

High-end, Professional Kitchens (Chez Panisse)

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Overview

Professional kitchens are designed and maintained to maximize quality, efficiency, cleanliness, and safety (for restaurant patrons and for the cooks themselves). The storage, retrieval, and labeling of tools, ingredients, and labor are critical not just for a business's ability to provide quality service, but for their ability to pass required health inspections, scheduled and unscheduled.

While many of the tactics discussed in this case study apply to typical high-end, professional restaurant kitchens, this case study will focus on the particular example of the Chez Panisse, with a particular emphasis on how their philosophy of using local, seasonal and sustainably sourced ingredients affect the way in which resources must be dynamically organized. The focus of this case study will furthermore primarily be on the function/organization of the back-of-house (BOH) team — that is, the team and resources of the restaurant that are non-customer-facing. This would exclude the wait staff as well as the office workers who handle reservations, PR, and the restaurant's relationship with the Berkeley community (though these do play integral roles in the successful maintenance of the overall restaurant system). The front-of-house versus back-of-house distinction loses some of its technical meaning in the case of Chez Panisse (because the kitchen is open concept) but nevertheless distinguishes the unique design goals of the production side of the restaurant to that of the service side.

What is being organized?

The physical resources of the professional kitchen include ingredients (produce, meat, pantry), tools (knives, pots, pans, etc.), labor (chefs, sous chefs, interns), and work space (counter space for prep, stovetop space, ovens, etc.). Information about these resources are equally important in this system; this includes but is not limited to the freshness of the ingredients, the skillsets of each of the chefs/cooks, and their scheduling with respect to one another.

Resources in the Chez Panisse kitchen are very dynamically organized; their access to high-skill labor and their philosophy prioritizing maximally fresh, local ingredients results in a system that is designed to be added to and deleted from on a daily if not sometimes hour-to-hour basis. Resources are not interchangeable in this system: the high degree of freedom that chefs are given in this system to dictate the menu and techniques with which the food will be prepared, and while ingredients may be considered interchangeable, they do require meeting rigorous sourcing, seasonality, and quality standards in order to be utilized.

Information about each of these resources dictate their life cycles — there may be some predictions that can be made about the life cycle of labor (a more experienced chef is likely to either advance or leave), but in general the “useful life” of a cook or chef will be very dependent on the individual's goals and specific talents. Ingredients have a much more predictable life cycle in terms of when something is likely to be expired, but how much and of what quality an ingredient is going to be is highly variable depending on supplier availability.

Why is it being organized?

Restaurant kitchens in the broad sense are organized to minimize waste, danger, and contamination. Chez Panisse in particular represents a unique design challenge in that its philosophy centers on using only local, seasonable, and sustainable ingredients — its founder, Alice Waters, being one of the first proponents of the farm-to-table movement in America. Chez Panisse has both an upstairs and a downstairs kitchen, each with two head chefs, who coordinate the use/ordering of ingredients, the direction of staff, and the allocation of kitchen space with one another. A successful organizing system means being able to provide consistently quality food, retaining good relationships with produce, meat, and dairy purveyors, and good relationships with labor.

How much is it being organized?

Chez Panisse is highly dynamic — menus aren't fully determined by the chefs in charge for that day until the morning-of; needs of the ingredients vary day-to-day and season-to-season, which require a system that is highly adaptable but standardized enough to ensure financial solvency and necessary attention to health and safety.

When is it being organized?

Chefs determine preliminary menus on the Wednesday prior to the coming week (Mon-Sat). Produce orders are made and the menu is adjusted according to local availability and meat orders are placed roughly a month advance to accommodate for the needs of ranchers. Alice Waters approves all menus before they are published on the website.

Orders are received daily and are organized/maintained by the garde manger, who reports to both cafe and restaurant chefs at the start of every service day before menus are finalized. Each item is logged on a master sheet as well as labeled upon arrival with the ingredient name, the date it was received, and whether it is reserved for the upstairs or downstairs kitchen. All orders are signed for by the garde manger and checked off; physical copies of slips are left in one location in the kitchen, and products tags of particularly sensitive items like shellfish are kept for a minimum of 90 days when received for health and safety reasons.

Menus are finalized (with sauces, dressings, preparations, and vegetarian options) the morning-of based on inventory as reported by the garde manger. The menu is discussed/adjusted with the kitchen staff as needed. Each cook is then assigned or volunteers for one item on the menu. Preparation is done by the chefs, staff, and interns themselves rather than with a separate prep team.

How or by whom?

There are four head chefs: two for the downstairs, prix fixe restaurant and two for the upstairs, a la carte cafe. The cafe chefs handle ordering for both kitchens because their needs are both higher in volume and volatility (the cafe handles about twice as many guests in a day and take in walk-in guests without reservations).

