Bournemouth University

THE BURNT CHEF PROJECT

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

INSIGHTS FROM A GLOBAL SURVEY ON CHEFS' INTENTION TO LEAVE

C. GIOUSMPASOGLOU, E. MARINAKOU, E. PAPAVASILEIOU, K. HALL

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a global study examining chefs' intentions to leave their current roles and, in many cases, the profession altogether. Conducted in collaboration with The Burnt Chef Project, the study draws on survey responses from 460 chefs working primarily in the UK and other English-speaking markets, across independent restaurants, national and multinational chains, contract catering, and institutional settings. The findings provide one of the clearest quantitative and qualitative accounts to date of the drivers of attrition in professional kitchens.

The results confirm that intention to leave among chefs is exceptionally high. Nearly seven in ten respondents (69%) report that they often or always consider leaving their job, with a further 27% doing so at least sometimes, indicating that exit thinking is near universal. These intentions are reflected in behaviour: two-thirds actively search for alternative employment, and more than four in ten do so frequently. Over half of respondents also consider starting their own business, often viewing self-employment as the only viable route to autonomy and sustainable working conditions.

Work-family conflict emerges as a central driver of these intentions. Almost 70% of chefs report moderate or strong interference of work with home and family life, with a further fifth experiencing some interference. Similar patterns appear across indicators relating to disrupted personal plans, difficulty meeting family responsibilities, and emotional or physical exhaustion at home. The findings suggest that it is not only long hours that drive dissatisfaction, but the persistent intrusion of work into personal life.

Despite these pressures, the data reveal ambivalence rather than rejection of the profession. Many chefs remain passionate about cooking, their teams, and the creative and social value of their work, yet feel that the prevailing employment model is no longer sustainable.

Qualitative responses from over 150 chefs give depth to these patterns. Respondents describe toxic and abusive management cultures, including bullying, harassment, and gaslighting, across both independent and corporate settings. They report unpaid overtime, wage theft, chronic understaffing, and expectations of 60–80 hour working weeks. The mental health consequences are severe, with accounts of burnout, anxiety, depression, and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. Women chefs additionally highlight systemic sexism and limited organisational understanding of gender-specific health needs.

At the same time, chefs point to examples of progress. Some organisations demonstrate that supportive leadership, better rota design, shorter working weeks, and paid closures can significantly improve wellbeing and retention, showing that change is possible.

The report concludes that chefs' intention to leave is a structural issue rather than a failure of individual resilience Addressing it will require redesigned roles and rotas, fair and transparent pay practices, stronger people-management capability, and targeted support for vulnerable groups. Without meaningful change, chefs will continue to seek sustainable careers elsewhere.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The global hospitality industry is facing an acute talent retention crisis in professional kitchens. Labour shortages, escalating costs and rising customer expectations are colliding with long-standing structural issues: long hours, intense pressure, low pay and, in too many cases, outdated and abusive management norms (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2022).

In this context, understanding chefs' intention to leave, whether their current job, their employer, or the industry altogether, has become strategically important for operators, investors and policy-makers.

This study, conducted in collaboration with The Burnt Chef Project, set out to:

- Measure the prevalence and intensity of chefs' intention to leave.
- Explore key drivers, including work–family conflict, goal alignment with colleagues, perceived organisational support, and broader working conditions.
- Capture first-hand narratives of why chefs stay, why they go, and what would need to change for them to build sustainable careers.

The report that follows is deliberately written as an industry-facing document. It provides sufficient methodological transparency for professional readers, but its primary aim is to inform practical decisions about how kitchens are organised and led, not merely to describe the problem.

Source: https://stock.adobe.com [File #:567055269], by BPawesome. © Adobe Stock

2. Background and Existing Evidence

Although this study focuses on original data gathered in collaboration with The Burnt Chef Project, it is positioned within a well-established body of research exploring turnover intention, wellbeing and labour conditions in hospitality and professional kitchens. Within organisational psychology, turnover intention has long been recognised as one of the strongest predictors of actual quitting behaviour (Tett and Meyer, 1993). Large meta-analyses demonstrate that when employees regularly contemplate leaving, it is highly likely that they ultimately do so (Griffeth, et al., 2000; Rubenstein et al., 2018). These relationships are especially potent in work environments characterised by high demands, limited autonomy and chronic role stress (CIPD, 2025), conditions that are common in professional kitchens (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2022).

