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## Chefs, Cooks, and Food Preparation Workers

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### Significant Points

- Many cooks and food preparation workers are young—37 percent are below the age of 24.
- One-third of these workers are employed part time.
- Job openings are expected to be plentiful because many of these workers will leave the occupation for full-time employment or better wages.

### Nature of the Work

Chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers prepare, season, and cook a wide range of foods—from soups, snacks, and salads to entrees, side dishes, and desserts. They work in a variety of restaurants and other food services establishments. Chefs and cooks create recipes and prepare meals, while food preparation workers peel and cut vegetables, trim meat, prepare poultry, and perform other duties, such as keeping work areas clean and monitoring temperatures of ovens and stovetops.

Specifically, *chefs* and cooks measure, mix, and cook ingredients according to recipes, using a variety of equipment, including pots, pans, cutlery, ovens, broilers, grills, slicers, grinders, and blenders. Chefs and head cooks also are responsible for directing the work of other kitchen workers, estimating food requirements, and ordering food supplies.

*Food preparation workers* perform routine, repetitive tasks under the direction of chefs and cooks. These workers ready the ingredients for complex dishes by slicing and dicing vegetables, and composing salads and cold items. They weigh and measure ingredients, go after pots and pans, and stir and strain soups and sauces. Food preparation workers may cut and grind meats, poultry, and seafood in preparation for cooking. They also clean work areas, equipment, utensils, dishes, and silverware.

Larger restaurants and food services establishments tend to have varied menus and larger kitchen staffs. Staffs often include several chefs and cooks, sometimes called assistant or line cooks. Each chef or cook works an assigned station that is equipped with the types of stoves, grills, pans, and ingredients needed for the foods prepared at that station. Job titles often reflect the principal ingredient prepared or the type of cooking performed—vegetable cook, fry cook, or grill cook, for example. These cooks also may direct or work with other food preparation workers.

*Executive chefs* and *head cooks* coordinate the work of the kitchen staff and direct the preparation of meals. They determine serving sizes, plan menus, order food supplies, and oversee kitchen operations to ensure uniform quality and presentation of meals. An executive chef, for example, is in charge of all food service operations and also may supervise the many kitchens of a hotel, restaurant group, or corporate dining operation. A *chef de cuisine* reports to an executive chef and is responsible for the daily operations of a single kitchen. A *sous chef*, or sub chef, is the second-in-command and runs the kitchen in the

absence of the chef. Many chefs earn fame both for themselves and for their kitchens because of the quality and distinctive nature of the food they serve.

Responsibilities depend on where cooks work. *Institution* and *cafeteria cooks*, for example, work in the kitchens of schools, cafeterias, businesses, hospitals, and other institutions. For each meal, they prepare a large quantity of a limited number of entrees, vegetables, and desserts according to preset menus. Meals generally are prepared in advance so diners seldom get the opportunity to special order a meal. Restaurant cooks usually prepare a wider selection of dishes, cooking most orders individually. *Short-order cooks* prepare foods in restaurants and coffee shops that emphasize fast service and quick food preparation. They grill and garnish hamburgers, prepare sandwiches, fry eggs, and cook French fries, often working on several orders at the same time. *Fast-food cooks* prepare a limited selection of menu items in fast-food restaurants. They cook and package batches of food, such as hamburgers and fried chicken, to be kept warm until served. (*Combined food preparation and service workers*, who both prepare and serve items in fast-food restaurants, are included with the material on food and beverage serving and related workers elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

The number and types of workers employed in kitchens also depends on the type of establishment. Small, full-service restaurants offering casual dining often feature a limited number of easy-to-prepare items supplemented by short-order specialties and ready-made desserts. Typically, one cook prepares all the food with the help of a short-order cook and one or two other kitchen workers.

Grocery and specialty food stores employ chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers to develop recipes and prepare meals for customers to carry out. Typically, entrees, side dishes, salads, or other items are prepared in large quantities and stored at an appropriate temperature. Counter assistants portion and package items according to customer orders for serving at home.

