Table Service: Back of the House Pre-Preparation

KITCHENS—the back of the house—are in a continuous prepping process to stay ahead of demand. No prep time is more crucial than that immediately prior to guest service. To ensure that meals leave the kitchen promptly and accurately requires exceptional planning and communication as well as an organized staff that knows their duties. A key component of kitchen pre-preparation is mise en place and its impact on "the line."



Objective:

Practice back of the house (BOTH) mise en place and pre-preparation tasks.

Key Terms:

86	FOTH	pass through
allergens	garnishes	pre-prep
backups	holding cabinet	prep cook
bain-marie	hotel pan	production sheet
BOTH	"the line"	refrigerated table
executive chef	line cook	sous chef
expeditor	mise en place	steam table

Understanding Table Service: Back-of-the-House Pre-Prep

Restaurants have two primary areas of operation: the kitchen and the dining area. The kitchen is known as the back of the house or **BOTH** and encompasses all the cooking, cooling, and food storage areas, preparation areas, cooking equipment, delivery area, dishwashing area,

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etc. The BOTH is one area in which mise en place is essential to effective and efficient food service.

MISE EN PLACE STANDARDS FOR PRE-PREP

It is essential for establishments to have outlined the mise en place standards for pre-prep so nothing is overlooked.

Back-of-the-House Mise en Place

Mise en place is a French phrase that literally means "everything in its place." It is also interpreted as "a state of constant readiness" or a way of "being." For efficient kitchen operations, proper mise en place is a way of life; it is an essential mindset and daily procedure to always be prepared and ready to meet the needs of guests and the business. It means, "Have everything ready to go!" That is the crux of kitchen pre-preparation or pre-prep.



FIGURE 1. Basic mise en place set up before cake preparation begins.

Pre-prep is the process of having food set up and ready for final cooking or preparation just prior to guest service as well as making sure everyone knows the layout and their role in getting food orders to customers. The goal is to provide a timely flow of food to the guests and to maximize revenue. Those objectives are accomplished when every seat in the restaurant is "turned over." Effective turnover is due to timely food and service flow. Profits are maximized when each seat in the dining area is occupied several times (or a set number of times) during each service period.

Pre-Prep and Line Cooking

To cooks and bakers, mise en place is gathering all the ingredients for the recipe/formula (formula for baking) and measuring them so they are ready to go before the cooking process begins. However, a broader vision for restaurants means that every item on the menu must have all the elements for each dish prepared and ready to go for that day's service. This requires anticipating and estimating how many of each item will be needed and having every ingredient for every dish ready when the restaurant opens. For example, food items for each dish are:

- On-site (in the restaurant kitchen)

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- Chopped, sliced, or formed
- Partially-cooked, as needed
- Pre-measured, as needed
- Sauces made ahead, as needed
- Fully cooked ahead of time, as required
  - Breads, crackers
  - Desserts
  - Soups and stews

Culinary Staff Positions and Pre-Prep Duties

A **prep cook** is a person who prepares food; chops and slices ingredients; prepares garnishes and dough, etc. for use later in the day. The work of a prep cook is vital to the smooth operational functioning of the BOTH during guest service. Work tasks may consist of:

- Washing and cutting vegetables for salads and hot vegetable use
- Trimming and cutting meat
- Preparing and assembling double-baked potatoes
- Preparing pizza dough and pancake batter
- Baking breads and crackers and croissants
- Prepping soups
- Prepping sandwich condiments and spreads
- Prepping salad dressings



FIGURE 2. A prep cook prepares food; chops and slices ingredients; and prepares garnishes and dough for use later in the day. A typical task for a prep cook is to prepare the mirepoix mixture (chopped carrots, celery, and onion) for a soup base.

A **line cook** is a person who prepares and plates food at the last minute or "to order"; he or she works "the line" during operation. A line cook is often tasked with some prep cook responsibilities, but his or her main goal is the final cooking and plating of food for guest service. In some cases, the same employee does both jobs—prep cook and line cook—but his or her title changes over the course of the operational day.

"The Line"

During operation hours, the hub of the BOTH is called "the line." "**The line**" is typically a straight line area where servers pick up guest meals from the kitchen from one side of a row of raised prep tables (or even an opening in the wall called a "window") while chefs and cooks

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prepare and plate food on the other side. The line is the focal point of all final food preparation prior to guest service. Setting up the line is a critical part of mise en place pre-preparation. Both sides of the line require their own mise en place prior to the restaurant opening.



