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Another One Bites the Crust

For a Friday night at 7:30, it wasn't a surprise to see a line out the door at California Pizza Kitchen in Bethesda. Like a hive, the servers, bartenders, cooks, hostesses, and bussers all work as a team amid the chaos.

At the front of the restaurant, hostesses are in a constant flurry of activity. While one is entrusted keeping track of the growing wait list, another holds the responsibility of following rotation, ensuring every server is seated in the correct order. The remaining two hostesses bounce back and forth from the host stand, dispatched every five minutes to walk guests to their table. To maintain an organized and clean restaurant, hostesses are also accountable to collect and sanitize all menus after use.

Entering the dining room, servers flutter in an even greater frenzy, zipping past each other like worker bees on a mission, not one empty handed. One waiter carries plates of bread and oil to greet their table as another dashes from the bar to serve a group of rowdy college students who can't seem to wait a minute longer for their Moscow Mules. Exiting from the kitchen, an array of servers with large round black trays filled with food sit on the palm of their hands hoisted above their head as they maneuver through the restaurant. The aromas of Garlic Cream Fettuccine, Spicy Chipotle Chicken Pizza, and Buffalo Cauliflower waft through the air.

Apart from being cordial and attentive, 85% of serving is knowing the menu. Being well-informed about which dishes are gluten-free, vegetarian, and vegan friendly is essential in creating an inclusive dining experience.

Three ladies tucked in a booth in the corner of the restaurant pepper their server with questions, unintentionally putting the server's knowledge to the test.

“Is the Barbeque Chicken Salad spicy?”

“What vegetables come on the California Veggie Pizza?”

“What is the soup of the day?”

“Can I take out the avocado in the Avocado Club Egg Rolls?”

“Are your burgers grass fed?”

Knowing the menu like the back of their hand, the server has no trouble answering the ladies pressing inquiries.

From the other side of the dining room, drink orders accumulate at the end of the bar.

Responsible for crafting specialty cocktails, refreshing strawberry mango coolers, and all other alcoholic refreshments, bartenders prepare beverages for the whole restaurant, including their own guests.

In the kitchen, chaos continues. A chef in the salad station hurriedly assembles an Italian Chopped Salad, tossing roasted turkey breast, tomatoes, garbanzo beans, and fresh mozzarella in a bowl. Merely feet away at the sauté station, another cook finishes the last touches of the Shrimp Scampi Zucchini, sprinkling a dash of grated parmesan on top before placing the piping hot plate in the serving window. Known as the most strenuous and rigorous station in the kitchen, sauté chefs are behind cranking out more intricate and complicated dishes. Not only do they work next to the blazing heat of the stove top burners, but they have to keep track of

preparing sometimes three to four dishes at once. If not careful, one wrong move can result in sauté chefs being seriously burned from mishandling hot skillets and pans. Even more important is working fast and efficiently under pressure.

At the end of the cooking line sits the coveted California Pizza Kitchen Woodstone oven. Here, chefs at this station are in charge of making fresh and delectable pizzas. From tenderly kneading the dough to generously spreading savory tomato sauce, pizza chefs will monitor the baking of up to 8 pizzas at once. For most if not all times of the year, this station tends to be in high demand.

On the other side of the cooking line stands the head chef, accountable for every dish that leaves the kitchen. Under attentive inspection, this cuisine ensures presentation and preparation are no less than exceptional. Acting as a backbone, the head chef is the kitchen staff's biggest support system, stepping in whenever and wherever assistance is needed to keep up with incoming orders. Any and all questions regarding food preparation and allergy friendly dishes can be directed to them.

Back in the dining room, bussers from every corner of the restaurant are knee-deep clearing off tables. Very much like servers, bussers are always on the move, going from place to place hauling dirty dishes to the back to be washed. While many tables generally require being cleared and wiped down, others demand significantly more attention. For children under the age of six, eating tends to be a messy activity which results in much of what's on their plate ending up on the floor. On these occasions, bussers must be equipped to efficiently sweep and clear any debris left on, under, or around the table, even making sure to wipe down chairs and booths. Additionally, bussers are also held accountable to refill ice at all beverage stations in the restaurant for servers and bartenders.

On a Friday night, there are at least three managers weaving through the restaurant at all times. While handling customer complaints stands as one of their biggest responsibilities, managers most of all are trained and entrusted to keep business running smoothly. Essential skills of restaurant managers include being able to think quickly on one's feet, possess strong communication and interpersonal skills, maintain organization, and demonstrate exceptional customer service. Away from the dining floor, managers are in charge of staff scheduling, event planning, inventory, and hiring and training new employees.

By 8:45, the rush has calmed down. The overwhelming buzz of conversation between guests has died to a low simmer of murmurs as only half of the tables within the restaurant remain. Servers and bussers traverse the dining room, their gait imparting much less urgency. With orders under control in the kitchen, a handful of cooks slip away outside to catch a breath of air.

Like a hive, servers, bartenders, cooks, hostess, and bussers all work as a team to close up shop, go home, and come back the next day to do it all over again tomorrow night.