

From Dishwasher to the Chief Culinary Officer: A Culinary Journey Workbook

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FORWARD:

Every culinary career begins somewhere—often in the steam, noise, and chaos of a kitchen’s least glamorous corner. Mine began at a dish sink. I didn’t know then that I was taking the first step toward a future that would lead me into boardrooms, innovation labs, global collaborations, and eventually the role of Chief Culinary Officer. I only knew one thing: I wanted to be better tomorrow than I was today.

That simple commitment—one shift, one plate, one question at a time—shaped every chapter of my career.

Over the years, I have had the privilege to lead culinary vision for national brands, build world-class innovation programs, mentor high-potential culinarians, represent companies on stage and in media, and shape culture across thousands of kitchens.

But none of those achievements would have been possible without the early experiences that taught me humility, discipline, and resilience. The dish pit built my foundation. Mentors sharpened my direction. Curiosity fueled my innovation. And people—teams, partners, chefs, operators—shaped my purpose.

This workbook is designed for anyone who has a dream, a spark, or even just a feeling that they are capable of more than their current role suggests. It is for the dishwasher who wants to become a cook. The cook who wants to lead a station. The sous chef who wants to shape a culinary vision. The chef who aspires to impact an entire industry.

Inside these pages, you’ll find exercises that helped guide my own evolution:

- **defining your identity,**
- **building your skill foundation,**
- **learning the business behind the food,**
- **mapping your vision,**
- **and growing into the leader you one day hope to become.**

This isn’t just a workbook—it’s a roadmap. A mirror. A challenge. And a promise that your starting point does not define your ceiling.

A Culinary Journey Workbook

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How to use this workbook:

- Set aside quiet time for each exercise—don’t rush.
- Revisit your answers monthly to track growth and adjust your vision.
- Share your reflections with a mentor or trusted peer for feedback.
- Use these exercises to guide goal-setting and decision-making throughout your journey.

1. MISE EN PLACE- Your Starting Point

As Chefs and culinarians, we know we need to get our prep and station organized. Why would life be any different? Let's start with where you are right now, and where you want to go.

Reflection prompts:

1. What is my current role?
2. How do I feel about my place in the kitchen?
3. What skills do I already have?
4. What do I want to learn?

❖ **Prompt: Use the Space below to write out your answers.**

1.

2.

3.

4.

2. Building the Foundation (Dish Pit Mindset)

It's important to know where you're starting from. Let's call it your "recipe for success" I know it sounds cheesy. But it will help you highlight what sets you apart.

- ❖ **Prompt:** Identify your ‘Dish Pit Traits’ such as work ethic, reliability, curiosity, efficiency, etc. You know the stuff that makes you badass.

3. Saying Yes to Opportunity

It's hard to get out of your comfort zone. Hell, it can feel downright impossible sometimes! I promise you however, there is so much more success waiting for you on the other side of your comfort zone, however. List some things that will help you grow towards your goals that you can work on today? (or in the next 30)

- ❖ **Prompt:** List tasks, stations, or roles you could say YES to in the next 30 days. Let's brainstorm at least 10.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____



4. Staying Late & Asking Questions

As I came up through the ranks in a kitchen, I'd spend time "off the clock" talking with my leaders, asking questions, learning new techniques, and just soaking it all up. I quickly realized that you could do the same with other aspects of life, strategy, relationships, and just about every aspect of business. It's easy to now just turn on a podcast or watch a video to get the gist of what's being taught. Don't get me wrong; I have learned some great cooking techniques from videos- but there was always something missing for me. The ability to ask questions, dive deeper into the why and also the much-needed immersion into the subject matter

❖ **Prompt: Journal about the last time you “stayed late” or “asked to learn something new”.**

- ❖ **Prompt: Why was it better to learn in person vs. watching a video etc...**

5. Learn the Classics. Learn the Business. Learn People.

Skills, business knowledge, and leadership assessment.

- ❖ **Prompt: What skills do you have that you can grow and use in your journey?**

- ❖ **Prompt: What do you need to learn, or get better at?**

- ❖ **Prompt: What does a leader look like to you, and how can you “be a leader” in your field?**

6. Handling Setbacks & Staying Motivated

Goodness knows not every situation will be a major success or even be able to be classified as a win. Here's the truth; however, **You learn more lessons through failure** then you do through success right out of the gate. All leaders fail- but the difference is they fail FORWARD. Meaning they use it to propel them into what's next.

- ❖ **Prompt: Let's take a situation that you feel you “failed” at in your life. Write the situation out below, and work to reframe, or get a different perspective about the situation. What did it teach you? What good came out of it? How can you use the information to keep the next attempt on the path to success?**

7. Becoming a Leader

In every field there are certain traits that help you navigate through opportunities, struggles, and even great times. These traits are described as foundational for anyone aspiring to grow as a leader in the culinary field or beyond.