FIGURE 3. Chefs and cooks work "the line": a basic kitchen set up with cooking equipment on one side and tables or shelves for servers to pick up plates on the other side.

Cooking Side

The line's cooking side mise en place includes:

- Cooks must check all the cooling and cooking equipment on the line.
- Cooks must check all ventilation systems on the line.
- Cooks must check that point-of-sale (POS) printer tape or screen operation is active for the line.
- Cooks must place a sufficient number of plates and bowls out for service.
- Cooks must oversee the placement of the appropriate serving and cooking utensils.
- Cooks must locate an adequate supply of cooking ingredients for meal service adjacent or at the line.
- Cooks must locate towels, gloves, and sanitizers adjacent to the line.
- Cooks must locate **backups** (supplemental or reserve foods needed when initial supplies are depleted during service) within easy reach of the line.
- Cooks must oversee the placement of hot and cold prepped foods for keeping (refrigeration of cold foods) and holding (hot foot equipment).

Service Side

Service side mise en place typically conducted by servers entails:

- Checking that an adequate amount of specified **garnishes** (final plate decorations before plates leave the kitchen) are available on the line
- Checking service "buzzers" or the call system to notify servers of a pick-up (when servers are prepping the line)
- Checking available server trays and stands
- Placing adequate condiments and accompaniments, as needed
- Placing sufficient flatware, as needed
- Locating and counting prepared salads

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- Locating and recording soup volume
- Placing adequate amounts of bread and crackers
- Warming bread and preparing breadbaskets for guest tables



FIGURE 4. Garnishes must be "ready to go" for service, but the chef may not be the one placing it on the plate. Who else might add a garnish to a plate?

PRE-PREPARATION EQUIPMENT

Hotel Pans and Bain-Maries

Countless tools (e.g., knives, cutting boards, peelers, strainers, scoops, ladles, and pots and pans) are used during food prep, but most of the foods prepared by prep cooks are stored in hotel pans or bain-maries.

A **hotel pan** is a standard-size stainless steel pan (full size is roughly 12 × 20 × 2 inches) designed to fit perfectly in standard openings or wells on steam tables and refrigerated tables. The basic size and shape of hotel pan opening in these tables allows for variations of that overall size to configure to the same total space using half pans, third pans, eighth pans, etc. The variety of hotel pans can be 2, 4, or 6 inches deep. Prep cooks typically store prepared food products in these pans because they can be removed readily and replaced in steam or refrigerated tables with an identical-sized pan during operation. Line cooks depend on the use of these pans for fast replacement on the line.

A **bain-marie** (pronounced bane mah-REE) is a round-in-shape cylindrical vessel that holds finished soups and sauces (but can be used to hold other items, such as vegetables or mashed potatoes) and is placed inside another container filled with hot water or hot air. It can be moist heat or dry heat. The finished food is held in a warm water bath or a hot air bath to maintain food temperature and quality. The equipment is stainless steel and standard in size to readily slide into openings on steam or refrigerated tables. [NOTE: Bain-marie equipment is designed to receive finished food and is not intended to heat cold food.]

Pre-Prep and Line Equipment

A **steam table** is a powered table of various lengths with wells that hold water heated to create steam over which hotel pans of pre-cooked or prepped foods are inserted. A steam table may have various configurations and uses and is an important part of the line. The number of wells depends on the table size. A steam table is designed to hold precooked hot foods at minimum temperatures for serving to enable the fast availability of these foods during plating for table or banquet service. Typically, a steam table has sufficient room to line plates in front of the hotel pans, room to store heated plates (or may be connected to a plate warmer), and a

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ledge on which to place plates ready for pick-up and covered by a heat source (e.g., infrared lamp) to hold foods at a safe temperature until servers pick up the items. Preparing and filling a steam table is part of line mise en place.

A **refrigerated table** is a tabletop with refrigerated keeping areas below and often with a covered opening on top in which hotel pans keep food items that are needed during final cooking but must be kept cold until that service point. A refrigerated table is commonly used at the end of a line. Again, a ledge on the front of the table is common for plates to sit as plating occurs. Filling a refrigerated table is part of line mise en place.