Hospitality research consistently identifies the sector as one of the most challenging labour markets, defined by long and unsocial hours, emotional labour, demanding customers, and relatively low pay (Baum, 2019; UKHospitality, 2022). Numerous empirical studies have shown clear links between these systemic characteristics and elevated levels of burnout, stress and intention to leave. For example, Karatepe and Uludag (2008) found that role stress and burnout significantly impair job performance in hotel employees, while Wong et al.'s (2025) systematic review highlights that wellbeing challenges in hospitality are pervasive, persistent and often poorly addressed. Industry analyses reinforce this, with the Moore UK (2024) report citing overwork, unsustainable schedules and a lack of career progression as core reasons driving staff to exit the sector.

Another dimension shaping chefs' turnover intention is the distinctive occupational culture of professional kitchens. Classic ethnographic work by Fine (2009) describes kitchen brigades as tightly bonded communities, steeped in pride, craftsmanship and camaraderie. However, this cultural strength often coexists with the normalisation of hardship, extreme hours, the expectation of stoicism, and the valorisation of working through illness or exhaustion (Cooper et al., 2017). Research examining wellbeing in hospitality (e.g., Wong et al., 2025) suggests that these embedded cultural norms can inhibit help-seeking and sustain environments where burnout is viewed as inevitable rather than preventable.

A substantial body of evidence also highlights workplace aggression, bullying and poor managerial practices as significant drivers of distress and turnover in hospitality (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). The International Labour Office report by Hoel and Einarsen (2003) identifies hospitality as a high-risk industry for workplace violence and bullying, with chefs and kitchen workers among the most exposed. This aligns with broader occupational health research showing that chronic exposure to job stressors, combined with inadequate recovery, accelerates psychological strain and disengagement (Sonnentag, 2018). Industry commentary has noted that these risks are heightened in hierarchical or authoritarian kitchen environments, where support structures are often limited and managerial capability varies widely.

Parallel to academic research, industry-led initiatives have increased awareness of the mental-health challenges facing hospitality workers, particularly chefs. The Burnt Chef Project's reports (2020) document widespread experiences of stress, anxiety,

depression and stigma around mental-health disclosure across the sector. Similar findings emerged from recent collaborative studies on Emotional Exhaustion among frontline employees in fine-dining restaurants (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2025a) and on the Imposter Syndrome in commercial kitchens (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2025b). These findings echo the conclusions of UKHospitality's Workforce Strategy (2022), which stresses that wellbeing support and psychologically safe management practices are now strategic imperatives for retention. These industry publications underscore that the pressures chefs face is both occupational and cultural, and that meaningful change requires coordinated organisational and sector-level action (Cooper, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the present study contributes new insight by integrating standardised quantitative measures, including work–family conflict (Netemeyer et al. 1996) and perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), with direct indicators of turnover intention, while also incorporating rich qualitative narratives from chefs themselves. Although previous research has documented aspects of burnout, bullying or strain in isolation, few studies have examined these components together within a large, international sample of chefs. The combination of statistical measurement and lived experience presented here adds depth to the existing evidence base and provides a more holistic understanding of why so many chefs are reconsidering their future in the profession.

Source: https://stock.adobe.com [File #:1184612651], by Budsadee. © Adobe Stock

3. Methodology and Participant Demographics

3.1 Study design and collaboration

The project used a cross-sectional online survey distributed via The Burnt Chef Project's channels and partner networks in 2025. The questionnaire (Table 1) included:

- Items on intention to leave (considering leaving, scanning for other jobs, thinking of starting a business).
- A validated work–family conflict scale.
- Items on goal alignment and collegiality.
- A standard perceived organisational support scale.
- Detailed demographic and occupational questions.
- A final open-ended question inviting chefs to "share your story" regarding intention to leave, work–family relationships, goal congruence and organisational support.

Table 1: Survey Questions

Work: In the past 9 months….
1. How often have you considered leaving your job?
2. How often are you frustrated when not given the opportunity at the restaurant to achieve your personal work-related goals?
3. How often do you think of starting your own restaurant?
4. How frequently do you scan the internet in search of alternative job opportunities?
Work and Family
5. The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life.
6. The amount of time my job takes up makes it difficult to fulfil family responsibilities.
7. Things I want to do at home do not get done because of the demands my job puts on me.
8. My job produces strain that makes it difficult to fulfil family duties fulfil
9. Due to work-related duties, I have to make changes to my plans for family activities.
10. The demands of my family or spouse/partner interfere with work-related activities.
11. I have to put off doing things at work because of demands on my time at home.
12. Things I want to do at work don't get done because of the demands of my family or spouse/ partner.
13. My home life interferes with my responsibilities at work such as getting to work on time, accomplishing daily tasks, and working overtime.
14. Family-related strain interferes with my ability to perform job-related duties
15. The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life.
Colleagues
16. My colleagues and I share a similar vision regarding the restaurant's future.
17. My colleagues and I think alike on most issues with respect to the restaurant.
18. Most of my work objectives are fully aligned with those of my colleagues.
19. My colleagues and I perceive our work-related problems as mutual problems.
Restaurant
20. The restaurant values my contribution to its well-being
21. Help is available from the organization when I have a problem
22. The restaurant strongly considers my goals and values.
23. The restaurant really cares about my well-being.
24. The organisation would forgive an honest mistake on my part.
25. If given the opportunity, the restaurant would take advantage of me.
26. The restaurant shows very little concern for me.
27. The restaurant cares about my opinions.

