

During the last two weeks of April a further round of exams – six at Trainee Chef level and two at Chef level – completed the pilot programme for the Applied Ability Awards: practical exams for professional chefs designed and delivered by chefs.

The aim of the pilot, supported by UK chefs' organisations, was to test the potential for craft-led chefs to devise their own system of professional qualification (as have solicitors, accountants, surveyors, etc); one that would be purpose-built for in-house training and would develop the core skills needed for the kitchen and larder chef and, at the next level, define the benchmark for fully fledged competence.

Accordingly, the AAA Trainee Chef exam entailed a range of blind tasks leading in the main to the preparation of two dishes, while the AAA Chef exam was made up of six recipe tests, with candidates informed two weeks in advance. Both practicals ran over three and a half hours and were worth 70% of the marks, while the online knowledge test accounted for 20% and an aptitude interview made up the balance.

A total of 76 candidates took the exams from the 100 plus that

entered the process, which began with each candidate and their mentor producing a skill scan and action plan, the only paperwork required. This 'scan and plan' logged strengths and weaknesses against the Triple A syllabus, which itself reflects the content of the NVQ, so as to decide individual needs in preparing for the exam.

Three examiners attend each exam, that is two chef examiners and the interviewer, all of whom must have frontline, up-to-date experience of the industry. Chef examiners in the recent round included Andreas Antona, Alan Baker Green, Gregg Brown, Sally Clarke, Martyn Nail, David Dorricott, Robert Kisby, Prue Leith, David Nichols, Graham Tinsley and Alan Shipman. Exams were held at Lakefield Training Centre in London, Stratford College, Cambrian Training Centre in Welshpool and at South Trafford College.

Seventy-four percent of the candidates achieved the 70% pass mark. Candidates and their mentors came from a wide variety of backgrounds: from two star and five star hotels; from conference venues to an outward-bound centre; from college students to military catering; from fine dining



# Testing times

The final exams in the pilot programme of the Applied Ability Awards have taken place and now it's up to the industry to put the new training initiative to the test

restaurants to inns. Participating companies varied accordingly, including several divisions of contract caterer Compass Group, Hilton and Marriott hotels, Northcote Manor and Heathcotes restaurants, the House of Commons and Le Cordon Bleu London Culinary Institute.

The scheme worked best where mentors seized the opportunity to bring added structure to their in-house training, often involving other staff whether as sub-mentors or co-learners, and always motivating their candidates to gain new and additional skills and experience by moving around the workplace, meeting suppliers and utilising the online training. In addition, all this activity took place without the need for copious paperwork, visits from external assessors or time away from work.

The fact that the Triple A provided a fixed and clear cut goal, with the outcome to be decided by fellow chefs – which activated a healthy degree of professional pride – enabled the learning to be readily integrated into day-to-day kitchen life, requiring not so much extra time as more considered use of existing time. So, in line with the original planning, the exam itself can be seen as just the tip of the iceberg; the setting of the goal. The real pay-off lies in the workplace practices that can be adopted to meet that goal.

With the pilot successfully completed, the prime aims now are, firstly, to filter all the recent feedback and findings into an operating plan approved by the chefs' organisations. Secondly, to properly establish the Triple A through a number of company contracts that deliver a rolling programme of candidates over a two year term.

Meanwhile a number of advances are now to hand: People 1st has cited the Triple A as a means to encouraging continuous professional development and is hence endorsed by its new Sector Qualifications Strategy.

Negotiations are also well advanced with the British Institute of Innkeeping Award Body and HCIMA to jointly accredit the scheme as a market-led professional qualification, and forward thinking training providers in the public and private sectors are advocating the Triple A's adoption into the national framework, thereby making it publicly fundable.

Martyn Nail of Claridge's, who has been both examiner and mentor, sums up his experience: "There are no common and consistent training standards that have the confidence of industry, and none at all that are set and maintained by the profession itself – that's the opportunity that the Triple A now provides."

Prue Leith, chairman of the Triple A's instigator The British Food Trust, concludes: "From the feedback from all those involved to date, above all the candidates themselves, I have no doubt that the Triple A can provide a home-grown route to improving and extending in-house training in ways that craft-based kitchens need and understand.

"The question now is whether we take up the opportunity in sufficient numbers and, of course, whether employers will enable us to do so, persuaded that money spent on building a cycle of in-house training – where today's trainees become tomorrow's trainers – will be far outweighed by money saved on staff turnover and recruitment and by profits gained from better business. I'm hopeful that, at last, we have a way to satisfy the constant cry that qualifications don't test actual skills. As chefs, we are great at carping from the sidelines; now we have a chance to set the standards ourselves."

- For information on how to participate in the Applied Ability Awards please contact Scott Antony, development director at The British Food Trust by emailing [santony@britfood.org.uk](mailto:santony@britfood.org.uk) or call 01453 886355

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