Depending on the operation, pass through units are designed for food to be placed inside from the kitchen side, held (cold or hot), and accessed easily from the restaurant side. The food "passes through" the unit. A **pass through** is an upright cabinet that looks a bit like a refrigerator from the exterior; it has doors on the front and back of the unit, may be heated or cooled inside, and is commonly built in to a wall to provide access to the kitchen and the dining area. The unit is designed for food to be put in and held (cold or hot) from the kitchen side and accessed easily from the restaurant side. The food "passes through."

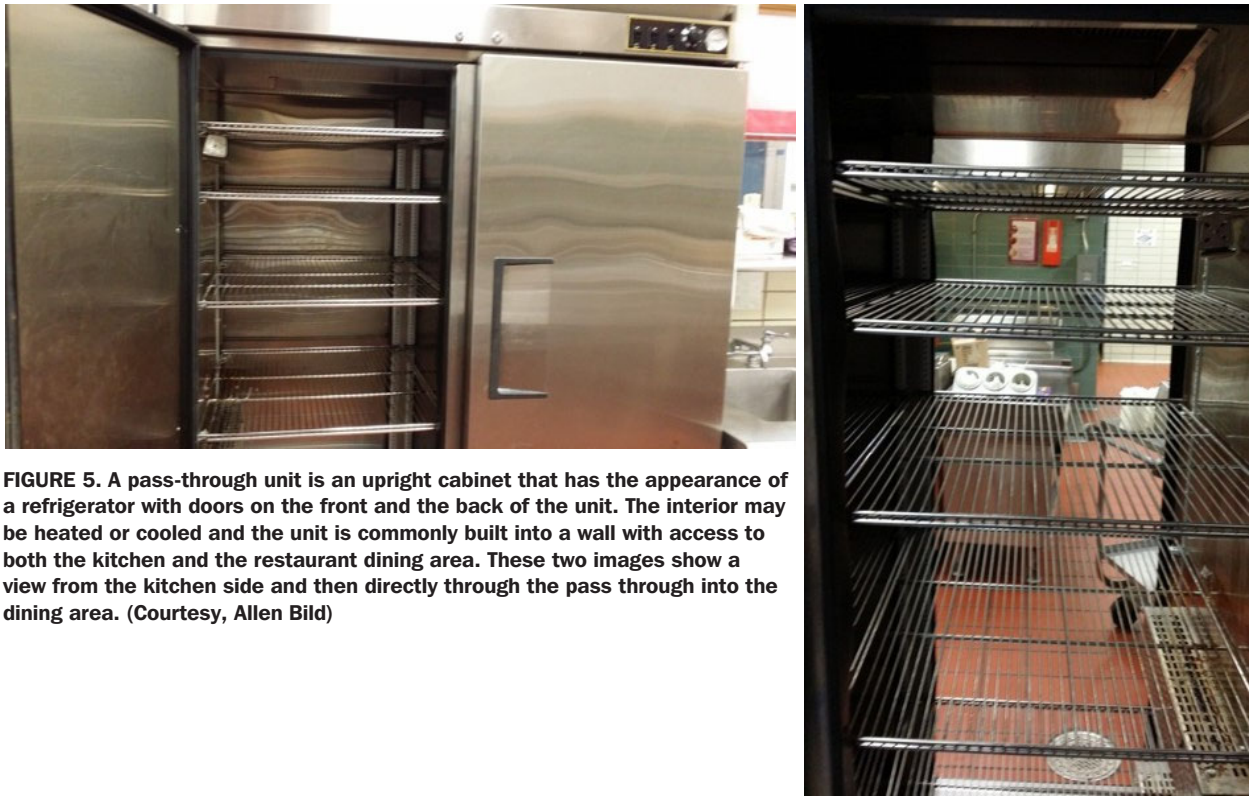


FIGURE 5. A pass-through unit is an upright cabinet that has the appearance of a refrigerator with doors on the front and the back of the unit. The interior may be heated or cooled and the unit is commonly built into a wall with access to both the kitchen and the restaurant dining area. These two images show a view from the kitchen side and then directly through the pass through into the dining area. (Courtesy, Allen Bild)

A **holding cabinet** is the same concept as a pass through except it has doors on one side only for use within the kitchen. Typically, a holding cabinet is for hot food only. It may be a full upright or half-size and may be on wheels (for relocation convenience and easy cleaning underneath). Bringing the unit to temperature (and filling and refilling as needed) is part of pre-prep.