Some cooks, called *research chefs*, combine culinary skills with knowledge of food science to develop recipes for chain restaurants and food processors and manufacturers. They test new formulas and flavors for prepared foods and determine the most efficient and safest way to prepare new foods.

Some cooks work for individuals rather than for restaurants, cafeterias, or food manufacturers. These *private household cooks* plan and prepare meals in private homes according to the client's tastes or dietary needs. They order groceries and supplies, clean the kitchen, and wash dishes and utensils. They also may serve meals. Private chefs are employed directly by a single individual or family or sometimes by corporations or institutions, such as universities and embassies, to perform cooking and entertaining tasks. These chefs usually live in and may travel with their employer. Because of the sensitive nature of their employment, they are usually required to sign confidentiality agreements. As part of the job, private chefs often perform additional services, such as paying bills, coordinating schedules, and planning events.

Another type of private household cooks, called personal chefs, usually prepare a week's worth of meals in the client's home for the client to heat and serve according to directions throughout the week. Personal chefs are self-employed or employed by a company that provides this service.

**Work environment.** Many restaurant and institutional kitchens have modern equipment, convenient work areas, and air conditioning, but kitchens in older and smaller eating places are often not as well designed. Kitchen staffs invariably work in small quarters against hot stoves and ovens. They are under constant pressure to prepare meals quickly, while ensuring quality is maintained and safety and sanitation guidelines are observed. Because the pace can be hectic during peak dining times, workers must be able to communicate clearly so that food orders are completed correctly.

Working conditions vary with the type and quantity of food prepared and the local laws governing food service operations. Workers usually must stand for hours at a time, lifting heavy pots and kettles, and working near hot ovens and grills. Job hazards include slips and falls, cuts, and burns, but injuries are seldom serious.

Work hours in restaurants may include early mornings, late evenings, holidays, and weekends. Work schedules of chefs, cooks and other kitchen workers in factory and school cafeterias may be more regular. In 2006, about 29 percent of cooks and 44 percent of food preparation workers had part-time schedules, compared to 15 percent of workers throughout the economy. Work schedules in fine-dining restaurants, however, tend to be longer because of the time required to prepare ingredients in advance. Many executive chefs regularly work 12-hour days because they oversee the delivery of foodstuffs early in the day, plan the menu, and prepare those menu items that take the most skill.

The wide range in dining hours and the need for fully-staffed kitchens during all open hours creates work opportunities for students, youth, and other individuals seeking supplemental income, flexible work hours, or variable schedules. Eighteen percent of cooks and food preparation workers were 16 to 19 years old in 2006; nineteen percent were age 20 to 24. Ten percent had variable schedules. Kitchen workers employed by schools may work during the school year only, usually for 9 or 10 months. Similarly, resort establishments usually only offer seasonal employment.

### **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

On-the-job training is most common for fast-food cooks, short-order cooks, and food preparation workers. Chefs and others with more advanced cooking duties often attend cooking school. Vocational training programs are available to many high school students, but advanced positions usually require training after high school. Experience, an ability to develop and enhance cooking skills, and a strong desire to cook are the most common requirements for advancement.

**Education and training.** A high school diploma is not required for beginning jobs, but it is recommended for those planning a career as a cook or chef. Most fast-food or short-order cooks and food preparation workers require little education or training to start because most skills are learned on the job. Training generally starts with basic sanitation and workplace safety and continues with instruction on food handling, preparation, and cooking procedures. Training in food handling, sanitation, and health and safety procedures are mandatory in most jurisdictions for all workers. Those who become



*Chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers often prepare ingredients ahead of time so that they can be cooked quickly when ordered.*

proficient and who show an interest in learning complicated cooking techniques may advance to more demanding cooking positions or into supervisory positions.

