

Food Service Workers in Restaurants: Short Order Cooks, First-Line Supervisors, and Managers

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Who are Short Order Cooks, First-Line Supervisors, and Managers?

Short order cooks are restaurant workers who prepare food as it is ordered by customers.¹ First-line supervisors also have to prepare food, but at the same time they must supervise the other workers who are cooking and preparing food.² In contrast, food service managers are responsible for the daily operations of a restaurant including all administrative and human resource functions of the restaurant.³

What are Food Service Wages?

In Erie County in 2008, the average weekly wage for a **cook** at a limited service restaurant (a restaurant that does not provide table waiting service), was \$220 per week or \$11,449 annually.⁴ That was just 10 percent above the poverty line for a single person.⁵ Given that a single person who makes up to 125 percent of the poverty line is eligible for limited forms of public assistance,⁶ it is clear that it is very difficult to survive on this meager income.

The national median annual wage for **first line supervisors** in the restaurant industry in 2008 was \$30,810 with an average hourly wage of \$14.81.⁷ In New York, the median annual wage for first- line supervisors in 2008 was \$31,540 and the average hourly wage was \$15.17.⁸

In contrast, the national median annual salary for food service **managers** in 2008 was \$46,320.⁹ In New York, their annual median salary was \$54,940 with an hourly mean wage of \$26.41.¹⁰ Food service managers held about 338,700 jobs in the United States in 2008.¹¹ Most managers are salaried, but 42 percent are self-employed as owners of independent restaurants or other small food service establishments.¹²

Who is Matt?

Matt is a 28 year old white male who has a high school diploma and an Associate's degree in restaurant management. Matt is a short order cook at a local burger and ice cream restaurant. Matt takes on all the duties of cook, first- line manager and restaurant manager, yet he makes a salary that averages out to only \$11 an hour. His average annual salary falls between that of a cook and a first-line supervisor.



Matt has been working at this restaurant for almost ten years and, with all his responsibilities, still makes only a meager wage. Last year, “God knows how,” Matt was able to convince his employer to provide him with health coverage.¹³ Although the plan is minimal and does not even include prescription drug coverage, Matt says that he feels very fortunate to receive this benefit. Based on his job description, Matt is earning between \$8,000 and \$22,000 less than the national and state average for first-line managers and restaurant managers respectively.

What is the Demographic of Matt's Co-Workers?

Contrary to popular belief, low wage workers are not mainly high school students; in fact, the typical low wage worker is an adult with a high school diploma or higher education.¹⁴ While some of Matt's co-workers are in high school, many are attending community college or work there part-time to supplement their income from another job. All of the workers are white, and all are from area suburbs. Most of them reside with their parents or roommates. There are two older women who work there part-time. One is a retired grandmother who receives money from her state pension and social security; the other is a single mother of two teenage daughters works to supplement her income from her other low wage job.

What are Matt's Duties as a Short Order Cook and First-Line Supervisor?

Short order cooks prepare food as it is ordered by the customers; the emphasis is on fast preparation, so most of the time, the cooks are working on preparing many orders including various food items at once.¹⁵

In a day's work, Matt must fulfill the duties of both short order cook and first-line manager. For him, the duties of being a cook start with prep work in the morning: slicing vegetables, filling bins with vegetables and condiments, steaming hot dogs, and making sure everything is fully stocked. Once the day starts, he assigns all the workers and himself to a position such as taking orders on the cash register, cooking on the grill, working the fryers, dressing the burgers and hot dogs, filling drink orders and setting up trays, or scooping ice cream and filling milkshake orders.

Matt emphasizes that if someone gets too busy, everyone is trained in every task and workers are constantly bouncing around helping each other out. Matt also has to ensure that the other workers are properly and efficiently preparing the food and performing their tasks. Sometimes, there are only two or three people working in order to cut labor costs for the owner, so if there is a surprise rush, things can get hectic pretty quickly.¹⁶



What are Matt's Managerial Duties?

Food service managers are responsible for the daily operations of a restaurant, including all administrative and human resource functions.¹⁷ In his managerial capacity, Matt oversees the inventory and places orders to various food and paper good suppliers. In addition, he calculates the nightly, weekly and monthly sales, and then analyzes this information to determine what scheduling changes need to be made in order to keep labor costs down.

