

Do culinary competitions have any real benefit?

Geoff Scott

Geoff Scott is a Culinary Lecturer in the School of Hospitality and Tourism, Auckland University of Technology. His experience in three-star Michelin restaurants in London, Milan, Paris, Aix-en-Provence and Monaco developed his interest in haute-cuisine. Geoff is a Board member of the New Zealand Chefs Association, a Worldchefs-certified judge and Chief Judge for the New Zealand Ice-Cream Awards. His special areas of interest include youth development, mentoring and coaching, judging food awards and culinary competitions.



As a passionate culinarian, I was honoured to be asked to judge at three recent junior chef competitions in Auckland. Having previously been a junior competitor, a chef in industry, a restaurateur, and now, a culinary lecturer, I questioned the value of culinary competitions as a pracademic. A large amount of time and effort is invested by competitors, coaches, judges, sponsors, and organisers. What is the benefit of culinary competitions? Is there any real reward for students? What outcomes are there for the hospitality industry, and does academia have a part to play in this at all?

Historically, people have enjoyed the spectacle of chefs competing. One of the first recorded culinary competitions took place in Medieval Baghdad, more than 1,000 years ago. Since then, there have been many culinary 'battles' but they did not become a major part of popular culture until television and print media made 'stars' of chefs in the late 21st century [1]. In January 1987, the Bocuse d'Or, a biennial world chef championship, was first held in Lyon, France, and in 1991, the very first James Beard Foundation Awards were presented in New York City. Two years later, 'Iron Chef' was launched in Japan, and at the same time, the Food Network in America was established; now we are bombarded by culinary competitions in many formats.

From a student's perspective, there are numerous benefits to be gained through competing. It is an essential part of skills development, enabling an environment that tests students against their peers. While keeping up with culinary trends, competitors develop creativity, enhance their cooking abilities, build confidence, self-discipline, and even learn humility [2]. Through their training for competitions, competitors are exposed to the discipline and expectations of professional competitions. They must demonstrate impeccable hygiene practices, excellent knife skills, speed, and creativity. Their expertise develops exponentially faster than their peers through learning advanced and innovative techniques. They also develop fundamental life skills; managing stress, performing under pressure, being organised, showing resilience, maintaining

motivation, and above all, a desire to learn. These attributes benefit individuals, particularly when they enter the workforce.

The hospitality industry has much to gain from culinary competitions. Firstly, more highly skilled and motivated young chefs enter the working kitchen. Employees with competition experience are highly sought after. The kitchen gains a positive 'rub-off' effect from the employee's high hygiene standards, productivity, creativity, work ethic and overall professionalism. Establishments that hire competition chefs also benefit from their chef's online presence. Through Instagram, Facebook and TikTok, chefs can market their creations, share recipes, and showcase their accolades, skills and artistic flair to a wider audience. The career opportunities for these new employees, are now almost assured. They are the future culinary leaders of the hospitality industry.

From an academic perspective, there are also advantages when students compete. Competitors generate a positive vibe in the kitchen, which benefits the entire class and lecturers. Not only is morale heightened, but the level of skills, attention to detail and professionalism increases in the learning environment. The hospitality industry needs graduates who have trained with reputable academic providers. These providers, such as AUT, can benefit by sharing the success of their students on media and social media platforms. Likewise, lecturers who actively engage, encourage, and mentor students to participate in culinary competitions, will find the journey enormously rewarding.

In conclusion, culinary competitors have become successful restaurateurs, respected Culinary Masters, hospitality leaders and, in some cases, television celebrities. We should, therefore, encourage aspiring culinarians to compete in competitions, as the experience will enhance their professional development and career prospects. The hospitality industry should continue to support competitors by collaborating with local culinary institutions. The result will be chefs with a higher level of knowledge and expertise. Culinary lecturers and academics should encourage and support participation in culinary competitions. By recognising the outstanding benefits, academia has the potential to influence, and enhance, the future of culinary arts. Ultimately, it is through the discipline of rigorous competition that culinary excellence is established.

Corresponding author

Geoff can be contacted at: geoff.scott@aut.ac.nz

References

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