

**A good tester is one who not only ensures that a recipe works, but is also a good communicator and keeps the consumer top of mind.**

**By Rob Benes**

“A recipe is a scientific formula,” says Irena Chalmers, an author and food commentator/essayist, teacher and culinary mentor based in New York. There are science-based reasons why a cake sinks in the middle, why a popover fails to pop or why the meat is tough or the fish dry, she says.

Imagine being able to earn a living by cooking in your own kitchen, or for a food company or a cookbook/magazine publisher. If you have a passion for food, an obsession for accuracy, and a curiosity about the way things work and cook, professional recipe testing might be a career for you.

Above: Dawn Viola. Courtesy of Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Orlando, Florida.

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## **THE JOB**

There are two kinds of testers. The first is someone who works for a company full time, and the other is a freelancer. A full-time recipe tester may be assigned to test one brand or product. A freelancer’s responsibilities vary from job to job depending on client expectations.

“A recipe tester either develops recipes from scratch or makes a recipe that already exists to ensure it works, no matter if working full time or freelancing,” says Dawn Viola, a chef instructor at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts, Orlando, Florida.

Jessica Gordon, culinary food specialist, dairy snacking, Kraft Foods Group, Northfield, Illinois, develops Kraft recipes and then tests them to make sure consumers can recreate them at home without problems. “You need to have a strong passion for food that goes beyond just cooking food,” she says. “You need to want to take apart recipes to see if they work, and if they don’t work, ask why and then find a way to correct them.”

Gordon explains it's important to understand sensory applications that go beyond the taste of food. A recipe tester needs to compare and contrast textures and assess mouth feel, be able to determine if the food is bitter, sweet or sour, and understand the overall chemistry of items.

Recipe testers work with a team when developing or testing a recipe. Team members could include research and development (R&D), marketing, sales, packaging and anyone else involved in bringing the recipe to market. Being a good communicator, both verbally and in written form, is an important skill for a recipe tester, as the person needs to clearly convey ideas and concerns to key people during the development and testing phases.

The way people want their food to taste is subjective and based on personal preferences, but a recipe tester needs to test a recipe from an objective standpoint. This is where communication skills play an important role. For example, testers will convey to R&D that too much salt is being used, or not enough.

“R&D may feel the recipe is perfect the way it is, but it's the tester's job to make an informed and objective decision as to what is best for the end-user,” Viola says.

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## **HOW TO FIND WORK**

Don't expect to graduate from culinary school and become a recipe tester. You need to gain real-world experience and cultivate a well-developed palate that has been exposed to different cooking styles, ingredients, flavors and ideas. Recipe tester jobs also are not generally front and center, so be prepared to do research to find this unique job.

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Chalmers recommends contacting food processors, such as Land O' Lakes, Kraft Foods and Nestlé, who hire full-time and part-time employees. Explore companies that develop new recipes for their stores, such as Starbucks and Panera. Commodity boards for apple, onion and strawberry growers, for example, and pork, beef and chicken producers, use recipe developers and testers. Television stations that post guest chef recipes online must make sure recipes are written accurately, and often hire freelance testers. Some food magazines and cookbook publishers employ full-time and freelance testers to check authors' work. Explore local food companies and food markets that may need recipes tested. Local orchards and farm stands may need help, too. The pay may be low, but the experience will be great.

“When you do find an organization that’s hiring a recipe tester, do your homework so you know not just about the company, but, more importantly, about the food it makes and why it makes it,” says Ruth Mossok Johnston, cookbook author and food innovations specialist, Detroit.

Many jobs are not posted online, but, rather, spread by word of mouth, so networking is one of the best ways to find employment. “No matter where you work, always do your best and try not to burn bridges,” says Gordon. “You never know when your path will cross with someone you once worked for, or someone is asked to make a recommendation and your name is brought up.”