Some high school or vocational school programs offer courses in basic food safety and handling procedures, cooking, and general business and computer classes that can be helpful for those who might someday want to be a chef or to open their own restaurant. Many school districts, in cooperation with State departments of education, provide on-the-job training and summer workshops for cafeteria kitchen workers who aspire to become cooks. Food service management companies or hotel and restaurant chains, also offer paid internships and summer jobs to those starting out in the field. Internships provide valuable experience and can lead to placement in more formal chef training programs.

When hiring chefs and others in advanced cooking positions, however, employers usually prefer applicants who have training after high school. These training programs range from a few months to 2 years or more. Vocational or trade-school programs typically offer basic training in food handling and sanitation procedures, nutrition, slicing and dicing methods for various kinds of meats and vegetables, and basic cooking methods, such as baking, broiling, and grilling. Longer

programs leading to a certificate or a 2- or 4-year degree train chefs for fine-dining or upscale restaurants. They offer a wider array of training specialties, such as advanced cooking techniques; cooking for banquets, buffets, or parties; and cuisines and cooking styles from around the world.

A growing number of chefs participate in these longer training programs through independent cooking schools, professional culinary institutes, 2- or 4-year college degree programs in hospitality or culinary arts, or in the armed forces. Some large hotels and restaurants also operate their own training and job-placement programs for chefs and cooks. Executive chefs and head cooks who work in fine-dining restaurants require many years of training and experience and an intense desire to cook.

Although curricula may vary, students in culinary training programs spend most of their time in kitchens learning to prepare meals by practicing cooking skills. They learn good knife techniques and proper use and care of kitchen equipment. Training programs also include courses in nutrition, menu planning, portion control, purchasing and inventory methods, proper food storage procedures, and use of leftover food to minimize waste. Students also learn sanitation and public health rules for handling food. Training in food service management, computer accounting and inventory software, and banquet service are featured in some training programs. Most formal training programs also require students to get experience in a commercial kitchen through an internship, apprenticeship, or out-placement program.

Many chefs are trained on the job, receiving real work experience and training from chef-mentors in the restaurants where they work. Professional culinary institutes, industry associations, and trade unions sponsor formal apprenticeship programs in coordination with the U.S. Department of Labor.

The American Culinary Federation accredits more than 200 formal academic training programs and sponsors apprenticeship programs around the country. Typical apprenticeships last 2 years and combine classroom training and work experience. Accreditation is an indication that a culinary program meets recognized standards regarding course content, facilities, and quality of instruction.

**Other qualifications.** Chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers must be efficient, quick, and work well as part of a team. Manual dexterity is helpful for cutting, chopping, and plating. These workers also need creativity and a keen sense of taste and smell. Personal cleanliness is essential because most States require health certificates indicating that workers are free from communicable diseases. Knowledge of a foreign language can be an asset because it may improve communication with other restaurant staff, vendors, and the restaurant's clientele.

**Certification and advancement.** The American Culinary Federation certifies pastry professionals, personal chefs, and culinary educators in addition to various levels of chefs. Certification standards are based primarily on experience and formal training. Although certification is not required, it can help to prove accomplishment and lead to advancement and higher-paying positions.

Advancement opportunities for chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers depend on their training, work experience, and ability to perform more responsible and sophisticated tasks. Many food preparation workers, for example, may move into assistant or line cook positions. Chefs and cooks who demonstrate an eagerness to learn new cooking skills and to accept greater responsibility may also move up and be asked to train or supervise lesser skilled kitchen staff. Others may move to larger or more prestigious kitchens and restaurants.

Some chefs and cooks go into business as caterers or personal chefs or open their own restaurant. Others become instructors in culinary training programs. A number of cooks and chefs advance to executive chef positions or food service management positions, particularly in hotels, clubs, or larger, more elegant restaurants. (See the section on food service managers elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

## Employment

Chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers held 3.1 million jobs in 2006. The distribution of jobs among the various types of chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers was as follows:

Food preparation workers .....	902,000
Cooks, restaurant .....	850,000
Cooks, fast food .....	629,000
Cooks, institution and cafeteria .....	401,000
Cooks, short order .....	195,000
Chefs and head cooks .....	115,000
Cooks, private household .....	4,900
Cooks, all other .....	16,000

Two-thirds of all chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers were employed in restaurants and other food services and drinking places. About 15 percent worked in institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, and nursing care facilities. Grocery stores, hotels, and gasoline stations with convenience stores employed most of the remainder.