Matt helps with payroll in adding up and reporting the hours on the workers time cards; he also makes the weekly schedules for employees, assigns tasks, helps to train new employees and also weighs in on hiring and firing decisions. On top of all this, Matt has to make sure customers are happy and enjoying their dining experience. At the end of the day,

Matt is responsible for shutting everything down and locking everything up. A typical day for Matt is often 12 hours long.

What are the Negative Aspects of the Job?

Reported injuries for food preparation workers are comparatively high in relation to all other occupations, but the job hazards the workers face, such as falls, cuts, and burns, are rarely serious.¹⁸

Matt states that it is very hot working near the charcoal grills. Before Matt's employer moved into a new building with air conditioning, working on the grill in the summer when it was already nearly 80 degrees in the restaurant was unbearable.¹⁹

Has Matt Suffered Any Injuries on the Job?

Matt has concerns with the vegetable and meat slicers he uses at work. Last year, one of his co-workers got her hand stuck in the tomato slicer, and now her hand is permanently disfigured. Matt commented on how he is predisposed to small injuries like burns and cuts since he is always rushing to fill orders.²⁰

Does Matt's Employer Follow All the Relevant Laws?

Minimum wage and overtime pay violations are common in the restaurant industry.²¹ When asked if his employer followed all relevant laws, Matt attempted to avoid the question. He finally admitted that his employer does not follow over-time laws. Matt's employer offers him overtime, but tells him that he cannot pay time and a half. He says he is doing Matt a favor by offering him more hours first before offering other employees who would not be going over 40 hours, because he knows Matt needs the money. When he protested about the fact that he was not being paid time and a half, the employer just gave the hours to someone else. Now, Matt usually just accepts the extra hours without complaining, because he *does* need the money.

What are the Positive Aspects of Matt's Job?

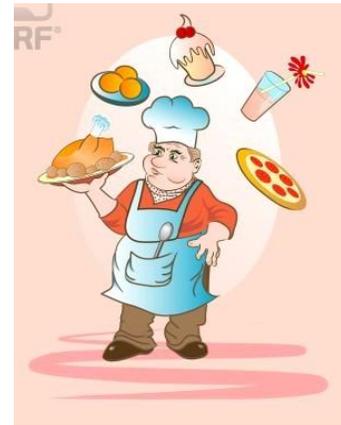
Matt states that his working environment is like a family and that everyone gets along really well. Because he has seniority, his boss gives him the days off he wants, and he usually sets his own hours. He is friends with his employer and socializes with him outside of work. He gets free food and free or discounted food for his friends and family. Matt said that if his employer needs help with tasks in his personal life, such as moving furniture, yard work, or even babysitting, his employer offers him a significant amount of cash to perform these



tasks, because he trusts him and knows that he is a hard worker and needs the extra money.

What are the Challenges of Living with a Low Wage?

Matt resides with his parents in a middle class neighborhood in Akron. His father is a retired state trooper who works part-time as a mall security guard. His mother is a retired nurse. He does not pay any rent to his parents and does not usually help out much with groceries. No one in the family is in receipt of public assistance or food stamps. Matt knows that he would not be able to afford his own place unless he had a roommate, and by now, he says, all of his friends are either married or living with their significant others.²² Matt's expenses include going out socially, his cell phone, car payments and car insurance, school loans, and paying off a debt he incurred last year when he had a dental emergency and no dental insurance. Matt feels lucky, because he was able to purchase a reliable car last year at a decent price through a family friend.²³



Has Matt Ever Contemplated Finding a New Job or Starting a New Career Path?

At his parents' request, Matt took the state trooper exam twice and the test required for border patrol, but he did not perform well on either exam. Matt's real dream is to save enough money to open his own restaurant. While his employer has made promises to him about some day running one of the seven area restaurants he owns, none of these have ever materialized. Matt says he takes on all of the responsibilities of running a restaurant, but does not see any pay increases. Sometimes, he feels like he is being manipulated by his employer.²⁴ Indeed, with all of the responsibilities Matt takes on, according to the national and state averages for a mere first-line supervisor, he should be making *at least* \$8,000 more than he is presently.²⁵ Matt spoke wistfully about how much more financially stable he would be with an extra \$8,000 a year.

