

Narrative: Anonymous, First Cook, West End Market, Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia
Interviewer: Rachel Whaley
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I am a first cook at West End Market, which is part of the food service industry. I grew up in Virginia Beach. My mom worked as an entomologist for a little bit and my dad is a director of housing and neighborhood preservation for Virginia Beach.

After I graduated in December 2005, I stayed in Blacksburg until the summer time at which point I moved down to Cocoa Beach, Florida, where I worked as a project engineer for a small boat building company, Titusville. I stayed down there for exactly one year before I decided to move back to Blacksburg where I could spend more time with my friends and change my lifestyle around so I didn't have to drive my car two hours a day. Basically, I wanted to get a job in which I could afford to live fairly comfortably and something that didn't require a whole lot of mental effort.

I work ten hour days Thursday through Sunday. Typically the beginning of my day umm... I come into work, I put on my uniform and then I start working on the prep list which is a list of things that we have to do in order to get ready for the following day. Things like marinating chicken, creating cheese mixes...and I kind of prep for soup or anything that we are going to make the next day. After working on that the stuff on the prep list, I usually make something to serve that day. After that we pretty much close down the kitchen and then go home.

I don't like a lot of the bureaucracy that's involved. For instance, say we don't like the way a recipe is, the way it's made. Like, say that's chicken-based and we changed it to vegetable-based--something real simple. We have to go through a whole elaborate process of making a new recipe and having a tasting and then have superiors

come in and taste it and either approve it or unapprove it. And that's not a whole lot of freedom. It's very strict in the way it's laid out.

Living in Blacksburg is very cheap and on the type of money that I'm making right now it'd be pretty difficult to live in a more expensive city. Plus Blacksburg has amenities and culture and whatnot that I wouldn't get in another small town.

One of the things that I kind of cut out of my diet after working at West End was ranch dressing. In order to make it, which is something we do at least once a day, we take two gallons of mayonnaise, add four packets of ranch dressing mix, then we add two gallons of buttermilk. And this all goes into what most people would call a bucket, about five gallons in size. Then we take a big stick blender and put it in there and basically puree everything up until it looks like ranch dressing. Then we pour it into five separate containers and put it in the refrigerator. And on an average day we go through about eight gallons of ranch dressing at West End Market.

When I just started working there, I had to do something called randoms, which is the type of chicken that we serve at about three of the different shops in West End. We marinate a day ahead of time and to do that we take twelve boxes of chicken, twenty pounds each, which amounts 240 pounds of raw chicken. And then we take four gallons of Italian dressing, a bottle of balsamic vinegar, and some lemon pepper seasoning, mix it all together. And then we add the chicken about five pounds at a time, into a big red trashcan basically. And then, about a third of the way up, we take a big steal paddle which looks like something they would use on the rowing team, or something like that, and then we stir up the chicken, so it's all fully marinated. And the first time I had to do that I was so disgusted I actually thought I might quit. It was quite nasty; it was like

rowing through a sea of dead chicken bodies. That's actually called random chicken breasts, not necessarily randoms. There's a few other gross things. We use a lot of low grade ground beef, which I don't think very highly of. It's the stuff that comes from 100 different cows and the average pound of beef, but I still eat it.

I think it's important for people to know where their food comes from and a lot of people, a lot of the students, I notice that they don't have any idea where the food actually comes from that they are eating. That's one nice thing about being a cook is that you become aware of all that, so you make better decisions on what you want to eat, what you don't want to eat. You don't just blindly start eating something that someone puts on your plate. It's definitely a messy job at times. You are bound to have a whole pan of gravy dropped on your foot or...Just the other day we had an eruption of fryer oil, which was pretty fun to clean up. We had about five gallons of fryer oil spilt on the floor and we had to clean that up, and you really need to have a strong stomach in to be a cook because a lot of the stuff is just weird or if you are fairly faint hearted you might not be able to handle it sometimes.

Being young, I was discriminated against a little bit or treated badly because being young, people didn't trust that I knew what I was doing. But over time I kinda proved myself and now I get lots of respect. I have seen instances of other co-workers being mistreated by other co-workers, though, and it kind of opened my eyes to something that I wasn't really aware were still existent. But I was early on when I started and this was one of my superiors, um, he told me not to do a certain task which would make it more difficult for the morning crew, one person in particular. I obeyed his orders not to do it and when I asked why he said, you know, "She ain't nothing but a nigger,"

and I was pretty astounded to hear someone say that in a work setting. It was definitely something that made me feel very uncomfortable working around him.

Student customers are usually pretty kind. Most of the time they treat you with respect. Student employees...I'm generally kind of surprised sometimes that some of them are students because some of them, they seem to be kind of stupid [*laughs*]. It's not very experienced in the real world but I guess that's what our...

I would change the wage; I think I would like to make a little bit more money but who wouldn't? It'd be nice to have weekends off. That way my schedule would coincide with everyone else that I know. But really I'm pretty content. I wouldn't say that I would change too much. In five years...I'd say I'm probably not living in Blacksburg anymore, possibly in the same line of work. In ten years? I don't know.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.