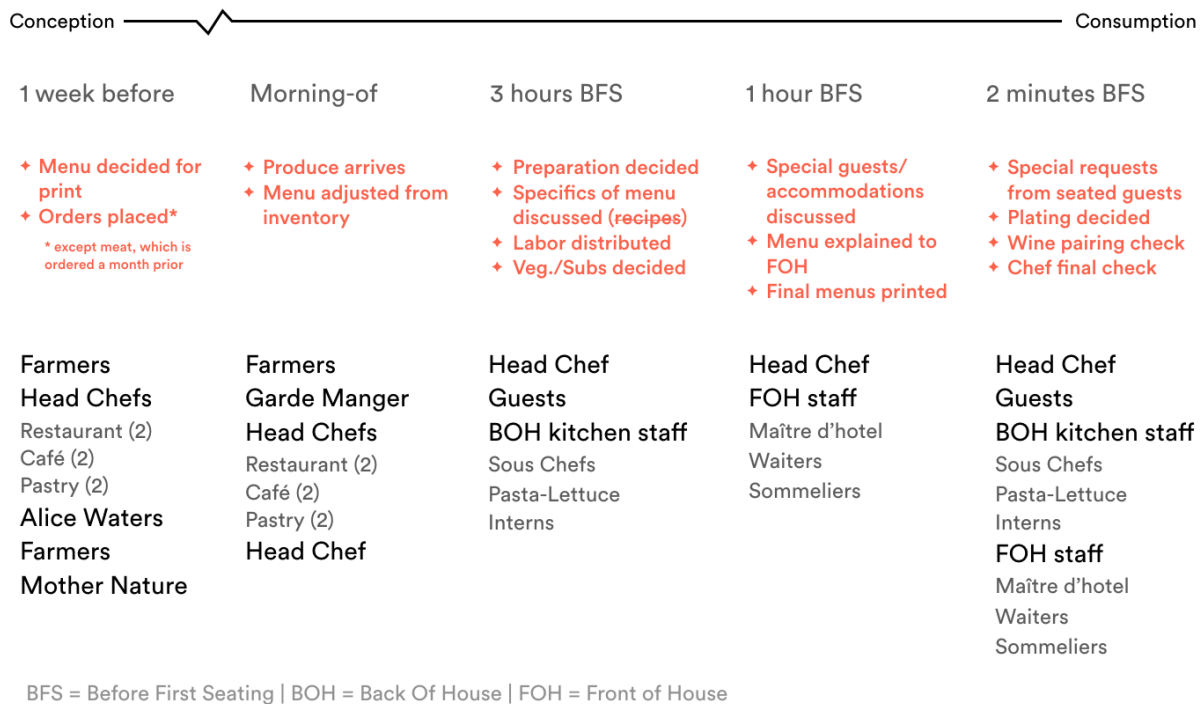


Figure 1: Timeline and stakeholders involved at each major stage of a dish being conceived to a dish being consumed.

As mentioned previously, the garde manger is responsible for continuously taking inventory, receiving orders, and replenishing standard pantry and dairy items. The garde manger is also ultimately responsible for maintaining the organization of the ingredients.

The chefs are also responsible for organizing tasks and labor amongst their teams of cooks; in many kitchens with standardized menus these tasks are prescribed pretty reliably from night to night on a component basis — i.e. one chef is on fish, grill, vegetables, sauces, etc. Cooks at Chez Panisse however, are assigned responsibility based on one entire dish (or several, in the case of the upstairs cafe). Chefs vary on the amount of direction they provide in dictating the menu to their staff— some chefs prefer to provide more direct instruction on how each element of the dish is going to be prepared while others provide more general suggestion as to preparation. In all cases there is at least some level of negotiation between the head chef and the cook assigned that dish, and no formal recipes are used. Final approval on taste, preparation, and plating before the dish goes out to the guest come from the chef.

Chefs bring their own knives (and are, by tradition, very protective of them), but the rest of appliances, cookware, and tools are organized by station (whisks by pastry, labels by the stovetop, etc.) and cleaned throughout prep and service in a dedicated area adjacent to the kitchen.

Where is it being organized?

Ingredients are stored in three primary locations: the kitchen itself, the secondary downstairs prep area, and outside. Where an ingredient will go is decided first by the needs of the ingredient itself (refrigeration, darkness, airflow etc.) and then secondly by the urgency of their use — taking urgency to mean both urgency in whether it will be used for service that day and urgency in how fresh that ingredient is with respect to other resources in the same category. In simpler terms, ingredients that are relevant to the menu that night and pantry items and spices that are routinely used in every dish (such as cooking oils, salts, peppers, etc) will be placed closer to the kitchen where the chefs are. Items with longer shelf lives or that are more infrequently used are placed in areas farther away from where the kitchen is.

Ingredients are furthermore organized with respect to one another based on when they were received; inventory is organized based on the rules of FIFO, or “first in, first out.” This means that the newest received instance of some resource category is placed at the back or otherwise least convenient place and the older, more soon-to-expire resources are placed forward to encourage use.