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Other Pre-Prep Equipment

Some BOTH equipment is used more during early pre-prep. Other equipment is used immediately before or during service. All are checked, kept clean, and ready for immediate use as needed before and during dining service. Other pre-prep and line equipment includes:

- Ovens, stovetops, grills, griddles (plain and flattop)
- Slicers
- Stand mixers
- Broilers and fryers
- Steamers
- Refrigeration equipment (e.g., coolers, reach-in refrigerators, and walk-in coolers)
- Ventilation system
- Dish machine
- Blenders and food processors
- Others (depending on the menu offerings)

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN BOTH & FOTH

The BOTH staff commonly meets prior to meal service to review prior performance, goals of the day, cost goals, time goals, procedures, menu items and specials, and plating techniques. The kitchen manager, the **executive chef** (chef in charge of the entire kitchen), or the **sous chef** (the second in command of the kitchen) typically presides over the meeting.

Meeting agenda topics may include:

- Explain cooking and/or food prep styles and standards
- Explain recipe changes, plating changes, and/or plate design
- Review past cooking or plating errors
- Make adjustments to current plating designs
- Tweak portion sizes
- Address staff questions and/or clarifies ingredients, plating, etc.
- Demonstrate a new or problematic training method
- Duplicate the chef's training (done by cooks) as evidence of understanding

Additional agenda items may include:

- Chefs may take issue with the timing of meals being served versus when tickets arrived in the kitchen.
- Sanitation issues may be addressed.
- Employee conduct may be reviewed.
- Current procedures that need to be adjusted or updated are addressed.

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The meetings usually are short because of time constraints, so effective communication is essential to achieve the stated goals.

FOTH MEETING PROCESS

The front of the house (**FOTH**) meeting process is similar to that for the BOTH staff. FOTH staff typically conducts their own meetings about service and the chefs coordinate with FOTH managers to meet with servers and other staff as needed. Chefs meet with the FOTH staff to review the written menu and explain each item, including:

- The pronunciation of menu items
- A review of potential **allergens** (ingredients that may cause hypersensitivity and a reaction) included in dishes and possible alternatives
- An outline of any potential limited quantities of dishes and which ones may take extra time coming out of the kitchen
- An opportunity for servers to taste all the menu dishes to accurately explain the dishes and suggest proper pairings (e.g., beer or wine)
- A review of any "last minute" garnishes the server needs to place on plates before service (e.g., when menus change or specials are introduced)
- Server training as to when specific orders should be submitted to the kitchen to properly pace the meal (e.g., baked soufflé for dessert must be ordered 45 minutes before intended service)
- Server training on the POS system used to communicate with the BOTH staff



FIGURE 6. Some of the most common food allergens are shown in this image. Nuts are a major problem as their use is often unseen—ground nuts, nut butters—ingredients in recipes. This is one of the reasons it is important that the chefs reveal the ingredients in a sauce, soup, etc. to the FOTH staff.

The Expeditor Conduit

Chefs, cooks, and servers all work closely with the expeditor. The **expeditor** is the coordinator between the line and the servers. The expeditor commonly "yells out" the order verbally as it enters the kitchen and makes sure tickets are complete and accurate when compared to the food served on plates. The comparison occurs before the food leaves the kitchen with the server. This key employee provides the last accuracy check before guests receive their plates and ensures that servers receive correct and complete orders.

- The expeditor needs excellent communication skills with the servers and the cooks.
- The expeditor takes direction from chefs and managers.

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ON THE JOB...

CAREER CONNECTION: Expeditor

In moderate-sized restaurants, an expeditor might only need a high school diploma (if that), while in larger establishments or fine-dining venues, some culinary training may be required (up to a two-year college degree). Becoming an expeditor is far more about experience than education, and having strong experience in the front or back of the house (or both) is key. In many cases, employees may not look to become expeditors, but the job finds them based on their interpersonal skills, soft technical skills, and experience. A cook or server who has outstanding organizational and attention-to-detail skills and can keep calm and focused where others may panic would likely make a good expeditor.

