Final Reflection on
My 2016 Summer Mentorship-Model Internship
in Culinary Arts

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For two full months this summer, I worked as an intern and apprentice at Tom’s Place, a five-star restaurant and bar in Desoto, IL, under Danish Executive Chef Lasse Sorensen in the Mentorship-Model Summer Internship in Culinary Arts, where I learned the ins and outs of a restaurant kitchen. For four days a week, from Wednesday through Saturday, I worked at the restaurant as a cook.

The Work Day

Around 2:00 p.m., I would arrive at the restaurant and change into my chef’s clothes. And, immediately, things would get started, as there was a lot to do before the restaurant’s 5:00 p.m. opening. Every night, there was a vegetable side, and, depending on the dish that was ordered, either a potato side or a risotto side. Making these three sides encompassed most of the prep period for me. I would also have to make beurre blanc sauce and refill the crab pot. At my station, which was the plating station at the end of the line, there was a checklist to go through. I had to make sure that the station was fully stocked with various sauces and garnishes, such as rosemary and chopped parsley. If it wasn’t, I would have to restock the station. If we were out of something, like maître d’hôtel butter or tomato-onion jam, that would also have to be made.

By 4:00 p.m., I was expected to be done with the potato, vegetable, and other prep work, and I needed to be starting on the risotto at that point. I made risotto so many times that I could probably do it in my sleep by now. Occasionally, we would offer something other than risotto, such as cheesy grits or rice pilaf. I would also make beurre blanc sauce, a creamy butter sauce that goes atop various fish dishes. Ideally, at the strike of 5 p.m., I would be done with all prep work, the vegetable, potato, risotto, and beurre blanc sauce, and have the station fully stocked.

During the summer, the restaurant was open four evenings a week, and some nights had special menu features. Wednesday was pasta night. Friday was the wine bar with three special appetizers. Saturday was the busiest night. Prep for Wednesday’s pasta night and Friday’s wine bar appetizers required additional tasks.

During service hours, especially in the early days of my internship, I worked at the end of the line, plating the dinners and preparing them to leave the kitchen. This included serving up the vegetable, risotto or potato, and garnishing the entée. While at this station, I learned many important lessons about plating food and making it look beautiful. These particular words truly stuck with me: “The eyes are the first thing to taste the food.”

Including myself, there were four cooks in the kitchen. While I was at the end of the line, Chef Sorensen worked at the sauté station. One of the cooks worked at the grill station, and another
worked at the salad and dessert station, preparing all of the cold dishes. At the sauté station, Chef Sorensen prepared multiple hot first courses and entrees.

Over time, I got experience at the sauté station, learning how to cook various entrees and appetizers. I also learned several things about grilling and spent some time at the salad and dessert station, learning how to make several salads and gaining exposure to several dessert skills, including using a brûlée torch to make crème brûlée.

When service was nearing the end, we had to start wrapping up. Every item on the line had to be wrapped. The line had to be cleaned. Dirty dishes and utensils had to go to the dish room. All of the ovens and stoves had to be turned off.

There is no such thing as downtime in a restaurant kitchen. If there’s no active service, then one could always clean something, organize his station, or help the dishwasher run utensils from the dish room back to the kitchen. The last things that we did at the end of the night were take out the trash and change. We usually closed up and left for the night between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m. Despite the work being hard and the hours being long, I always felt at least a little excited to go back for the next shift.

The Comradery of the Kitchen

In the kitchen, we were a family. We laughed together, cried together, struggled together, and celebrated together. I developed great friendships with many people. I will always remember the family of which I was a part. We had plenty of times during which we joked around. There were also serious moments and moments of tension, but, overall, the kitchen is a fun environment. It’s a light-hearted environment, one where family members enjoy each other. After seeing people at their worst and at their best, you learn to love them for who they are. This is an important lesson, as it’s a lesson about being part of a team and about fitting into a well-oiled machine. At the end of the night, our employee dinners were called “family meal,” and there’s a reason why.

Takeaways

I learned a lot—a whole lot. Ranging from specific recipes and culinary techniques to life lessons and enlightening moments, this internship was an extremely educational experience. I learned how to prepare many foods, from salads to appetizers, from sauces to entrees, and from desserts to pastas. I learned proper knife technique, allowing me to evenly and efficiently cut things. I learned how to: fan a strawberry, peel an onion, judge the doneness of meat, and toss with a pan.

Even more important than the culinary skills were the life lessons. The restaurant kitchen is not an easy environment in which to be. It’s hot. It’s demanding. It requires tremendous physical and mental strength. I was subject to burns, cuts, pressure to do well, and the expectation of perfection, and I loved every bit of it. I came out of this internship a tougher person—a person who’s better at getting the job done. This was also my first taste of the eight-hour work day, something that I will have to get used to for the rest of my life—no matter what career path I
pursue. With so many things to prepare in one night, I learned how to stay mentally organized and keep my cool in tense situations. I learned about the importance of cleaning up as you go and how it’s never acceptable to use “I can do it later” as an excuse. One of the cooks once caught me with a horribly disorganized station and said to me: “All of this clutter is a giant mess. This is what your brain looks like.” That is an experience that I will always keep with me, reminding me to be organized.

Overall, I learned more in such a condensed period of time than I ever thought I could. I learned valuable culinary lessons that I can always apply to my cooking, whether that’s ultimately for customers or just for family. I learned valuable life lessons that I can apply to anything I do for the rest of my life. This experience also confirmed many of my assumptions about a career in the culinary arts. Yes, the work is hard, but it’s also very rewarding. As I leave this program, I do so feeling like the restaurant industry suits me, as seeing the beautiful creations I can make and developing such great friendships are a truly amazing gifts. Leaving the restaurant kitchen for the last time was bittersweet, because, despite being excited to go back to school, I will always remember and cherish the time at Tom’s Place—the good and bad, the happy and the stressful.