## Job Outlook

Job opportunities for chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers are expected to be plentiful because of the continued growth and expansion of food services outlets, resulting in average employment growth, and because of the large numbers of workers who leave these occupations and need to be replaced. However, those seeking the highest-paying positions will face keen competition.

**Employment change.** Employment of chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers is expected to increase by 11 percent over the 2006-16 decade, which is about as fast as the average for all occupations. This occupation will have among the largest numbers of new jobs arise, about 351,000 over the period. Growth will be spurred by increases in population, household income, and demand for convenience that will lead to more people dining out and taking vacations that include hotel stays and restaurant visits. In addition, employment of chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers who prepare meals-to-go, such as those who work in the prepared foods sections of grocery or specialty food stores, should grow faster than average as

**Projections data from the National Employment Matrix**

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers.....	—	3,113,000	3,464,000	351,000	11
Chefs and head cooks.....	35-1011	115,000	124,000	8,700	8
Cooks and food preparation workers .....	35-2000	2,998,000	3,340,000	342,000	11
Cooks .....	35-2010	2,097,000	2,301,000	204,000	10
Cooks, fast food .....	35-2011	629,000	681,000	52,000	8
Cooks, institution and cafeteria.....	35-2012	401,000	445,000	43,000	11
Cooks, private household.....	35-2013	4,900	5,400	400	9
Cooks, restaurant.....	35-2014	850,000	948,000	98,000	12
Cooks, short order.....	35-2015	195,000	205,000	9,500	5
Cooks, all other .....	35-2019	16,000	16,000	500	3
Food preparation workers .....	35-2021	902,000	1,040,000	138,000	15

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

these stores compete with restaurants for people's food dollars. Also, there is a growing consumer desire for convenient, healthier, made-from-scratch meals.

Projected employment growth varies by detailed occupation. The number of higher-skilled chefs and cooks working in full-service restaurants—those that offer table service and more varied menus—is expected to increase about as fast as the average for all occupations. Much of this increase will come from job growth in more casual dining settings, rather than in up-scale full-service restaurants. Dining trends suggest that an increasing number of meals are eaten away from home, which creates growth in family dining restaurants, but greater limits on expense-account meals is expected to generate slower growth for up-scale restaurants.

Employment of food preparation workers is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations, reflecting diners' desires for convenience as they shop for carryout meals in a greater variety of places, including full-service restaurants, limited-service eating places, and grocery stores.

Employment of fast-food cooks is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations. Duties of cooks in fast-food restaurants are limited; most workers are likely to be combined food preparation and serving workers, rather than fast-food cooks. Employment of short-order cooks is expected to increase more slowly than average.

Employment of institution and cafeteria chefs and cooks will show growth about as fast as the average. Their employment will not keep pace with the rapid growth in the educational and health services industries—where their employment is concentrated. Offices, schools, and hospitals increasingly contract out their food services in an effort to make “institutional food” more attractive to office workers, students, staff, visitors, and patients. Much of the growth of these workers will be in contract food service establishments that provide catering services or food management and staff for employee dining rooms, sports complexes, convention centers, and educational or health care facilities.

Employment of private household cooks is projected to grow by 9 percent, about as fast as the average. While the employment of personal chefs is expected to increase—reflecting the growing popularity and convenience of eating restaurant-quality

meals at home—the number of private chefs will not grow as fast, reflecting slower growth in private household service employment.