For many people, the adrenaline rush of the fast-paced nature of the expeditor's job is attractive. For others, it is the ability to use skills that may not be valuable in other positions for which they are qualified. Others recognize that expeditors have management skills and use the position as a stepping-stone to further their careers.

In modest-sized restaurants, expeditors typically are paid on the hourly line cook scale. However, in major or fine dining kitchens, expeditor pay will notably exceed line cook hourly rates but will remain well below a chef or a manager's income.

- The expeditor alerts servers that their table meals are ready for pickup.
- The expeditor makes servers aware that the kitchen has run out of certain items (to prevent over-ordering and disappointment by guests).
- Food returned to the kitchen, as inaccurate or unacceptable, is usually received first by the expeditor for correction. Then the expeditor coordinates the needed change to the line cooks.

The expeditor can be a kitchen employee (e.g., a cook), the kitchen manager, or a specially trained FOTH employee or manager. Kitchens with long service operation but major periods of down time may use an expeditor just during peak service hours. In situations outside peak hours, servers work directly with the line cooks to coordinate their own meal orders while the expeditor returns to primary job duties.

The White Board

Kitchens often have a white board or other visual aid with information posted for servers, reminding them of:

- Specials for the shift
- Requests of special clients (banquet service, allergies, etc.)
- New procedure reminders (service and/or plating)
- Menu items that are sold out
- Upcoming events and banquets
- Staff schedules

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On the occasion the line runs out of a dish, the word needs to get to servers fast (so they do not keep selling it). Restaurant jargon for cutting an item off the menu is referred to as **86** (i.e., "86 the veal chops!"). The expeditor usually writes 86'd items on the board to alert all the servers ASAP.

Value of Pre-Prep Communication

Pre-prep communication may prevent frustration and loss of revenue.

Long-Term Communication

In the long term, the value of communication in pre-prep is to facilitate the business goals of the moment and beyond as it affects final food prep and table service operations. By communicating the goals and procedures desired, the business has a better chance of meeting financial goals, cutting costs, and improving guest satisfaction.

Short-Term Communication

In the short term, the immediate needs of restaurant operation are met. Preparing the proper amounts of food, preparing them accurately, passing information from kitchen to server to guest, proper staffing and job responsibilities, and proper time allocation are all addressed in a smooth flow. Everyone knows what he or she is supposed to be doing, when to do it, how to do it, where to put it, and how to present it to the guest.

Oral Communication

Pre-prep communication in the BOTH is usually conducted orally between chef, sous chef, prep cooks, and line cooks. Meetings are a formal method of communication. However, it is more common for operational conversation to be conducted person-to-person during a workday.

Written Communication

A **production sheet** is a written communication document—a detailed checklist—prepared by the chef that outlines everything that needs to be prepared for a given day (or alerts to preps for days in advance). It is a detailed food production checklist. Written communication may be in the form of lists or instructions posted on boards in the kitchen, notes next to time clocks, or pop-up screens on POS monitors.

Summary:



Restaurants have two primary areas of operation: the kitchen and the dining area. The kitchen is known as the BOTH or "back of the house" and encompasses all the cooking, cooling, and food storage areas, preparation areas, cooking equipment, delivery area, dishwashing area, etc. The BOTH is one area in which mise en place is essential to effective and efficient food service.

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Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Why would servers need to know recipe ingredients?
2. What is the goal of "pre-prep?"
3. Whose job is it to make sure the correct garnish is placed on plates before they leave the kitchen?
4. Why are production sheets important to pre-prep?
5. List six items to be checked behind "the line" during pre-prep and before restaurant service begins.

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Mise en place is a long process that ends with table service pre-prep. The tools and equipment needed to ensure a "state of constant readiness" are crucial and extensive. What would be on that list? Would those tools and equipment be the same ones needed during table service or early mise en place? How many of each item would be needed? Where can you find out? Research online and write a two- to three-page paper to answer the questions.

Web Links:



Communication
http://www.escoffier.edu/culinary-arts/5-effective-ways-chefs-can-communicate-with-wait-staff/

Food Preparation & Kitchen Operations
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TU1VhCyyC6g

The Preparation Control Point
http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~wlr2/ha442/class/control/preparation/

Restaurant Cooking Positions
http://restaurants.about.com/od/kitchenpositions/a/Cooking_Jobs.htm

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