

Food Cost Controls Needed for Efficient Club Management

By HARRY FAWCETT

Mgr., Kansas City (Mo.) Club

Managing a club has its counterpart in no other industry, and when I say that, I do not exclude hotels.

How often in a board or committee meeting have you not heard a member say, "Why can't we run this club like a business?"

Well, the answer to that is also the explanation of why members can never be unanimous in their opinions about your food.

The answer is — no club is a business. It is an overgrown home. Picture a home as all of you can — adults, children, in-laws, ailing aged grandparents, irascible bachelor uncles, stern unbending maiden aunts with a Pilgrim's zeal for observance of the proprieties; throw in a few "Uncle Louies" with a propensity of overindulgence in wine, women and song.

There you have a club; your club, my club, anyone's club. Can you run such an institution as a business? Of course, the answer is NO.

Use business principles, yes, use business practices known to be safe, sane, honorable — yes, by all means, but is a club a business? No, and it never will be.

Some 35 years ago when I managed my first club, I brought to it some knowledge of cooking and a great love for it. France has long been accorded the premiere position in culinary accomplishment in the world. To do her justice, it must be admitted the French people know food and how to prepare it, but I have long contended there is not a dish that has ever been served in France that has not been served in certain cities in these United States as well or better than in France. This, in itself, is nothing to brag about. With the unlimited larder at the disposal of our chefs here in America, it is to our eternal shame that we have to take second place in the culinary world.

We ought to lead, but we don't. Why? Because the truth of the matter is, we are not natural born cooks and we prefer to fill our stomachs rather than to please them and nourish them correctly.

It has been said it is really hard to get a poor meal in any part of France. It can

be said with equal truth there are many parts of America where it is impossible to get any decently cooked meal. Food to fill your stomach, yes. I say that not from any theory but from actual experience and most of you have had the same experience in certain parts of the United States. Fire has been applied to it, so, they can say it is cooked, but that is all you can say for it, too.

Now, one of the reasons for this is the steady decline in the art of cooking in the American home. You have to love food and the creation of nourishing appetizing dishes to become a real cook. Since the pioneer days (when cooking was a necessity of life) have long since passed into history, how many women take pleasure in cooking? Isn't it a fact that most women look forward to eating as many meals out as possible?

In our clubs there has been a decline of food. There is no use denying it, our meals have changed and they are going to change more. They are going to be simpler. I look forward to the possibility that we may all have to go to women cooks.

The chefs of 1918-20 are today, for the most part, elderly men, if not just old men. Many retired shortly after World War II started. Some have died. There have been no replacements, or very few, because of immigration quotas. Your chefs and cooks from Europe learned their trade in a slow and hard school. At various places on the continent are such schools devoted to the culinary art alone. The youth graduating from the culinary school there already knows his business. And, since school there, at least culinary school, is a serious matter, and wastage of food is just something that is not tolerated, you may know his lessons are well learned and are seldom, if ever, forgotten.

But, all that was in the good old days; the days before World Wars One and Two. Today, hardly a man of the chef class comes here; and while our cities and some of our state universities recognizing our sore need are trying to induce the American youth to take up culinary work, the results so far have been far from satisfying.

Now there is the change in eating habits and on that count there are several marked changes which affect you all. First, of course, the reduced menu. Lack of cooks had their hand in that, but most of all it is due to a change in eating habits, and there is no doubt the old, long many-course meal is definitely a thing of the past. Few menus today of the table d'hotel variety offer appetizers and soups. Mostly you have the choice of one or the other. Relishes seldom go beyond celery and olives, except on party menus. Few menus offer a fish course as well as a meat entree. Usually your choice of vegetables is limited to two; in some clubs one vegetable and a potato suffices.

Another of the great changes is the ingestion of almost a full meal from a buffet of appetizers, hot and cold, liberally washed down by two or four scotches or bourbons, as the prelude to a party dinner, and this, too, has a great effect on:

The trend to later dinners. Now, this has certainly been a serious concern to all of you, for in the last 20 years dinners have been starting later and later. At one club I managed, they sat down as late as 10:30 and 11:00 P.M. Your kitchen crew, following good old tradition, still returns for their evening meal at 5:30 P.M. Now, I know you all have that to a greater or less degree. It certainly affects your crew, their tempers, their ability to work the next day and, of course, your payroll.

