

“Chefs in the City” program Restaurant and Catering Victoria



The Product

Restaurant and Catering Victoria is the peak industry association for the State’s enviable array of dining establishments and catering businesses. The member organization services industry businesses across metropolitan and regional Victoria.

The Challenge

Most people working in the restaurant industry within the metropolitan area and larger regional centres are exposed to a range of dining establishments, different foods and are able to regularly mix with industry peers. Cooking apprentices in many smaller centres of provincial Victoria can feel isolated and are often unaware of the opportunities available in the industry. While some attend trade school in Melbourne, most undertake their formal learning and hands-on training in their local area.

One of the most significant issues facing the hospitality industry in Australia is the shortage of people entering and remaining in cooking apprenticeships. Even many who do, qualify leave the industry after only two or three years, often disillusioned by difficult working hours and conditions.

In 2002 Restaurant and Catering Victoria (RCV) embarked on an annual program designed to expose regionally based apprentices to the range of work opportunities available in the industry.

The need was to not only demonstrate other opportunities, but also to boost their enthusiasm for the work, to provide new ideas and thinking and, hopefully, to increase their commitment to remain within the industry.

The Strategy

In partnership with Crown Ltd and Meat and Livestock Australia, RCV devised an intensive three-day program. It includes hands-on experience in a busy city restaurant, new taste experiences, behind-the-scenes insight into restaurant operations, networking with other apprentices and chefs, and concludes with a hosted dinner.

Three intakes of four apprentices are offered in May, July and September. Wherever possible, the program is scheduled to coincide with a major food and/or wine industry function, such as the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. This provides apprentices with a wide range of experiences and learning within a concentrated period of time. The small groups of participants ensure one-on-one attention and maximum exposure.

RCV emphasises that the program is not designed to teach technical skill, even though apprentices work for two days alongside experienced chefs. It aims to get them to have a broader commitment to their own career, their profession and to the industry.

Applications are posted to RCV's regional member businesses once a year. The placements are open to all apprentice year levels and to people of all ages. Employers need to state in 100 words why their apprentice would benefit from the experience and the employee needs to state why they wish to be involved.

Crown provides the learning experience and meals, Meat and Livestock Australia funds accommodation, while RCV coordinates the program and provides an allowance to cover travel, parking and other incidentals. The employer is only required to cover the wages of the apprentice for the three days.

An extension to the Chefs in the City program launched in 2007 is the Thierry Marx Career Development Award. It funds two apprentices to travel to Bordeaux, France for a four week work placement under the direction of Thierry Marx, the 2006 Relais Gourmands French Chef of the Year. As well as covering all training, travel and accommodation expenses, RCV also provides the employer with an allowance to help defray the cost of having a valued staff member away from their business for a month.

The Result

The program is entering its fifth year of operation and is now a highly valued part of the industry's training calendar.

RCV reports that the typical response of participants after their three days is an awareness of the enormity of the industry. Even though they may cook in a small town café-bistro, for two days they are rubbing shoulders with chefs in one of Melbourne's busiest restaurants. They eat their meals in the Crown staff canteen, which is the biggest restaurant in the Southern Hemisphere.

They taste foods that many have only read or heard about. They are exposed to the hierarchy of a traditional kitchen and are hosted by Crown's Executive General Manager, Food and Beverage.

RCV says it is a major confidence builder for participants and often provides them with inspiration to try new things. It helps them to appreciate that, while the hours and work conditions of the industry may be tough, their qualification will enable them to gain well paid work anywhere in Australia or the world. "It's all about showing the options", says RCV's Executive Director.

The participating employers use the program to motivate an employee, to keep them happy and to encourage them to remain in the trade.