

Chef

Run a kitchen: the menu, the orders, the crew and the food. You get there by cooking for years, not by graduating.

TYPICAL PAY

\$62,470

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$38k to \$99k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

4 to 10 years

after high school

DEMAND

Very high

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Restaurants, hotels, hospitals, schools, catering companies

How you get there

- 1 High school and a kitchen job** Grades 11 and 12
Get hired washing dishes or prepping at 16. A year in a real kitchen tells you whether you can stand the pace.
- 2 Line cook** 2 to 4 years
One station at a time: garde manger, then saute or grill. Speed, consistency and not falling apart during a rush.
- 3 Culinary program, if you want one** 1 to 2 years
A community college certificate or associate degree covers technique, sanitation and costing in a year or two. Optional, and cheapest in-state.
- 4 Sous chef** 2 to 4 years
Second in command: ordering, scheduling, running service, training new cooks. This is where you find out if you can lead.
- 5 Chef or executive chef** Year 6 onward
The menu, the food cost, the hiring and whatever goes wrong at 7:45 on a Saturday.

Pros and cons

- + You can start at 16 and be paid the whole way
- + Skill is visible: good cooks get hired anywhere, fast
- + The federal outlook is strong and openings are everywhere
- Nights, weekends and holidays, permanently
- Heat, burns, cuts and standing for 12 hours
- Salaried chefs often work 55 hours or more for the same pay

Good to know

Half of American adults started in a restaurant

The National Restaurant Association calls the industry the nation's second largest private sector employer and says about half of adults got their first job in a restaurant. It is the country's default first paych...

The station names are 120 years old

Saucier, garde manger, poissonnier and the rest come from the kitchen brigade that Auguste Escoffier organized in French hotel kitchens. American kitchens still shout the same words during service.

Optional boosts

Butchery. Bread and pastry. Food cost and inventory control. Volume and banquet cooking.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Chefs and Head Cooks (35-1011.00)

ServSafe: food safety certification from the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation

The Culinary Institute of America

National Restaurant Association

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/chef>



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