



☀️ 76°



News Obits Sports Business Opinion Food & Wine Lifestyle A&E Events Guide

New Cyrus restaurant in Geyserville tries new model to equalize worker pay

CAREY SWEET
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT
September 16, 2022



During a family and friends pre-opening night, Sonoma duck, Kosui pear and turnips are plated for service at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday Sept. 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)



It's almost unheard of: A restaurant prep chef earning at least \$65,000.

But that's what Cyrus partners Douglas Keane, Nick Peyton and Drew Glassell are promising, with the recent opening of their new restaurant in Geyserville.

And those prep chefs will be able to increase their salaries to \$75,000, which is equivalent to what a "captain," or top guest services manager, earns at the upscale destination.

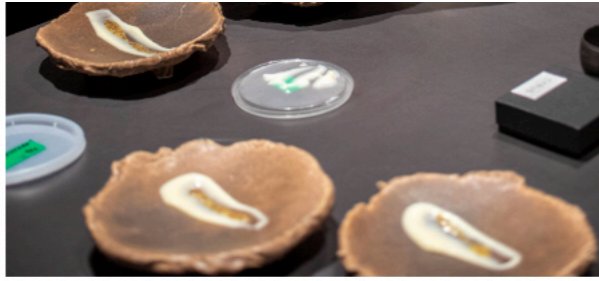
The non-traditional approach to positions and salaries is the partners' strategy to land workers during a crippling labor shortage and to combat a lack of living wages for restaurant staff.

"We have to do more with less," Keane told The Press Democrat recently. "We want to pay people good money."



According to the Indeed.com job site, the average pay for a prep cook in San Francisco is \$19.12 per hour, or \$44,604 per year, which is already 24% above the national average.

In Sonoma County, a prep cook earns a median salary of \$31,720, according to the county's Economic Development Board, while restaurant managers on average get a median pay of \$60,840.



During a family and friends pre-opening, aged gouda, pear, pretzel and mustard are plated for service by Chef Doug Keane at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday, Sept. 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

“For cooks, it’s a much higher pay rate, so that’s made it really easy to find help,” said Keane of the Bay Area’s famously challenged hiring landscape over the past few years. “We were all staffed except for three positions by mid-July.”

To make it happen, the Cyrus team is leveraging a non-standard staffing model, one that involves intensive cross-training, so every employee is able to do another employee’s job. Essentially, the dining room and kitchen positions are being combined, so waitstaff also prepares food and kitchen

staff also serves the meals.

It’s a concept that has been tested before, such as at the former Restaurant at CIA Copia in Napa, which debuted in 2017 with chefs making rounds in the dining room and presenting their food on carts for diners to choose from, in an elevated dim-sum style.

The thinking has been that bringing the chefs onto the service floor allows them to boost their traditionally lower income by sharing in tips with servers.

But at the new Cyrus, staff who normally would be relegated to chopping vegetables can learn how to be a captain — and

BREAKING NEWS ALERTS

Receive immediate notice of breaking news events.

[Subscribe Now](#)

[Read our **Privacy Policy**](#)

The exclusive restaurant limits dinners to 36 guests per night, divided into groups of 12 for the partially communal experience.

A captain is assigned to each seating, guiding all 12 people through a progressive Champagne and canapes “Bubble Lounge” reception, hors d’oeuvres at an interactive chef’s table in the kitchen, entrees at private tables in the dining room overlooking Alexander Valley vineyards and dessert in the “Chocolate Room” with its 8-foot tall liquid chocolate arch.





During a family and friends pre-opening night, guests are invited into the Kitchen Table area to enjoy a selection of “Crudit ”, Umeboshi at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday, Sept. 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

“That’s high-level training, but everyone — food runners and back waiters, even — will be front-of-house trained,” Keane said.

“You could be prepping the pastry station until 4:30, and then you’re dedicated to the front. Then next week, you could be working plating, or the grill, and may stay there the whole night.”

The idea borrows a page from the 1986 autobiography, “Made in Japan: Akio Morita and Sony.” Keane has traveled extensively throughout Japan, exploring its culture, though he said he has never heard of the book chronicling the remarkable success of the electronics company that flourished through the devastating aftermath of Japan’s defeat in World War II.

Sony co-founder Morita strongly believed in cross-training employees, to give them insight into the demands their co-workers faced and encourage even entry-level workers to offer suggestions for improvement.

“More experienced members provide new members with the direction and help they need in a continuous on-the-job training process,” the book summary explains. “The effectiveness of a particular section is strongly influenced by the morale, ambition and talent of the whole team.”



During a family and friends pre-opening night beef, squash, maitake, are plated for service at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday September 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / Press Democrat)

Getting the Cyrus staff on board took some convincing, and it still might be “brutal and take some finesse,” as the team puts concept into action during these grand opening months, Keane acknowledged.

“We knew we were going to need the right mentality of employee, because we might tell a front-of-house person you might be working pastry station next week,” he said.

Some kitchen workers might be intimidated at handling customer interaction, too, he added. “On the other hand, (our training) doesn’t mean you actually have to be a captain, just be able to be a captain.”

To help pay for the higher salaries, Cyrus tacks a 20% service charge on to the \$295 per-person bill (wine pairings command an additional \$250). Tips are not expected but welcomed, and go to all staff in equal shares.

That’s similar to the high-end Barndiva in Healdsburg, where diners are advised on the restaurant’s website and menu that “a 19% service charge will be included on your bill. Please note this is not a gratuity but used by the restaurant to pay all our staff, culinary and alike, higher wages inclusive of health insurance. While a tip is not required or expected, it’s certainly appreciated. Should you wish to leave a gratuity, it will be distributed among all non-managerial staff working the shift.”