The increase of male amateur chefs in the home. Nearly half of the club member class become chefs in their own kitchens or backyards by donning the caps and aprons now sold in all sporting goods houses, and most department stores.

And, while seriously I think this pastime is a laudable one and healthy too, some of these boys can really tell you just what is wrong with your club's cooking after they have cooked a few steaks encased in honey mustard and what-all, and had some of their hapless or helpless guests tell them, "Gee, this is wonderful; don't see how you do it." The sad part of this change is they will want you to put some of their specialties on the menu.

Seasonings. There seems to be a well-planned campaign to sell you people that cooks are not necessary any more because of the magic seasonings which take anything cooked and really make it taste like something else. Believe me, there is no magic which will make a piece of cow beef taste like prime steer, and what goes for steer meat goes all along the line.

I, of course, know that the problems presented by rising food and labor costs rest heavily on you all. I have no magic seasoning to offer, no formula to help you on labor costs, which are up as much as

200 per cent of pre-war levels, but on food costs, you are the master of your fate. Food costs can be controlled, and in our kindred industry, the hotel business, today as never before, management is concerning itself with these costs; adjusting selling prices so they will get a fair return on their costs, and you can do it too.

If your volume of business permits, I would counsel the engagement of a food control system from Horwath & Horwath, or Harris Kerr Foster. It will pay for itself not only in money but in hours of worry and headaches saved for you, for they will furnish you the facts and figures to show you and your House Committee how much to get for your food. Then, if your committee won't face the facts and raise your menu prices to the level desired to make the percentage you need, your committee has the blame on their shoulders, not yours. If your club won't authorize outside help for this purpose, put in your own food costs control. Make tests and make them often, as experience has taught me a price established by a test on loins or ribs from one butcher may be out of line with another. The fact remains I have in my portfolio here 12 or 15 tests made on ribs and loins. Some of them were made within a day of each other, one set of ribs from one house and another set from another house. The costs of them vary on a slice of roast beef as much as ten cents per portion.

I was asked how that was possible. It was possible because critters don't all grow in one mold. They are all different. Have your specifications and make your butchers stick to them. Keep on making tests in your kitchen on entrees, on whole meals, as well as steaks and chops. It is the only way you can price right and thus keep your food costs in line. Control of food costs is the one factor in club restaurant operation you can absolutely deal with. Know your costs. It may help you hold your job.

I am going to digress for one minute here for the reason there are many people that really want to know these things. We strive in the Kansas City Club for 45 per cent food costs because we have determined with 45 per cent food costs on our volume we can make money in our restaurant. We have kept it low enough to make a profit on it in the last 15 months. The 12 months before that we lost our shirts and then we started putting in the food cost control. Soon we began going to the house committee and saying, "Here is the price of this piece of steak. If you want to sell it for the price we are selling it we will lose money in the restaurant, and we are losing it. It is up to you. You

(Continued on page 94)

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FOOD COST CONTROLS

(Continued from page 46)

say you want the restaurant to break even; so do I. If you want my restaurant to break even you must give me a chance to make it break even. If you want to subsidize the restaurant that is all right, but you will have to raise your dues in this club because the dues in this club don't pay the cost of overhead."

That answers another question that I heard. Somebody said, "Can you set up a budget to cover your overhead?" Of course you can. The overhead is there and the dues should cover it and nothing else—but, they should cover the overhead. When they don't cover the overhead you either have to raise your restaurant prices and bring prices to the point where they will return you a profit or else raise the dues.