**Job prospects.** Job openings for chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers are expected to be plentiful through 2016; however, competition should be keen for jobs in the top kitchens of higher end restaurants. Although job growth will create many new positions, the overwhelming majority of job openings will stem from the need to replace workers who leave this large occupational group. Many chef, cook, and food preparation worker jobs are attractive to people seeking first-time or short-term employment, additional income, or a flexible schedule. Employers typically hire a large number of part-time workers, but many of these workers soon transfer to other occupations or stop working, creating numerous openings for those entering the field. At higher end restaurants, the fast pace, long hours, and high energy levels required to succeed also cause some top chefs and cooks to leave for other jobs, creating job openings.

**Earnings**

Earnings of chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers vary greatly by region and the type of employer. Earnings usually are highest in elegant restaurants and hotels, where many executive chefs are employed, and in major metropolitan and resort areas.

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of chefs and head cooks were \$34,370 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$25,910 and \$46,040. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$20,160, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$60,730. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest number of chefs and head cooks were:

Other amusement and recreations industries .....	\$46,460
Traveler accommodation.....	40,020
Special food services .....	36,450
Full-service restaurants .....	32,360
Limited-service eating places .....	27,560

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of cooks, private household were \$22,870 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent

earned between \$17,960 and \$31,050. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$14,690, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$55,040.

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of institution and cafeteria cooks were \$20,410 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$16,280 and \$25,280. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$13,450, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$30,770. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of institution and cafeteria cooks were:

General medical and surgical hospitals.....	\$22,980
Special food services.....	21,650
Community care facilities for the elderly .....	20,910
Nursing care facilities .....	20,470
Elementary and secondary schools .....	18,770

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of restaurant cooks were \$20,340 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$16,860 and \$24,260. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$14,370, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$28,850. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of restaurant cooks were:

Traveler accommodations .....	\$23,400
Full-service restaurants .....	20,100
Limited-service eating places .....	18,200

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of short-order cooks were \$17,880 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$14,960 and \$21,820. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$12,930, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$26,110. Median annual earnings in full-service restaurants were \$18,340.

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of food preparation workers were \$17,410 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$14,920 and \$21,230. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$13,190, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$25,940. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest number of food preparation workers were:

Grocery stores .....	\$18,920
Full-service restaurants .....	17,390
Limited-service eating places .....	15,550

Median annual wage-and-salary earnings of fast-food cooks were \$15,410 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned

between \$13,730 and \$17,700. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$12,170, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$20,770. Median annual earnings were \$15,360 in full-service restaurants and \$15,350 in limited-service eating places.

Some employers provide employees with uniforms and free meals, but Federal law permits employers to deduct from their employees' wages the cost or fair value of any meals or lodging provided, and some employers do so. Chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers who work full time often receive typical benefits, but part-time and hourly workers usually do not.

In some large hotels and restaurants, kitchen workers belong to unions. The principal unions are the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union and the Service Employees International Union.

**Related Occupations**

People who perform tasks similar to those of chefs, cooks, and food preparation workers include those in food processing occupations, such as butchers and meat cutters, and bakers. Others who work closely with these workers include food service managers and food and beverage serving and related workers.

**Sources of Additional Information**

Information about job opportunities may be obtained from local employers and local offices of the State employment service.

Career information about chefs, cooks, and other kitchen workers, including a directory of 2- and 4-year colleges that offer courses or training programs is available from:

- National Restaurant Association, 1200 17th St.NW., Washington, DC 20036.

Internet: <http://www.restaurant.org>

Information on the American Culinary Federation's apprenticeship and certification programs for cooks and a list of accredited culinary programs is available from:

- American Culinary Federation, 180 Center Place Way, St.Augustine, FL 32095.

Internet: <http://www.acfchefs.org>

For information about becoming a personal or private chef, contact:

- American Personal & Private Chef Association, 4572 Delaware St., San Diego, CA 92116.

Internet: <http://www.personalchef.com>

For information about culinary apprenticeship programs registered with the U.S. Department of Labor, contact the local office of your State employment service agency, check the department's apprenticeship Web site: [http://www.doleta.gov/atels\\_bat](http://www.doleta.gov/atels_bat) or call the toll free helpline: (877) 872-5627.