

Closing the Disconnect: How to Work with Chefs

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It's sort of like the white elephant in the room. Or the 300-pound gorilla. Whatever phrase you prefer to use, when it comes to talking about the relationship between chefs and consultants, well, no one wants to talk about it.

That's a generalization, of course. But it's pretty safe to say that the larger majority of chefs don't work with consultants, and the larger majority of consultants don't work with chefs when they design foodservice kitchens.

When finally acknowledging this disconnect, the question that begs asking is simply, "Why not?"

Perhaps the solution to this "disconnect" is not to ask why this has been the case, given that it's pretty difficult to change a system that's worked for decades. Instead, the more appropriate question may be: "Why is it important to repair this disconnect and what are the necessary steps for doing so?"

Enter Stuart Davis. Now a consultant with [Cini-Little](#), Davis spent the better part of the last decade in some pretty prestigious roles as a chef. He served as chef de cuisine at the renowned [Les Nomades](#) in Chicago working with Roland Liccioni, and then took the executive sous chef position at [Tru](#), another nationally acclaimed restaurant where he worked with Rick Tramanto. From there he went on to serve as executive sous chef at Tramanto's Steak and Seafood in Wheeling, Ill., where he worked up until joining Cini-Little last year.

The transition from chef/operations to consulting couldn't have been smoother, Davis says. "Since I've been in kitchens for the last 14 years, I know what works and what doesn't as far as equipment and layout," he says.

This knowledge, Davis says, helps give chefs a "leg up" when they start working in the kitchens he designs. "Most times we deal with the operator or owner, and there's no chef in the picture until six, seven months later, at least," Davis says. Then, if the chef comes on board and encounters functional problems in the kitchen, "he's stuck with what's there."

To prevent those breakdowns, Davis says, "I try to fight for those pieces of equipment that I know the chef will need when we get started on a project, equipment that will allow the chef to prepare any kind of cuisine he can do. Then, I've given the chef a head start."

For example, Davis says, "Sometimes there are shelves where shelves don't need to be or a little excess undercounter refrigeration when a space for kitchen tools would be better. But those are smaller problems." The bigger concern, he says, comes with the equipment — knowing what's needed, how long it will last, replacement forecasts, ongoing service, etc.

That's where MAS consultants like Karen Malody, enter the picture. Malody, like Davis, has a leg up when it comes to knowing how to work with chefs because she was one. With more than 20 years in the food industry, prior to founding [Culinary Options](#), Malody served as food and

beverage director for Starbucks, and at one point ran her own catering business and cooking school.

In leveraging her experience, Malody will break down a design in terms that appeal to everyone: financial. In doing the math associated with menu cost and anticipated volume, this will allow an operator to better determine which pieces of equipment to specify.

“Chefs may or may not know about equipment innovations because they’re not necessarily the people going to trade shows because they’re busy creating menus, hiring people, and managing their operations,” Malody says. As a result, she says, “that collaboration between chefs and consultants is often missed. A partnership between a chef and a design consultant can be powerful because chefs know how they want their kitchen to work and they can give tremendous, specific input to the designer.”

At that point, Malody says, the consultant can “fill in the gaps” with their knowledge about new equipment on the market, reducing footprints, and other aspects of layout. But Malody emphasizes the importance of having a chef, design consultant and a MAS consultant on board for a project in order to truly fill in all these gaps.

“A lot of times people think that because there is a chef, you don’t need a MAS consultant,” Malody says. The problem therein is that some, repeat some, chefs lean heavily toward the creative side of restaurant and menu design, which can interfere with addressing important details like determining food costs, projected food waste, and others to avoid erosion of profit and erosion of core concept.

“Some chefs are so creative that they want every idea they’ve ever had to show up on the menu, and before you know it, the menu begins to lose control. There could be all kinds of things on the menu that are delicious, but the customer wonders how they all relate to one another,” Malody says, but emphasizes that she’s not trying to make a “sweeping statement that chefs do this or that.”

The point is, she says, many chefs would benefit for “there are many things that MAS consultants can do to support chefs and their skills and creativity.”

So, the question becomes, what if a consultant doesn’t have a culinary background like Davis and Malody but wants to know how to relate and work with chefs at a deeper level?

The answer is not that mysterious. Short of quitting the consultancy jobs they’ve had for decades and take a job working in a kitchen, there’s no substitute for good old-fashioned face time with a chef. Davis suggests sitting down with chefs for a couple hours to hear their input. “A chef will tell you what they like and what they hate,” he says. “They’re in the kitchen day-in and day-out, using the equipment and what you specified. They’re there working for 12 to 14 hours a day, and they know what will break down and what won’t.”

Or, Davis suggests, it might even be helpful to volunteer to fill in during a kitchen shift at a restaurant just to see what really happens. “Come in for a day and hide in the corner and watch

the operation from a bird's eye view. You can see how chefs and cooks use the equipment, how rough they are on the equipment, what's being used, what's not being used.”

At the same time, more chefs could benefit from understanding who consultants are and what they do. “Many chefs and restaurant owners do not know there are people like us out here to help,” Malody says. Davis admits he didn't know about the consulting world until not long before accepting the job at Cini-Little.

Malody adds, “It's very sad we don't find each other. That's the marketing challenge for consultants: How do you let people know you're out there to help?”

But ... that's another topic.