

Hilton Prague – Latest food production trends for large scale events

BY: BARBARA E. EULER for KTCHNrebel 🕒 READING TIME: 3 MINUTES

Francu Luise doesn't shy away from big jobs. As the kitchen director of the Prague Hilton, he manages a team of almost 70 chefs – and has made as many as 1500 guests happy at once with his culinary creations. His experience is what helps him – along with a very special production process.

This place is enormous, Franco! Cooking here can't be easy. What keeps you going day-to-day?

Cooking is the most universal language I know – and it's my way of expressing my creativity! It's just magical. I've wanted to be a chef ever since I was a child in Padua, watching my grandmother cook. I wanted to know what was happening in her pots and pans! And now I'm in my 50s, and cooking is still my passion. See, I'm from a traditional Italian family in Padua, where meals are always the best opportunity for conversation. Eating together is what keeps the family together!



Franco Luise / Image: Hilton Prag

And now you're the kitchen director at the largest Hilton in Europe, right? What kinds of challenges do you face when you're working on such a massive scale?

It's true. We have nearly 800 rooms and four restaurants, and we manage banquets for up to 1500 people. The biggest challenge is getting all of the food ready on time. It only works with Cook & Chill – separating production and service. We have nearly 70 chefs here, but we can't do it without special equipment, especially combi-steamers. You have to make the most of their full range of capabilities, stay curious, and keep experimenting! RATIONAL offers great training programs, as well as a network where we professionals can share our experiences.

They say you're a total Cook & Chill pro. What advantages does that technology offer, and what kinds of things do you have to watch out for?

With Cook & Chill, you do pre-production up to a few days before the actual event, and then blast-chill the food and store it. The only part you do right before serving is Finishing. That way, you always have everything under control, so there's no stress. But most importantly, it cuts your operating costs. If you're doing a large event with 500 or 600 tenderloin steaks, you'd need at least four to five stations with four or five people each. With Cook & Chill, you may not even need half that many. Cook & Chill also straightens out your working hours – so you avoid overtime, and it's easier to accommodate requests for days off. Also, the units are pre-programmed, so even newer or less experienced staff can use them. That's really important nowadays, when professionally trained food service personnel are scarce. The one thing you need to make sure of is to chill the food quickly, for health and hygiene reasons. But we couldn't make any of this work without top-notch technology. My kitchen is like one big laboratory with all the coolest equipment! Besides our conventional appliances like the induction stove and the grill, we have RATIONAL SelfCookingCenters, VarioCookingCenters, sous-vide equipment, Paco Jets, Thermomixers... Kitchen technology has really improved over the last 20 years. I've got all the latest toys – some of them I even have at home!



Restaurant The Able Butcher Hilton Prague / Image: Hilton Prague

Is Cook & Chill always your go-to method?

No. I use Cook & Serve for a-la-carte service. I really like it. You can always do individual components like sauces in advance using Cook & Chill. It depends on the product. When you have fresh fish, you don't need Cook & Chill. You have to serve that fresh! And vegetables are better as fresh components, too.

What other techniques and trends do you find inspiring?

Ferran Adrià and his molecular gastronomy were a big influence on me. I don't go crazy with that stuff, but I do have a few fun little powders in my kitchen! We once did edible cocktails at the bar, too. Nobody else was offering those! But I would say that, in the past 100 years of cooking technology, the biggest revolution has been the sous-vide method. There's no better way of learning how temperature affects food. That inspired me a lot. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens in the coming years. Europe is transforming. We're welcoming people from all kinds of different cultures, and sharing our own traditions. That's going to improve our way of eating and our way of cooking. People are going to come here one way or another, so we should accept their traditions. There's no reason to fear that. The new opportunities vastly outweigh the disadvantages. I'm not afraid.