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Passed on to Mr. Schulson, the expediting chef -- or ringmaster -- the piping-hot food is appraised, tasted, fluffed, rearranged and then either approved or rejected (he has about eight seconds per plate and a 10-percent rejection rate). Accepted dishes earn his bellowing cry, “Runners! Get me runners!” He screams this over and over all night long (there are never enough runners), always followed by “yo, yo, yo, yo” (in lieu of names he has no time to remember), and, “go, go, go, go,” sending the runners on their way.

Precision Cuisine, The Art of Feeding 800 a Night in Style

By MELISSA CLARK

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Navy-clad muscle-bound runners balancing trays piled with the steaming plates fly out of the kitchen. Scaling narrow staircases, darting down disco-lighted hallways, and skidding past tipsy patrons in mini-skirts and stilettos, they barrel through three levels and as much as 16,000 square feet to reach their goal: a hungry table of 14.

In a typical evening at Buddakan, this is played out approximately 133 times in a five-hour time span.

Pushing the limits of what a restaurant kitchen can do, big-box eateries -- those serving 600 to 1,000 customers a night -- are being forced to become increasingly inventive and resourceful in how they run their kitchens, or else face drowning in the unending chaos of those vast numbers.

For Buddakan, part of its salvation lies in vigorous speed. Another factor is the sheer numbers of employees.

In addition to the 24 line or main cooks, there are four dozen prep cooks rolling dumpling skins, pinching the heads off bean sprouts and peeling fresh water chestnuts during the day, and several wandering sous-chefs on duty at night, ready to jump into the fray wherever needed.

There’s even one person whose sole job is circulating in the 3,500-square-foot kitchen to empty the garbage cans into one of the two refrigerated garbage rooms the restaurant had built.

But Buddakan’s crowded, frenetic model represents just one of many approaches. Peek into the kitchen at Vento or Blue Fin, two restaurants in the B. R. Guest group, and it’s a completely different scene, closer to tournament dominos than a rugby match.

All screaming is turned down to a hushed silence but for the click-clacking of dishes and clanging of pans. Oustide gestures and flamboyant maneuvers are replaced with the precise, methodical movements of the two expediters (one for appetizers, one for entrees), intently focused on a five-foot-long sheath of order tickets, which they arrange into numbered blocks grouped by order time, and constantly reshuffle. The aim is to coordinate everything so that the appetizers arrive between two to eight minutes from when a table orders, with the entrees following 15 minutes later.

Although they serve the same number of people a night as Buddakan -- give or take a couple hundred -- Blue Fin and Vento employ about half the number of cooks. For them, the key is in their particular style of expediting. It’s a routine that has been honed over the years to such a fine tool that, Blue Fin’s executive chef, Paul Sale, said, if the appetizer expeditor “dropped dead right now, I’d still know that mussels...”
were missing from table 117.’’

An adjunct part of the system is making sure that each cooking station is equally busy throughout the night, and never backed up at vital moments, say, during Blue Fin’s pre-theater rush, when the restaurant might have 600 “covers” (or diners) in two hours. If a cog in the machine gets stuck (perhaps by a rejected order of overcooked halibut), it is up to the expeditor to urgently grease it, by repositioning problematic tickets into their own panic section where they will receive special attention.

Since the distances in mega-restaurants can be expansive, communications devices, like walkie-talkies, headsets and computers, are useful.

In the kitchens themselves, the more advanced and highly specific gadgetry is used in food prep. For Buddakan’s lacquered ducks, whole defeathered birds have their skins ballooned out (to separate the fat from the meat) with an industrial-strength air compressor. The birds are then slow-roasted in a specially designed duck cooker that’s unfortunately somewhat apt to catch fire. At Blue Fin, one piece of big technology is an $18,000 rice washer that helps out the sushi chefs.

However, as it is with all games of skill -- whether dominos or sports -- for high-volume restaurants serving high-quality food, it’s the strategies, rather than any clever gadgets or pieces of equipment, that make or break them.

A well-designed kitchen is paramount too, but here bigger isn’t necessarily better. At the Italian restaurant Vento, Brett Reichler, a corporate executive chef for B. R. Guest restaurant group, motions his arms around the relatively small size of a kitchen that cooks for 600 people a night.

“Just making it bigger wouldn’t make it any more efficient,” he said. “A guy shouldn’t have to move too far to complete a dish. If I have to take two extra steps for each dish, that’s a thousand steps at the end of the night. ‘We want to move as little as possible to get the job done,’” he added.

The same quest for efficiency underlies yet another big-box kitchen maxim: have as few hands touch the plate as possible.

Unlike a classic brigade de cuisine, where the fish cook sears the tuna, passes the plate to the vegetable cook who adds the freshly sautéed snow peas and sends it down the chain to the saucier, who drizzles on the ginger glaze, at Vento and Buddakan et al, each cook builds a dish from start to finish.

For any classically trained chef, it’s an adjustment that takes some getting used to. Mr. Sale of Blue Fin admitted, “I had to completely change the way I was used to cooking to make it work.”

The approach to writing menus changes, too. Dishes need to be streamlined and simplified so that most of the preparation can be done in advance; when an order comes in, the chef can quickly cook the protein and heat the made sauces and garnishes.

As Mr. Reichler of Vento said, “Pan sauces made à la minute are just not going to happen here like at Le Bernardin.”

The only dishes cooked completely to order are those made in a wok, which has many advantages over the Western-style burners. Not only does it get much hotter and thus cook the food more speedily than a frying pan, it also holds more volume. At Buddakan, the wok cook can put out four orders of scallop-fried rice in the same three minutes it takes a cook on the standard burner to whip up one order of sizzling short rib with mushroom chow fun and the mysterious “crispy stuff” mentioned on the menu.

Wok cooking, and being able to send the food to the table family style for sharing, are two reasons many of the giant restaurants (Buddakan, Ruby Foo’s, Japonais, Buddha Bar, Megu, Tao) are Asian. It makes it possible to get a lot of food out to the tables quickly.

Family-style dishes also encourage the expeditor to send out dishes as they are ready instead of waiting for all the entrees for the entire table. This gives Mr. Schulson at Buddakan another measure of control. If the cook in charge of the minced pork lo mein is in the weeds, as they say, Mr. Schulson can still instantly send that hungry table of 14 their sweet and crispy jumbo shrimp and jasmine-tea-scented chicken.

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