During a family and friends pre-opening night guests enjoy sparkling wine and canapés in the bubble room at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday September 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / Press Democrat)

Since instituting the charge in January 2021, the Barndiva team has found it works well for the staff, restaurant co-owner Jil Hales said.

“Wage equity and opportunity is a critical conversation to be having in our industry right now,” she said. “Our cooks, dishwashers, porters and food runners are all embracing it, since their cost-of-living expenses continue to go up like everyone else’s.”

Anything that helps address wage disparity in the restaurant industry is a worthwhile consideration, said Sonoma resident Martin J. Bennett.



During a family and friends pre-opening night guests enjoy sparkling wine and oysters in the bubble room at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday September 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / Press Democrat)

He has been a vocal supporter of living-wage issues for more than 25 years, as a current instructor emeritus of history at Santa Rosa Junior College and a consultant with Unite Here Local 2. That's a hospitality workers' union in San Francisco, San Mateo County, the East Bay and the North Bay.

As early as 2019, he was encouraging local fine-dining restaurants to look at compensation innovations, after the Sonoma City Council approved the North Bay's first citywide minimum wage law, increasing it to \$15 an hour by January 2021. Some upscale restaurants at that time, he said, asked the council to exempt "front of the house" tipped workers or include a "tip credit" that would permit restaurants to pay servers less than the new minimum.

"The majority of Bay Area restaurant workers are working poor who daily struggle to make ends meet," Bennett said.

According to the 2022 Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage Calculator, a Sonoma County adult with no children needs to earn a bare minimum of \$21.67 an hour to cover just the basics, he added.

"That doesn't include any savings, or down payment for a house," he said. "And the housing crisis is just getting worse. Between 2000 and 2018, Sonoma County rents increased by 25%, but wages only went up 2%."

Bennett's suggestions included — and still include — creating a separate kitchen service tip line on the bill so customers can tip both dining room and kitchen staff.



“Or abolish tips and include a 10 to 20% surcharge to replace tips, pay livable wages and provide comprehensive benefits to all employees, as the Sunflower Caffé in Sonoma has done nicely, through its Health and Happiness 15% fee that funds medical coverage, 401k with company match, a wellness bonus and paid time off.”

Bennett especially applauds the Cyrus idea of training staff in new roles.

“Few back-of-the-house employees have access to on-the-job training and promotion opportunities,” he said. “Increased skills and wages have proven to retain better workers, bring higher morale and higher productivity.”



Job sharing





During a family and friends pre-opening night, chef/partner Drew Glassell, left, assembles Foie Gras Torchon in the kitchen at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday, Sept. 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

With Cyrus completely booked through September, staff is on a double learning curve, navigating the 9,000-square-foot space and a 20-course tasting menu along with their new roles.

“We’ll lean on everyone’s expertise in the beginning, and once everyone gets comfortable, that’s when the cross-training starts,” Keane said.

“It’s great, because maybe somebody is working one station but really wants to learn something else, so they can go to front of house for a week and get certified as a captain, and then they’re able to make more money no matter what they do.”

It’s easier to bring a front of house person into the kitchen, he added. “But eventually, cooks will want to do it, because it gives them the opportunity to have a better life.”

The twist on job sharing also helps the restaurant. If a staffer needs or wants to take time off, another staffer is primed to step in. And it can lead to better day-to-day efficiency, as Cyrus’ innovation also means all employees work an eight- to 10-hour shift, versus four-hour shifts like at many other restaurants.

“From an investment standpoint, this industry is not great since the profit margins are so low, and that’s partly because the industry staffing model is broken,” Keane said.



“You’ve got too many people hanging out doing too many things or nothing at all. You’ve got a dishwasher who’s making lousy money, and then he gets slammed for two hours, and no one helps him. But if, from the beginning, there’s the mentality that we’re all in this together, then five of us help for 15 minutes and we’re out of the weeds.”

Hales and her Barndiva team plan to keep an eye on the progress, too.

“I have no idea if Doug’s system will work,” Hales said. “Cross-training every member of staff — I suspect the size of staff needed will be a crucial factor — but he should be applauded for trying something new.”

“There is not a single member of our staff that isn’t integral to the success of the dining experience here, and I’m sure Doug is aware of and counting on how caring about equity — an inherent respect for labor — has the potential to build a dedicated and unified team.”

If the plan works, the Cyrus partners hope to have all staff soon enjoying a four-day work week and making equal salaries. The vision is to give them all one week paid vacation after one year and three weeks’ vacation after two years.

“We’re also going to close for a week in summer and then two weeks in winter because people have kids and never get vacation ... and just because we can,” Keane said.



During a family and friends pre-opening night, salmon, kumquat, finger lime and shio koji are plated for service at Cyrus in Geyserville on Thursday, Sept. 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

However the experiment pans out, the restaurant community is rooting for the best, Hales said.

“There are so many challenges for restaurants right now,” she said, reflecting on the upcoming Oct. 1 closure of Healdsburg’s popular Campo Fina.

inflation and the lack of housing for their staff.

In a farewell letter on the restaurant’s website, owners Ari and Dawnelise Rosen cited difficulties including a national labor shortage,

“There’s no one panacea,” Hales said. “The Rosens said it so well: There are so many challenges for restaurants right now. Especially in Sonoma County — most especially in Healdsburg — and labor is at the heart of many of them. As it should be.”