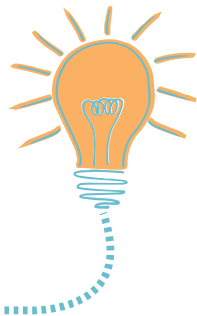


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Case study

Synopsis

Jan Knedla is one of the best Czech (and probably the world's) chefs, according to Forbes and haute cuisine community. He navigates a highly competitive and stressful industry where no mistakes are forgiven. In his daily operations at Papilio he is responsible for ensuring consistency and the highest quality of food plates and relentless serving experiences. There is an ongoing fight to choose and attract the best chefs on his team, especially operating from a small village located 20 km from Prague. At the same time, the challenge is preserving the legacy of being one of the world's best chefs, keeping innovating and differentiating from the rest. Looking for the most sustainable business model for his business is not easy. He needs to balance limited resources such as quality staff, restaurant capacity, time and never-ending pursuit of excellence.



THE FUTURE OF CULINARY EXCELLENCE: ELEVATING THE DINING EXPERIENCE WITH LOCALLY GROWN INGREDIENTS

EARLY START IN GASTRONOMY

The closest family had a fundamental influence on the formation of Jan Knedla's career path. From an early age he was surrounded by pristine mountains, animals and fresh food supplies, tended by his family in Jeseníky mountains in Czechia. The grandmothers were excellent cooks, and young Jan started to experiment and transformed the fruits into tasty meals from early age. It was then he understood that the best meals require fresh and ideally locally supplied ingredients. That is how natural ingredients got under his skin. Jan divided his vision board into 3 decades. The first ten years to learn as much as possible from the best experts worldwide, the next decade to cook as main chef in a distinguished restaurant, and finally to shift his career towards mentoring, supervising and nurturing young talents.

LEARNING FROM THE BEST

It turned out that he was a dreamer and doer at the same time. After studying at the hotel college, he set off into the world. He worked in top restaurants in Glasgow, London, Italian Ravello, St. Petersburg or Hong Kong, usually as a chef. As the only Czech, he took pride in learning the craft by working side by side with the most famous chef in the world at the time, chef Joel Robuchon. He used to spend about 16 hours a day, 6 days a week at work.

"We, chefs, have so much in common with top athletes, run slowly as quality takes time.-is how Jan defines a chefs' career."

The work of Jan's large team was regularly evaluated internally, and externally by designated evaluators. So, the cooking passion and the stress are common for such positions. Enduring on top, often comes with a price. He suffered a minor burnout in Hong Kong while working in Amber, the world's top 23 restaurant. It was time to make a change, so he moved back to Czechia and settled in Prague. Jan is currently in charge for the menu at the Papilio restaurant, an elegant fine-dining restaurant that offers contemporary cuisine at Vysoký Újezd, west of Prague.

THE FACE OF GASTRONOMY

Success in the culinary world does not solely depend on talent; instead, it hinges on qualities such as persistence, diligence, humility, and unwavering commitment. A lasting passion for cooking serves as the enduring driving force, emphasizing that the journey is as significant as the destination. The optimal performance of chefs is realized within a serene and collaborative team environment, where they serve as exemplary role models. Leading by example, means that the chef is not only first to embark on tasks but also the last to conclude them. Chefs maintain a comprehensive understanding of all operations starting from the ingredients to meticulously ensuring the quality of every dish that leaves the kitchen. All of this predeceases the recognition for exceptional chef performance, the prestigious Michelin star or the satisfaction of guests who consistently return to the restaurant.

Perfection, in Jan's perspective, involves immersing oneself in the present moment and fostering a positive inner feeling that motivates the chef to give their best. Attaining a Michelin star is never ending process and it has to be earned every year and Jan had a point saying that... *"athletes get to take their medals at home while chefs have to defend them every day at work!"*

Yet, the success is a team work and the ongoing process of assembling the right team is no easy task. While there may be a plenty of candidates, navigating through the demands of quality is a tough challenge. Prospective colleagues who align with Jan Knedla, actively seek opportunities to work under his leadership, considering it an honor to be part of his team and learn from him. Jan values not just what a chef can do, but places emphasis on loyalty, passion for the culinary craft, teamwork, and a long-term commitment to self-improvement. Laziness finds no place in his kitchen. During interviews, Jan keenly inquires about hobbies, observing the candidate's passion and enthusiasm. Only a few manage to pass this selection. He is always eager to give more than he takes and emphasizes that ...*"the most effective method to motivate his team is through inspiration and leading by personal example. It is imperative to act as a mentor, providing support while maintaining a disciplined approach."*

Working in the kitchen is always stressful, so it's important to find ways to relax, like playing sports or just taking it easy. It's also essential to not get upset personally, even when things get intense in the kitchen and the boss gets loud. Building up a respectful and resilient attitude is crucial in handling tough moments.

A WAY FORWARD

The world of high gastronomy, epitomized by fine dining establishments like Papilio, demands unparalleled commitment, operates under relentless pressure, and allows no room for culinary errors. Papilio's uniqueness lies in its intimate setting, with chefs catering to a maximum of eight guests, personally presenting each dish, and engaging in meaningful interactions with the guests. Jan Knedla envisions enhancing the future of the Papilio's culinary identity by cultivating ingredients in an adjoining castle garden, forging connections with local growers, and celebrating Czech cuisine through locally-sourced, seasonal elements. Jan crafts innovative recipes, inspired from fellow chefs from esteemed culinary establishments. His creativity shines through when faced with ingredient challenges, deftly substituting unavailable items like seafood with unique Czech alternatives. Flavours come from locally supplied pork, lamb, goat meat, poultry, potatoes, grains, legumes, and even some freshwater fish and game.

Yet, Jan grapples with multifaceted challenges in steering his gastronomic venture to new heights. He also, acknowledges that the gastronomy operations are highly fragmented and there is much to be done to advance the industry to the next level. He is trying to change the game by organizing joint meetings for the industry stakeholders and popularizing the art of cooking on Instagram.

He often asks himself how he could permanently ensure the highest quality of food and service and what to do next to stay different and ahead of competition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Is it possible to grow the profit with the current set-up? What do you suggest.
2. Is it possible to scale such a business or is it really so based on the personality of the chef that it can only work in one restaurant?
3. When choosing new colleagues, is it enough to choose only on the basis of experience and skills?

Developed by: Zdeněk Hašek
Reviewer: Makedonka Dimitrova

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