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Chefs, Shoes, and Matting

Several years ago, researchers at Cornell University and Michigan State University studied the success and failure rates of restaurants in three markets over a ten-year period. They concluded that nearly a third of the restaurants failed within the first year. In three years, half of them were out of business, and at the end of ten years nearly three-quarters of the restaurants that had opened a decade before were gone.

Terrance Brennan, chef and owner of the Picholine restaurant on New York's Upper West Side, is one of the success stories. Nearly 20 years running strong, Brennan says he plans to keep the restaurant going as long as he can stand it—literally. Brennan has the same problem many chefs have: he is on his feet as much as 12 hours per day, walking over soiled, hard, and slippery kitchen floors. His shoes take a beating, as do his feet, his legs, his knees, and sometimes his spirits.

According to an article in the *New York Times* (Suzanne Hamlin, "Chefs and Shoes: A Bond Forged in Battle," November 5, 1997), this problem is so bad for many foodservice workers that they have given up looking for shoes in typical shoe stores. Instead, many try having shoes custom made or go to medical or kitchen supply companies looking for specially made shoes that offer extra cushioning and pain relief.

Painful lower ligaments are common throughout the restaurant industry for everyone from chefs in the kitchen to bussers clearing tables. A big part of the problem, as mentioned earlier, is that foodservice workers are on their feet for long hours.

Additionally, in many restaurants, concrete is the flooring of choice in cook and prep areas. It tends to be easier to clean and last forever, but concrete can wreak havoc on feet, knees, and legs.

It's Not the Walking...It's the Standing That's the Killer

Brennan has tried all kinds of shoes purchased from all kinds of places. One of the big concerns when selecting shoes for foodservice work is safety. Slips and falls are among the leading causes of injury in restaurants—not for the customers but for the foodservice workers. So shoes have to be nonskid as well as resistant to grease and water. Additionally, they have to be durable.

However, unlike many of us who develop problems with shoes due to considerable walking, for Brennan and other chefs, “it’s not the walking that’s the killer, it’s the standing.” An example of this: One San Francisco chef said that he was “too busy” to notice pain after standing for several 16-hour days in a row. However, one night after work, he found he could not take off his shoes. He ended up in a hospital where they found a blister the size of an orange on his ankle.

How to Keep on Standing

According to Dr. Jerry Lublinear, a New York orthopedic surgeon who specializes in sports medicine, chefs are particularly vulnerable to foot problems. He says support is crucial. “If you stand all day, you need to wear a shoe with cushioned support that evenly balances the whole foot.”

Further, he suggests getting an arch support for the shoe, “but a soft one that gives, not [one] made of steel or leather.” He suggests chefs and other foodservice workers have arch supports specially made from molds for the workers’ feet. These are designed to fit snugly and comfortably for each individual wearer.

However, some suggest foodservice workers and others who must stand for long periods of time must look beyond just their shoes and try to cushion the floor below. “The foodservice industry has actually evolved into one of our biggest markets,” says Christopher Tricozzi, Vice President of Sales and Marketing for Crown Mats and Matting, one of the oldest matting manufacturers in the country.

“Originally, the mats were designed mostly for drainage, to allow water, grease, oil, and other items to fall beneath the walking area. Now we also design them to help alleviate some of the pain foodservice workers [experience] after standing for long hours.”

Tricozzi is referring to antifatigue matting systems. An antifatigue mat is not a soft mat; instead, it is specially engineered to provide both a cushion and a bounce when walked upon.

The combination “increases body movement, disperses the worker’s weight more evenly over the surface, and helps improve blood flow and circulation,” he says. “This type of matting system was originally developed for workers in industrial locations but lends itself just as well to foodservice facilities.”

Is Fashion Out the Window?

As incredible as it may sound, some chefs will grin and bear the foot, ankle, knee, and leg pain in order to wear high-fashion shoes while they work. Many say that style fits in with the ambiance of their restaurants and the high-end elegance they are trying to create. One such chef, Jean-George Vongerichten, even wears costly shoes imported from Italy, made much more for looks and leisure than for hard work.

“I wouldn’t say chefs can wear high-fashion shoes and experience no pain if they simply install antifatigue mats,” says Tricozzi. “However, if they wear comfortable, appropriate shoes and install [antifatigue] mats, they should have healthier feet and experience less pain.”

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About Crown Mats and Matting

For more than 60 years, Crown Mats and Matting has been a pioneer in the development and manufacture of matting products. Beginning with the invention of walk-off matting by the company's founder, R.P. Johnson, the company now has the most diverse matting product line offered in our industry. Crown sells matting through an extensive network of highly trained sales representatives throughout the United States and worldwide. These sales experts are familiar with the features and benefits of all matting systems and are able to help their clients find the right system for virtually any application.

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