

History of the Chefs Uniform

Chefs, for the most part, wear their uniforms almost every day of their working lives, replete with toque, checked pants and double-breasted jacket. Though these uniforms are ubiquitous in the foodservice industry worldwide, they are often taken for granted and worn without much thought. However, many may find that the origin and reasons behind traditional chef's attire are as interesting as it looks.

Much of the chef's uniform has developed out of necessity. The jacket, for example, is double-breasted so it can easily be reversed to hide stains that may accumulate throughout the day; the double layer of cotton is also designed to insulate our bodies against the intense heat of the stove or an accidental splattering of hot liquid. Even the knotted cloth buttons were fashioned for a reason-cloth will withstand the frequent washings and abuse buttons often take from contact with pots, pans and other heavy equipment. Though executive chefs often wear black pants, working chefs and cooks usually don pants with black-and-white checks-the dizzying pattern of hound's tooth camouflages minor spills and soiling. Today neckerchiefs are primarily worn for aesthetic purposes, to give our uniforms a more finished look, but originally cotton cloths were draped around ones neck to soak body sweat while working in the inferno-like kitchens of yesteryear.

The traditional chef's hat, or toque blanche, is what is most distinguishing and recognizable of the uniform, and also the component which often causes the most debate. Chefs as far back as the 16th century are said to have worn toques. During that period artisans of all types (including chefs) were often imprisoned, or even executed, because of their freethinking. To alleviate persecution, some chefs sought refuge in the Orthodox Church and hid amongst the priests of the monasteries. There they wore the same clothes as the priests-including their tall hats and long robes-with the exception of one deviating trait: the chef's clothes were gray and the priest's were black.

It wasn't until the middle 1800's that chef Marie-Antoine Carême redesigned the uniforms. Carême thought the color white more appropriate, that it denoted cleanliness in the kitchen; it was also at this time that he and his staff began to wear double-breasted jackets. Carême also thought that the hats should be different sizes, to distinguish the cooks from the chefs. The chefs wore the tall hats and the younger cooks wore shorter hats, more like a cap. Carême himself supposedly wore a hat that was 18 inches tall! The folded pleats of a toque, which later became an established characteristic of the chef's hat, were first said to have been added to indicate the more than 100 ways in which a chef can cook an egg.

Escoffier too, thought the cleanliness of the cook's uniform was very important, and that it promoted professionalism. His staffs was required to maintain clean and complete uniforms while on the job, and were also encouraged to wear coats and ties while not at work. To this day cooks and chefs around the world wear the same attire that has traceable origins back to more than 400 years. Along with the other conveniences the 1950's brought, paper toques were invented to look like cloth but could be disposed of once they were soiled.

The traditional chef's uniform may be the standard for our profession, but it's definitely not the law. Since the mid-1980's a legion of chefs and cooks have begun to wear non-traditional "fun" chef's attire. These nouveau uniforms run the gamut from pinstriped baggy pants and denim jackets to full blown wildly patterned outfits with chili peppers, flowers, and even the CIA logo. While some chefs may nay-say these new-style uniforms as non-professional, others retaliate that they are more comfortable and give chefs an opportunity to express their individuality through their clothes as well as their food.

Actually, the non-traditional uniforms of today may remind some of the late chef-philanthropist Alexis Soyer, author, inventor and one time chef of the Reform Club in London. Chef Soyer was known to have his entire wardrobe-including his work attire-tailor made. Some of his headgear was as eccentric as a red velvet beret; his jackets were often cut on the bias with large lapels and cuffs. He called his individualistic style "à la zoug-zoug," and the more his contemporaries ridiculed him the more outlandish his outfits became. Like the old adage says, "What's old is new again."

As a professional chef myself, I prefer to adhere to traditional chef's attire-the uniform and its history are something to be proud of. On the other hand, I can also understand a chef's desire to want to be expressive. These nouveau style uniforms have their place in certain establishments; restaurants today, after all, are considered a form of theater. As with anything, the chef's uniform continues to evolve, who knows what the future has to hold? One thing is certain though, the image of a chef, in a pristine white jacket and toque, is recognized the world over as a professional, and we have our predecessors to thank for this.

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