Proud History of the Chef’s Uniform

It’s all about pride. If you have it in your profession, you will have it in your uniform, no matter what your walk of life. With the Chef’s uniform, there is more at stake than just keeping the uniform clean and white. A dignified look helps generate a feeling of professionalism. When you don the toque, jacket, checkered pants, necktie and apron, you are continuing centuries old traditions. There are many apocryphal stories about the origin of the chef’s uniform, here are a few of the most popular.

The Toque or Hat – The Chef’s hat, or toque, goes back to ancient times. Thousands of years ago in Assyria, poisoning was a common way for a person to rid himself of enemies. Aware of this problem, Assyrian royalty selected their cooks cautiously. They were entitled to wear a crown of a similar shape to the royal family employing them, although made of cloth and lacking in jewels.

Chef Boucher, Careme’s mentor, who cooked for the Prince of Talleyrand, insisted that everyone in his kitchen wear a white toque for sanitary reasons. It kept hair up and out of the food, while absorbing some of the moisture from an overheated brow. The tower of air inside the Chef’s hat kept the head cool in a hot kitchen.

Later, Chef Marie-Antoine Careme decided that each station and rank in the kitchen should have a different height hat. The chef, being the highest ranking of all kitchen staff, wore the tallest hat. Rumor had it that Careme’s hat was 18 inches high and had to be reinforced to keep it upright.

Pleats, too, are steeped in a rich history. Their origin came from the idea that the more experience a chef had, the more pleats his hat had. A pleat could signify a technique or recipe he had mastered. At one time, a chef had 100 pleats in his hat to signify the 100 ways he knew how to prepare eggs. Chef hats today don’t hold so many pleats, but they still signify a chef’s level of experience.

The Jacket – The double-breasted jacket was portrayed in Marie-Antoine Careme’s 1822 illustration, and was in full vogue by 1878. The advantage of these unique wide-flapped jackets was that if the front of the jacket became soiled, the flaps could be reversed with the dirty one hidden behind, to create a better appearance. Thus, the Chef could wear a clean jacket for twice as long. In addition, there were two layers of protection from spills, splashes, heat and steam.

The Trousers – A Chef’s trouser has a small checkered pattern that is effective in disguising the inevitable stains, which develop while working.

The Apron – is worn over the jacket and around the midsection to protect the uniform as well as the Chef.

The Necktie – The necktie, serves the same purpose to a uniform as a tie does to a business suit, and is tied in the same way. Originally, when kitchens were unbearably hot, the necktie caught and absorbed facial perspiration.

The Shoes – High-quality, supportive and protective footwear is an often overlooked part of the uniform, but also a very important part, a fact to which anyone who stands all day can attest.

When you walk into a kitchen with a bright, clean uniform, it is not only a measure of pride you have in your appearance, your skills and your profession, it is also a matter of health for your customers. You are showing that you are a member of a team, and a practitioner of a noble and ancient craft.

The Prue Leith Chefs Academy Johannesburg, South Africa