

# A Job on the Line

By Mat Nugent, *culinary student*

“Fire 21, 34, 10, 11, and 27,” screams the chef as he sauces and wipes the order of scallops. I look at the tickets to see what to plate for each table. I have no table 21 or 34 on my board. A sick feeling overcomes me. I stand motionless and stiff. A bead of sweat drips off my forehead in slow motion. The sound of the chef bellowing in my ear wakes me from my trance: “Where is my food,” demands the chef. “I don’t know.” “Find it. Now!”

Sure, this scenario is nothing new to the experienced line cook, but for the novice, the sound of a screaming chef instills panic, anxiety, and fear. It is my first night on the grill and I’m going down in flames. What do I need on the grill? I look at the tickets on the front of the line and quickly toss on the fire a chicken and three filets. I cover the meats with pie pans like I have seen others do in the past and reconfirm that I have everything I need to complete all the fired tables. Just then the sound of the ticket machine sounds like an alarm. More orders are coming in. “We’ve got two ten tops walking in,” announces the runner. “Order five filets — two medium-rare, three well-done, three chicken, four lamb and five strips — all medium-rare,” shouts the sous chef. Numerous profanities enter my head as I dive into my reach-in refrigerator for all the meats. As I begin filling up the grill with protein, I notice that my fire is dwindling away.

## Rare Job: Egg Peeler

Barbara Dale-Avant, an employee of Atlantic Food Inc.’s cooked-egg division, in Hemingway, South Carolina, holds the record for number of hard-boiled eggs peeled per minute. Her best total was 48, which means that she dawdled away exactly 1-1/4 seconds on each egg. And her boss, Wilbur Ivey, is not a man to tolerate bits of shell among the eggs, which are shipped to East Coast restaurants. To get these perfect results, he is willing to allow 3 seconds per egg, but that’s only when peelers are first starting to peel on the job.

“A real clumsy person couldn’t do this,” remarked one of Avant’s peelers, somewhat unnecessarily. Another confided that the members of the six-woman team (who together once peeled 10,000 eggs in an eight-hour shift,) sometimes throw eggs at each other, recreationally, although Mr. Ivey does not entirely approve. On the other hand, he is clearly no spoilsport, as he is credited with devising the initiation rite for new egg-peeler: he slips a raw egg into a recruit’s first batch.

The sous chef glares at me. “You better get that fire up quick, the dining room just got flat.” I have no idea what he means, but I know it can’t be good. (Later, I find out that “flat” means every available seat in the restaurant is filled.) Within minutes, the grill looks like a scene from Satan’s Alley, the back half is ghost-white and one of my chickens is on fire. The chef returns and calls for tables.

“Break it down.” Relief fills my entire body. I feel like I just ran a marathon at a dead sprint. I walk back into the prep area and gulp down a pitcher of

water. The chef appears and says “Its fun, huh?” I consider this. I lost three steaks, one lamb and I incinerated a chicken. I am dead tired. The hair on my right arm is scorched and the burn on my right wrist is filled ash and grease. It’s midnight on a Saturday and all I want to do is go home and pass out. But I didn’t quit – I stuck it out and held my own. So was that fun? Hell yeah!