available on two levels: personal certified chef (PCC) and personal certified executive chef (PCEC). Visit www.acfchefs.org.
- *The Professional Personal Chef: The Business of Doing Business as a Personal Chef*, a textbook, will be available in February 2007 from John Wiley & Sons Inc., Hoboken, N.J. The authors are Candy Wallace, founder/executive director of the American Personal Chef Association, and Gregory Forte, CEC, CCE, AAC, director of the Culinary Arts Institute, Utah Valley State College, Orem, Utah.
- Learn more about the personal chef business from these Web sites: www.personalchef.com

sonal-chef industry. A few days later, in a conversation with a real estate agent, he mentioned personal chefs, and she asked him if he and Bryan would cook for her the following week. He called Wallace and asked her to overnight information.

"We quickly put a program together, and started the next day," Davis says. Now, he trains other personal chefs as APCA's East Coast regional manager, and also owns a cooking school.

For those interested in the personal-chef business, Davis suggests reading everything they can about it. He advises them to visit www.personalchef.com to find chefs in their area. "Call them," he says. "Buy them coffee, and find out how they are doing. Some make nice six-figure incomes."

Though it depends on how hard you work and the area you are in, Wallace estimates the average annual income of a personal chef is \$50,000 to \$70,000. "Those who add catering do better," she says.

The person who makes the best personal chef is honest, a people person and works well alone, Davis says. "You have to have professional cooking skills. You don't have to be a culinary-school graduate, but it's helpful. You have to be self-confident, and you have to do your own marketing. Even when your schedule is full, keep marketing. You have to have a waiting list."

He tells those beginning in the business that they have to offer better food than can be found at the local family restaurant. "Customers can buy food anywhere—from any store, deli or McDonald's," he says. "What we have to do is change people's lives. We have to improve the way they live and the way they get their food, and make them happier doing it." □

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