Essential Leadership Traits

- **Work Ethic:** Consistently putting in effort and dedication, even in challenging situations.
- **Reliability:** Being dependable and trustworthy in fulfilling responsibilities.
- **Curiosity:** Always seeking to learn, ask questions, and understand more.
- **Efficiency:** Managing time and resources well to achieve goals.
- **Humility:** Recognizing the value of every role and learning from every experience.
- **Discipline:** Maintaining focus and self-control to achieve long-term objectives.
- **Resilience:** Bouncing back from setbacks and using failures as learning opportunities.
- **Mentorship:** Supporting and guiding others to help them grow.
- **Vision:** Mapping out goals and inspiring others to work toward a shared purpose.
- **Adaptability:** Willingness to step out of your comfort zone and embrace new challenges.

I know I can look at that list and spend some time “sharpening the skill”. Also much like a knife, you can possess these skills and they can become dull or in need of defining the edge. If you feel like you want to grow and develop some of these traits (and we all should) here are some tips and actionable concepts.

Tips for Developing Leadership Traits

Work Ethic

- Set daily goals and hold yourself accountable.
- Volunteer for challenging tasks and see them through.
- Arrive early and stay late when needed.

Reliability

- Meet deadlines consistently.
- Communicate proactively if you encounter obstacles.
- Be someone others can count on for follow-through.

Curiosity

- Ask questions and seek feedback from mentors and peers.
- Explore new techniques, cuisines, or business practices.
- Read industry publications and attend workshops.

Efficiency

- Organize your workspace and tasks for maximum productivity.
- Prioritize tasks by urgency and importance.
- Continuously look for ways to streamline processes.

Humility

- Recognize and appreciate the contributions of every team member.
- Admit mistakes and learn from them.
- Stay open to advice and constructive criticism.

Discipline

- Develop routines that support your goals.
- Avoid distractions and stay focused on tasks.
- Practice self-control in stressful situations.

Resilience

- Reflect on setbacks and identify lessons learned.
- Maintain a positive outlook during challenges.
- Use failures as stepping stones for growth.

Mentorship

- Offer guidance and support to less experienced colleagues.
- Share your knowledge and experiences openly.
- Encourage others to pursue their goals.

Vision

- Set clear short-term and long-term goals.
- Communicate your vision to inspire others.
- Regularly review and adjust your plans as needed.

Adaptability

- Embrace change and new opportunities.
- Step outside your comfort zone regularly.
- Be willing to learn new skills and take on unfamiliar roles.

❖ **Prompt: From that list, what are some characteristics/traits that you feel you're strong in?**

❖ **Prompt: What about ones you can work to sharpen?**

8. Your Roadmap

Creating Your Roadmap with Goals

A well-crafted roadmap transforms your vision into reality by breaking down big dreams into achievable steps. Use this section to set clear goals for the next 3 months, 12 months, and 3–5 years and outline the actions that will move you forward.

1. Define Your Milestones

- **Short-Term (3 Months):**

Identify immediate skills to develop, new responsibilities to take on, or projects to complete.

Example: Master a new cooking technique, lead a team meeting, or complete a food safety certification.

- **Mid-Term (12 Months):**

Set goals that stretch your abilities and expand your influence.

Example: Launch a new menu concept, mentor a junior team member, or present at an industry event.

- **Long-Term (3–5 Years):**

Envision your ultimate career achievements and leadership impact.

Example: Become a department head, open your own consulting business, or shape company-wide culinary standards.

2. Make Your Goals SMART

For each milestone, ensure your goals are:

- **Specific:** Clearly state what you want to achieve.
- **Measurable:** Define how you'll track progress.
- **Achievable:** Set realistic targets based on your resources.
- **Relevant:** Align goals with your values and vision.
- **Time-bound:** Assign deadlines to keep momentum.

3. Action Steps & Accountability

- Break each goal into actionable steps.

Example: If your goal is to master a new technique, list the resources, practice sessions, and feedback you'll need.

- Schedule regular check-ins with yourself or a mentor to review progress and adjust your plan.

4. Anticipate Roadblocks

- List potential challenges for each goal (e.g., time constraints, skill gaps).
- Brainstorm solutions or support systems to overcome obstacles.

5. Celebrate Progress

- Recognize achievements, big and small.
- Reflect on lessons learned and update your roadmap as you grow.

Roadmap Template

- ❖ **Prompt:** Use this roadmap template to define your short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. Fill in each section with specific action steps, resources, deadlines, and progress tracking. Revisit and update regularly to stay aligned with your vision.

- **Short-Term Goals (Next 3 Months)**

Goal	Action Steps	Resources Needed	Deadline	Progress Tracking

- **Mid-Term Goals (Next 12 Months)**

Goal	Action Steps	Resources Needed	Deadline	Progress Tracking

- **Long-Term Goals (3–5 Years)**

Goal	Action Steps	Resources Needed	Deadline	Progress Tracking

- **Roadblocks & Solutions**

Roadblock	Solution/Support System

- **Accountability & Check-Ins**

Mentor/Peer for Feedback	
Check-In Schedule	
Reflection Notes	
Additional Comments	

- **Celebrate Progress**

Achievements to Recognize	
Lessons Learned	
Updates to Roadmap	



9. Final Origin Story

Final Origin Story – Personalized Example

My culinary journey began in the dish pit—a place where humility and hard work are forged. At first, my role was simple, but I quickly realized that every shift was an opportunity to learn and grow. I took pride in reliability, showing up early, staying late, and always striving to be better than I was the day before.