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## HOW TO GAIN EXPERIENCE

Most culinary schools require students to complete an internship or externship before graduating. Here lies a perfect opportunity to explore if recipe tester is the right career choice. “Don’t pick a restaurant or job that meets the minimum requirement of your externship or internship,” Viola says. “Challenge yourself by aligning with a company that has a recipe testing kitchen that’ll help develop your culinary skills and palate.”

After finishing an externship or internship, work in a professional kitchen to gain real-world experience. Again, challenge yourself to find employment to help improve your culinary skills instead of maintaining the same skill set.

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Many food companies hire summer interns or part-time kitchen assistants. “This is a great way to gain experience and network. Internships and part-time jobs sometimes turn into full-time employment,” Johnston says.

Viola also recommends blogging. It’s a safe place to develop and test recipes from cookbooks or your own recipes. You can practice your testing skills, develop a testing style, perfect communication skills and self-promote if a prospective employer asks to see published work. Her website and blog can be found at [www.dawnviola.com](http://www.dawnviola.com).

“Market yourself smartly,” Johnston says. Facebook, Instagram and other social media site are popular, and use them to your advantage. Post pictures about your cooking, build your credibility and set yourself apart from everyone else. Her website and blog can be found at [www.feedmeheartfully.com](http://www.feedmeheartfully.com).

## **ONGOING EDUCATION**

There are no specific organizations for recipe testers, but there are professional groups that have subgroups, such as the International Association of Culinary Professionals that offers a Test Kitchen Professionals networking membership. Joining other groups such as Research Chefs Association or The American Culinary Federation, can offer networking opportunities, as well.

Gordon suggests attending trade shows-both large ones, such as the National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show in Chicago, and smaller ones put on by commodity boards-to learn about the latest flavor and food trends. “I spend time at local grocery stores to see what fresh foods are being stocked and walk the packaged food aisle to see what new items are coming to market,” says Gordon. “I also read blogs to keep up on trends, such as Food52 and The Kitchn.”

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## **SALARY AND FEES**

Salary and fees are dependent on status of employment: full time, part time, freelance (or contract), as well as the type of company and the person’s level of experience. Full-time positions guarantee a salary and other company benefits. For a contract position, Chalmers recommends considering the fee offered before accepting an assignment. Negotiate to be reimbursed for ingredients purchased if testing/cooking at home and factor in the amount of time it will take to write the recipe, submit it to the client and make changes.

Remember that you will have to pay taxes on the amount of money you receive, so make a realistic estimate of your out-of-pocket expenses and time involved before accepting a flat fee for a project.

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Rob Benes, a Chicago-based hospitality industry writer, reports on recipe development, beverage programs, business trends, equipment and chefs for trade, educational and consumer publications.

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## **Employment Resources**

Food Jobs: 150 Great Jobs for Culinary Students, Career Changers and FOOD Lovers (Beaufort Books, 2008), by Irena Chalmers. This book is a guide to food occupations, ranging from chef, butcher and nutritionist to beekeeper, kitchen designer and wild-game farmer. It includes job duties and qualifications.

Great Food Jobs 2: Ideas and Inspiration for Your Job Hunt (Beaufort Books, 2013), by Irena Chalmers. This second volume describes an abundance of careers in the food industry, in and out of the kitchen.

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## **Recipe Tester Resources**

The Recipe Writer's Handbook (John Wiley & Sons, 2001), by Barbara Gibbs Ostmann and Jane L. Baker. This book contains detailed information on the development and writing of recipes.

Will Write for Food: The Complete Guide to Writing Cookbooks, Blogs, Reviews, Memoir, and More (Da Capo Press, 2010), by Dianne Jacobs. Best practices for getting published as a cookbook author, restaurant reviewer or food magazine writer, as well the how-to-dos for food blogging, is outlined in this book.

Food Blogging for Dummies (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), by Kelly Senyei. This book explains how to join the blogosphere with your food blog, including how to identify your niche, design your site, find your voice and create mouthwatering visuals of your best recipes by using lighting, effects and more.