Labor and space are much more dynamically organized; because menus change daily and aren’t finalized until hours before service, the use of space, appliances, and cookware need to be dynamically negotiated between kitchen staff. The presence of hot and sharp objects in cooking also require constant communication and the observance of best-practices, for example, vocabulary like “Hot, behind” or “Corner” to minimize incident or injury.

Other Considerations

While in many ways Chez Panisse functions as other typical well-run, high-end restaurants do, their particular philosophy around using local, seasonable ingredients as well as their reputation in the community that provide the ability to draw in both a reliable stream of customers and talent allow for the ability to adopt some of the more unusual practices that they do. Its priorities and the relative influence that it gives to different aspects of its structure make for a customer experience that is highly variable — not necessarily in quality but in subjective experience. An extreme contrast would be a company like Subway, with extremely different priorities but a consistent experience that is, inarguably, still an extremely profitable way of organizing food-service.

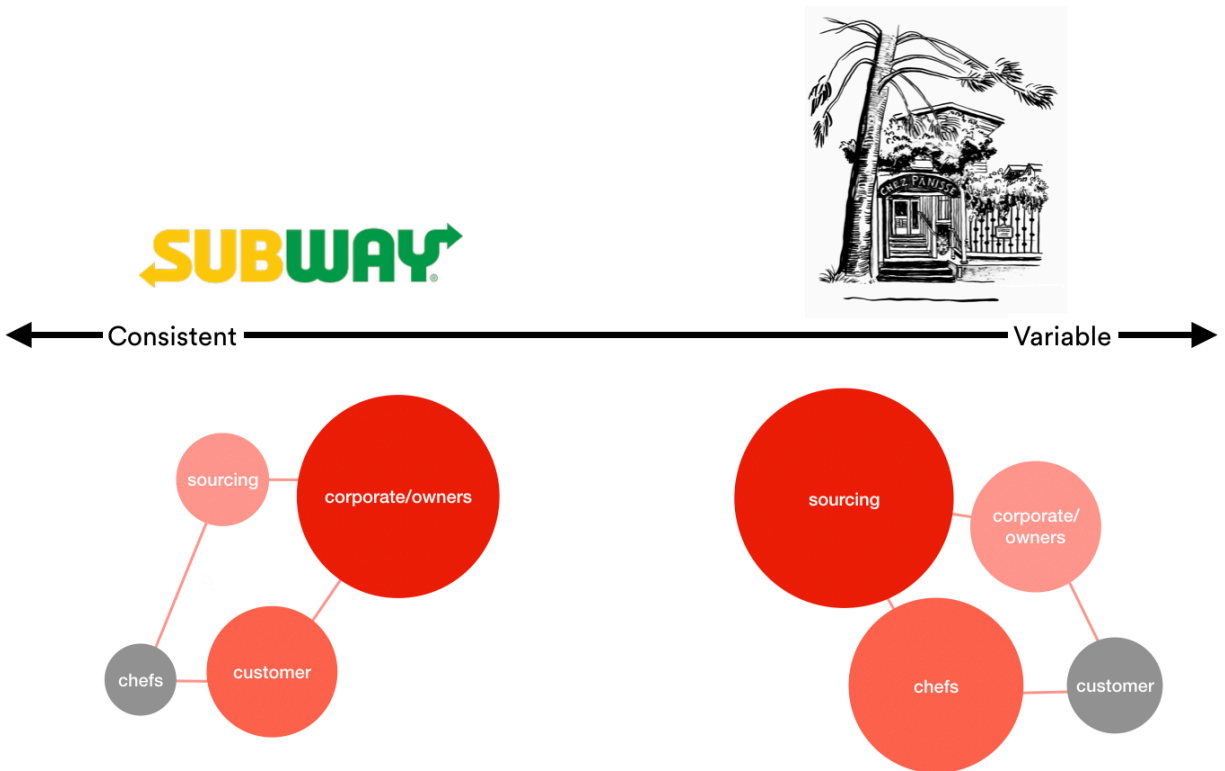


Figure 2: Contrast between Chez Pansisse and an extreme example, Subway on the relative influences of sourcing, chefs, customers, and owners on the end-product.

Subway:

Sourcing — ingredients standard across all locations, regardless of season/region. Franchised business.

Chefs — low skill labor, little training or education needed. Little to no influence on the end-product.

Customer — high degree of personalization, still limited to the ingredients offered.

Corporate — Methods, ingredients, highly regimented recipes decided at the corporate level.

Chez Pansisse:

Sourcing — Birthplace of the farm-to-table movement; entirely based on seasonal and local availability and sustainable farming practices. Directs menu.

Chefs — high skill, high degree of freedom. Near-complete control of menu, highly variable night-to-night.

Corporate — Approve menus, guide philosophy of the restaurant. (Alice Waters)

Customer — Little influence beyond substitutions due to dietary restrictions. Especially so in prix fixe scenarios.