As I moved up from washing dishes to prepping ingredients, I embraced curiosity. I asked questions, observed the chefs, and volunteered for new tasks, even when they felt outside my comfort zone. These experiences taught me efficiency and resilience, especially when things didn't go as planned.

With time and dedication, I earned the trust of my team and took on more responsibility. I became a station lead, then a sous chef, and eventually began shaping the culinary vision for my kitchen. Along the way, I faced setbacks—mistakes, missed opportunities, and moments of doubt—but each challenge taught me to fail forward, using every lesson to fuel my growth.

Mentorship became a core part of my journey. I found fulfillment in guiding new team members, sharing my experiences, and helping others see their own potential. My vision expanded from mastering recipes to inspiring a culture of excellence and adaptability.

Today, I strive to be a leader who sets clear goals, communicates a shared purpose, and embraces change. My legacy, I hope, will be defined not just by the dishes I create, but by the people I support and the positive impact I leave on my team and the industry.

❖ **Prompt: Write your own multi-paragraph journey.**

10. Vision Expansion Exercises

There is a reason every great cookbook includes delicious, styled and perfect looking photos of the final dish with the recipe. That is meant to entice the reader/user to want to produce the same results while simultaneously providing an example of what can be produced if you follow this recipe. Said another way- a vision.

❖ **Prompt: Let's take some time to create a recipe or a vision of what your perfect success recipe looks like.**

Vision Expansion Exercises

1. Identity Blueprint

Purpose: Clarify who you are at your core—your values, strengths, and passions.

- List your top 5 values (e.g., integrity, creativity, teamwork).
- Identify your signature strengths and how you use them daily.
- Write a short statement that describes your culinary identity.

❖ **Prompt: Who am I when I am at my best in the kitchen or at work? What do I stand for?**

2. Perfect Day Visualization

Purpose: Imagine your ideal workday to help set clear goals.

- Describe your perfect day from start to finish. Where are you? Who are you working with? What tasks fill your time?
- Note the feelings, achievements, and interactions that make this day meaningful.

❖ **Prompt: If I could design my perfect workday, what would it look like?**

3. Reverse Resume

Purpose: Map out your future achievements as if they've already happened.

- Write a resume dated 3–5 years from now, listing the roles, skills, awards, and projects you want to have accomplished.
- Be specific—include job titles, leadership experiences, and impact made.

❖ **Prompt: What do I want my professional story to say in five years?**

4. Purpose Excavation

Purpose: Dig deep to uncover your driving motivations.

- Reflect on moments when you felt most fulfilled at work.
- Ask yourself: What impact do I want to have on others? Why do I do what I do?

❖ **Prompt: Why do I care about my work? What legacy do I want to leave?**

5. Roadblocks

Purpose: Identify and plan for obstacles that could slow your progress.

- List current challenges (skills gaps, time constraints, confidence, etc.).
- For each, brainstorm possible solutions or support systems.

❖ **Prompt: What's standing in my way right now, and how can I overcome it?**

6. Legacy Statement

Purpose: Articulate the lasting impact you want to make.

- Write a paragraph describing how you hope to be remembered by colleagues, mentees, and the industry.
- Consider both professional achievements and personal qualities.

❖ **Prompt: What do I want people to say about me and my work when I retire?**



11. Conclusion

As you reach the final pages of **From Dishwasher to the Chief Culinary Officer: A Culinary Journey Workbook**, remember that every step you've taken—every reflection, challenge, and goal—has been part of building your unique path forward. This workbook was created with the belief that *they say you're most qualified to help the person you once were*. That conviction is the motivation behind every exercise and insight shared here.

Your journey is proof that growth is possible from any starting point. The tools and strategies within these pages are meant to inspire you, guide your vision, and empower you to lead with purpose and resilience. While no workbook can guarantee success, it can help you unlock your potential, clarify your direction, and remind you that your experiences are the foundation for helping others rise.

Carry this spirit with you as you continue to innovate, mentor, and shape the future of your field. Your story—and the impact you make—will be the legacy that inspires the next generation to believe in their own journey.

CHRIS AQUILINO, FMP
Culinary Architect | Consultant | Food Photographer & Stylist | Brand Ambassador



12. Disclaimer:

This workbook is intended to serve as a guide and resource for individuals seeking to create a path toward personal and professional growth. While the exercises, tips, and strategies provided are designed to help you reflect, plan, and develop essential leadership traits, they do not guarantee specific outcomes or success. Your journey will be shaped by your unique circumstances, choices, and efforts. Use this workbook as a tool to inspire and support your progress, but remember that results may vary for each individual.