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Too much heat in the kitchen: survey shows toxic work conditions mean many chefs are getting out

Published: March 8, 2024 11.57am NZDT

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Chefs are in hot demand. “Chefs, chefs, chefs! Virtually impossible to find anyone,” lamented one Auckland restaurant owner recently. Australia is seeing a similar gap, with chefs ranked the eighth most in-demand occupation. Given this culinary skills shortage, we might expect such sought-after employees to be highly valued.

Apparently not. Our new report on chef wellbeing and working conditions shows chefs in Australia and New Zealand experience significant financial hardship and mental health issues, with many wishing to leave their jobs.

This has major implications for tourism, too, as jobs such as cheffing are “keystone occupations” in major destinations. When jobs can’t be filled, these places lose money.

Tourism revenue is booming, with visitors reportedly seeking more scenery, history and culture. The food chefs prepare in cafés and restaurants forms an integral part of the tourist experience. But despite the laws of supply and demand, the situation for chefs is unlikely to improve without radical changes to work practices.

Our study is the first quantitative survey to examine working conditions and mental health issues among chefs in both Australia and New Zealand. The survey was distributed through professional culinary associations, and final responses were captured as Australasia emerged from COVID restrictions.

The survey also followed up previous Australian studies, which indicated exploitation was an industry norm, with chefs experiencing burnout and wage theft.



Culinary cruelty: restaurant kitchens have a long history as stressful and abusive workplaces. Getty Images

‘Banter, bollockings and beatings’

The kitchen environment is well documented to be particularly harsh. As one British study titled “Banter, bollockings and beatings” made clear, an often macho culture can prevail, including bizarre induction rituals.

An Australian study published in 2022 showed chefs were significantly more likely than the general population to commit suicide. And even before the pandemic, the industry’s “toxic” workplace culture was blamed for mental health issues and high suicide rates among employees.

Most of our chef respondents were men, with an average age of 37. They had been chefs for 16 years on average. Of these, 42% originally came from outside Australia and New Zealand, underlining the profession’s high mobility.

Read more: The Bear gets the suffering and self-sacrifice of a top-flight kitchen just right

The results reveal disturbing insights into chefs’ working conditions. It was surprising to find nearly half (44%) of our sample were in precarious employment, given the skills shortage.

Two-thirds (67%) of respondents worked more than 38 hours weekly, but a fifth of the chefs worked 52-61 hours. Of these, 6.33% worked 62 hours or more – well above New Zealand’s still commonplace 40-hour work week, and Australia’s legally prescribed 38 hours. Despite the fast-paced environment, a quarter did not get their legally entitled breaks.

Economic insecurity was very evident. Financial hardship was reported by almost one in five chefs (15-20%), and a quarter of respondents went without meals due to financial pressure. That those who feed others struggle to feed themselves seems a dark irony.

Two-thirds also reported working when sick, an average of nine days each a year. Post-COVID, this should concern health professionals, policy makers and the broader community.

Read more: Toxic work cultures start with incivility and mediocre leadership. What can you do about it?

Leaving the industry

The 2023 Umbrella Wellbeing report, which recorded New Zealanders' perceptions of their workplaces and wellbeing, warns that long working hours and poor workplace cultures have adverse health outcomes, with New Zealand faring worse than Australia.

Nearly one in ten of the chefs surveyed suffered mental distress. Results showed high levels of physical and mental fatigue (“exhausted at work”, “emotionally drained”, “becoming disconnected”).

Respondents reported disrupted sleep and unhealthy lifestyles. Almost 15% of the sample consumed alcohol five or more days weekly, with 11.4% saying they had consumed hard drugs (LSD, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine or ecstasy) in the past year.

One in five hospitality professionals experiences depression according to charity The Burnt Chef Project. In a spoken-word performance for the project, poet and writer Joe Bellman describes “defeated faces and lifeless eyes” behind the kitchen door, where “breaking the human spirit is just company policy”.

The majority of respondents said they were likely (with 20% extremely likely) to look for a new employer during the next year. Many of these new jobs will be outside hospitality (which is classified within the overall tourism sector).

Another report commissioned last year by the New Zealand Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) found a third of hospitality and tourism workers had high intentions of completely quitting the industries. Reasons included low pay and conditions, stress and toxic work environments.

Read more: All these celebrity restaurant wage-theft scandals point to an industry norm

Mental health and healthy hospo

Maybe not surprisingly, our survey showed intention to quit a job declines with better management support. Failure to improve working conditions for chefs, however, will have lasting consequences for the industry.

The Better Work Action Plan, the first phase of New Zealand's Tourism Industry Transformation Plan, was launched by MBIE in 2023 under the previous government. It followed extensive consultation with representatives from hospitality and tourism, Māori, unions, workers and government.

Its aim was to develop a sustainable tourism workforce by addressing longstanding issues of low pay and poor conditions across the sector.

Read more: How did abuse get baked into the restaurant industry?

The first step involved hospitality and tourism workers receiving government approval to negotiate an industry-wide fair pay agreement. However, the current coalition government immediately scrapped fair pay legislation.

The Australian government's post-COVID tourism recovery strategy, THRIVE 2030, has committed to "promote employment standards" regarding compliance obligations and fair work. If effective, these would address the breaches evident in our study.

The hospitality industry relies on young people actively choosing a culinary career. But MBIE forecasts show students are less likely to seek hospitality jobs given these problems in the sector.

By chance, however, New Zealand's new minister for mental health, Matt Doocey, is also tourism and hospitality minister. It is now up to him to make the connection between his portfolios, and work to reduce the heat in the nation's commercial kitchens.

The authors acknowledge the assistance of the AUT Hospitable Futures Research Fund.

