

Anticipation

MARCH 20, 2020: ATLANTA, GEORGIA

The anticipation brings me back to similar feelings that would come rushing through me on a Friday or Saturday night before a large reservation dinner service. Cooks and chefs all over the world feel the adrenaline coming right before the reservations start rolling in: Does my station have enough *mise en place*, sauté pans, or bar towels to get through service? Will I sell more specials than a la carte items? How many cancellations will we receive? These questions are common thoughts among chefs on a nightly basis and I too felt and handled these questions with confidence for fifteen years, as I worked in the restaurant business. I also had feelings of adrenaline up until the economy crashed in 2008 and I was forced to leave the fine dining industry for something different. That something different ended up being a hospital.

I have spent the past ten years as an executive chef, transforming an institutional kitchen for a large academic medical center into a kitchen that prides itself on purchasing and preparing local and sustainable products that nourish the sick. We no longer cook with foods that come out of cans and boxes, but instead focus on fresh vegetables, stocks, and even heirloom beans and grains. All this aside, we now sit and wait in anticipation as business has slowed and all but stalled.

We have experienced a large decrease in patient volume due to the hospital canceling elective procedures in order to

make room for more COVID patients that we expect in coming weeks. No more local organic lettuce here for a while; we have shuttered our doors to visitors, closed salad bars and all self-service operations. We have cleaned shelves and floors, organized coolers, and prepared emergency menus, all for the sake of being ready to take on the rush. But, while I am experiencing a similar adrenaline rush to that from my memory of the restaurant business on a busy weekend, my worries now revolve around different types of *mise en place*.

Do we have enough disposable plate ware for the COVID patients so our dishwashers and servers are kept safe from contact? Do we have enough tube-feeding for patients too sick to eat? Can I keep my staff and myself healthy enough to keep the kitchen running? Will our café business return to normal at some point? In the same way that I felt confident many years ago each and every Saturday night before the rush, I feel confident now that we are ready for service. So, while I am again ready for this, I unfortunately do not know how many reservations I have nor do I want to know because a hospital is not a dining destination. As my anticipation grows stronger, my uncertainty of what the future holds also grows even stronger. What will the future hold not only for my foodservice operation but for all restaurants around the world? When is it safe to open? What does good and safe service look like for the future of dining? For now, I work patiently and anticipate the uncertainty that the future holds. ☹