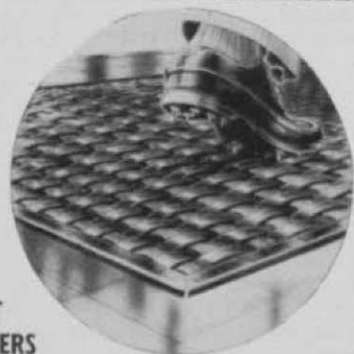
Feature cheaper dishes on your menus. Feature some as specials to take away the stigma of the lower prices. "Today's Special" will sometimes sell a fellow at the big tables who otherwise wouldn't order such an item because of "keeping up with the Jones's." I think you know what I mean.

Inventory turnover, that feature of all well-run establishments, too, can be ac-

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complished with the help of feature items, "Today's Special" boxes on the menu, clip-ons, and so forth. Once in a while you will have to disregard your indicated selling prices and feature items below your regular price. Sometimes House Committee policy will compel this, but in the long run if those sort of feature items increase your volume of business, and your menus feature your low-cost profitable items too, you will come out all right on your over-all food cost.

Along with your food cost control go the statistics as to meals served, portions, and so forth, all of which will help you with your buying, help you keep your inventory down, help your cooks in knowing quantities needed for preparation, tell you the items that sell, those that don't, and so forth.

I have always felt our big job was to intelligently present our case to the House Committee and Board with figures they can not brush aside. The fallacy that club dues call for club restaurants to sell food at lower prices than competition still persists in the minds of some club members, while nothing is further from the truth in most cases. Put them on the Boards of clubs and on the House Committee and I think every one of you know that the minute they get in a Board meeting or House

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Committee meeting they lose all the business sense they ever had.

Now, you take this food cost control and these statistics so you can know your prices and know what you are talking about. Go into the meeting and just resolutely tell them, "These are the facts of life, gentlemen. You can't dispute this." You will get along a lot better if you have some fellow tell you in there that he don't see why you with your possibly \$200 a day business can't sell something as cheap as the hotel that has \$1000 a day business.

Know your food costs, have your prices set to break even or return a small profit, for in most clubs you will find your dues are not carrying the overhead expenses they are supposed to cover. Give some thought, too, to the combining of food and liquor results. Most hotels today do this, although separate schedules of each department's revenues and expenses are also kept for management information.

I remember a few years ago we got out a form of standard account for city clubs and you have also had one for country clubs. We did a separate accounting in the restaurant and bar, like country clubs always did but we have one sheet that combines the two together and why not? The successful restaurants in your town sell food and liquor, they hire chefs, cooks, waiters, cashiers and everything and when they make up their results at the end of the month they take the cash register tapes, that is their receipt, and they make a profit and they put you fellows at a disadvantage because somebody on your board says, "Joe's Restaurant down here makes a profit, why didn't you?"

If you could say to him, "All right, throw into my restaurant department also the receipts from the bar and then let's see what we are doing." The one good excuse for you to do that, and the logical excuse and the necessity for doing it is: how much of the liquor do you serve in your club by your waiters? In our club the largest amount of our liquor sales goes through our banquet department and, therefore, if we were following out the old system in its entirety the service of all that liquor would be credited to the bartender, the head bartender's department and no part of it to our restaurant, but our restaurant is paying the wages of serving 60 per cent of the liquor business that is being done in it, including everything. That is the reason why one should keep that schedule and have the club used to getting the figures that way so they will know what is being done.

Remember, there are just three ways you can better your operating results:

- First: Increase prices
- Second: Increase volume
- Third: Decrease costs

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Clubs can seldom increase volume because patronage is limited by membership privileges being limited. There is little opportunity for you to decrease expenses, although sometimes there is a possibility here, but in the matter of prices, there is much you can do if you know your costs. Have the figures to back you up and the courage to show your House Committee and your Board what your costs are and why your selling prices should be increased, when such increases are indicated.

To my mind the club is not in the merchandising or propaganda business. You run a club for a certain specific number of members, you offer your wares to that member, not to the public. There is no need for you to try to go out and snare other business or try to induce a man who pays his dues to come down to the club when he doesn't want to.

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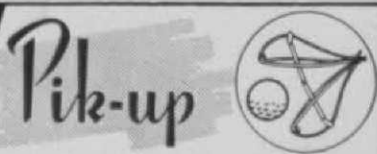
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