Who is Matt's Employer?

Matt's employer, Tim, along with his father and three brothers, owns and operates six other area restaurants and a catering business. Matt states that his employer's major concerns are keeping costs down, especially labor costs. This is why Tim has Matt analyze labor costs every week.

Restaurateurs have a variety of concerns with regard to running their restaurants. According to a survey of restaurateurs, the major reasons restaurants fail include poor financial management, the quality of employees and service, and the amount of turnover.²⁶

What Type of Pay Scale Does Matt's Employer Use?

To offset costs, Tim hires younger people who will work for less money. Tim believes that employing high school workers will decrease turnover rates, because they usually stick around until they finish high school and even longer if they go to college locally. He starts young workers who have no prior experience at minimum wage; his pay scale with regard to new workers is based on past experience. He generally gives new workers a 25 cent to 50 cent raise within six months if they perform well. Workers with seniority who are already making a couple dollars above minimum wage usually have to negotiate for raises.



¹ Cooks and Food Preparation Workers, Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 Edition, The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos331.htm#nature>

² First Line Supervisors/Managers of Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Occupational Employment and Wages, The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/oes/2008/may/oes351012.htm>

³ Food Service Managers, Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 Edition, The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos024.htm>

⁴ The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/data/> (scroll down to the section entitled "Employment" then follow "State and County Employment Wages" and make selections in each box to get data for Erie County restaurant workers in a limited service restaurant). Note that this is the wage for a non-specific limited service restaurant "worker" and is not as job specific as the nationwide or statewide data.

⁵ Prior HHS Poverty Guidelines and Federal Register References, United States Department of Health and Human Services, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/figures-fed-reg.shtml>

⁶ Temporary Assistance Source Book, New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, <http://www.otda.state.ny.us/main/ta/TASB.pdf>

⁷ Occupational and Employment and Wages, May 2008: First Line Supervisors/Managers of Food Preparation and Serving Workers, The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/oes/2008/may/oes351012.htm>

⁸ Id. (follow link for "State profile for this occupation")

⁹ Food Service Managers, Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 Edition, The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos024.htm>

¹⁰ Occupational Employment Statistics, New York: Food Service Manager, The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://data.bls.gov:8080/oes/datatype.do>

¹¹ Food Service Managers, *supra*

¹² Id.

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- ¹³ Personal communication with Matt, March 16, 2010
- ¹⁴ HOLLY SKLAR & REV. DR. PAUL H. SHERRY, A JUST MINIMUM WAGE: GOOD FOR WORKERS, BUSINESS AND OUR FUTURE 18 (2005), <http://letjustice.org/sites/default/files/resources/AJustMinimumWage.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Food and Beverage Serving and Related Workers, Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 Edition, The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos162.htm#nature>
- ¹⁶ Personal communication with Matt, March 16, 2010
- ¹⁷ Food Service Managers, *supra*
- ¹⁸ Food and Beverage Serving and Related Workers, *supra*
- ¹⁹ Personal communication with Matt, March 16, 2010
- ²⁰ *Id.*
- ²¹ ANNETTE BERNHARDT ET AL., BROKEN LAWS, UNPROTECTED WORKERS: VIOLATIONS OF EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR LAWS IN AMERICA'S CITIES 31 FIGURE 4.2, 34 FIGURE 4.5 (2009), *available at* [http://low-wage.wikispaces.com/file/view/BrokeLawsReport2009\[1\].pdf](http://low-wage.wikispaces.com/file/view/BrokeLawsReport2009[1].pdf)
- ²² Personal communication with Matt, March 16, 2010
- ²³ *Id.*
- ²⁴ *Id.*
- ²⁵ Occupational and Employment and Wages, May 2008: First Line Supervisors/Managers of Food Preparation and Serving Workers, *supra*
- ²⁶ H.G. Parsa et al, Why Restaurants Fail, CORNELL HOTEL AND RESTAURANT ADMIN. Q., 304, 315 (2005).