The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative responses were subject to inductive thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns and illustrative narratives across more than 150 personal stories.

3.2 Sample size and composition

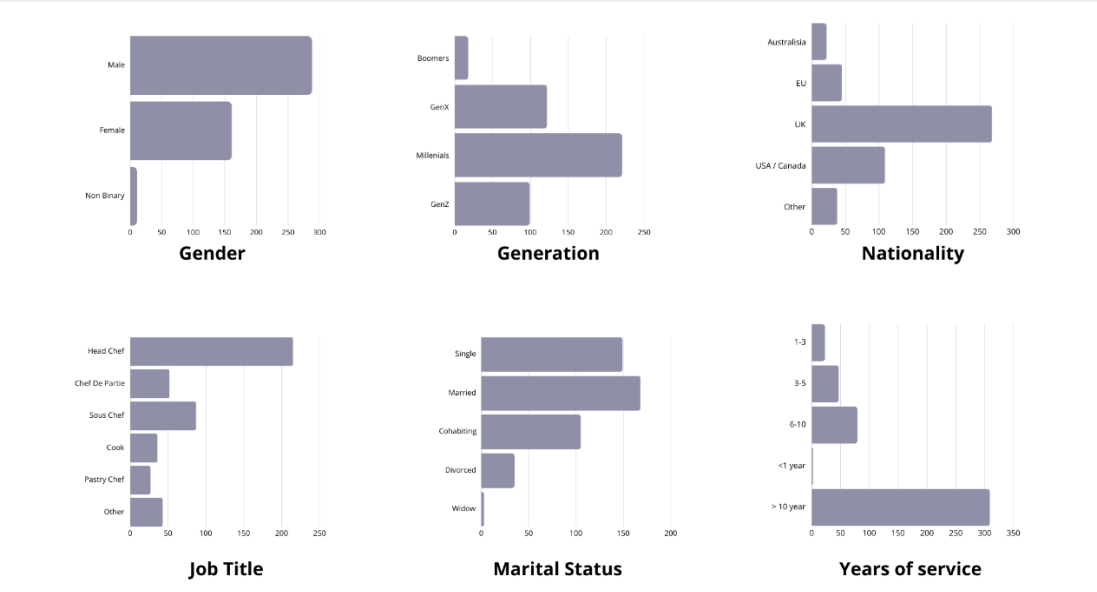
The demographic profile of the sample provides important context for interpreting chefs' high intention to leave. A total of 460 chefs completed the survey. The respondents are predominantly mid-career and experienced chefs, with *Millennials* (n=221) and *Generation X* (n=122) forming the core of the sample. The presence of *Generation Z* chefs (n = 99) indicates that exit thinking begins early, while the small number of *Baby Boomers* (n=18) reflects long-term attrition at later career stages. Overall, intention to leave emerges as a cross-generational issue, rather than one confined to younger workers.

The sample remains male-dominated (n=288), though the inclusion of female (n=161) and non-binary chefs (n=11) highlights ongoing diversity challenges in a profession still shaped by masculine norms and limited flexibility. These dynamics are particularly relevant when considered alongside the strong evidence of work–family conflict.

While most respondents are UK nationals (n=268), a substantial international cohort is present, particularly from North America (US & Canada), Europe and Australia. The occupational profile is heavily weighted towards senior roles, with Head Chefs (n=215) and Sous Chefs (n=87) dominating the sample. This challenges the assumption that turnover intention is primarily an entry-level issue and instead points to growing disengagement among those carrying the greatest operational and leadership responsibility.

Finally, the majority of respondents are *married* or *cohabiting* and report more than 10 years of service (n=309). High intention to leave among such long-serving, embedded professionals signals not a lack of commitment to cooking, but the cumulative impact of unsustainable working conditions over time. Collectively, the demographics reinforce the conclusion that chefs' intention to leave reflects a structural retention problem, rather than individual or generational failure.

Figure 1: Sample's Demographic Characteristics

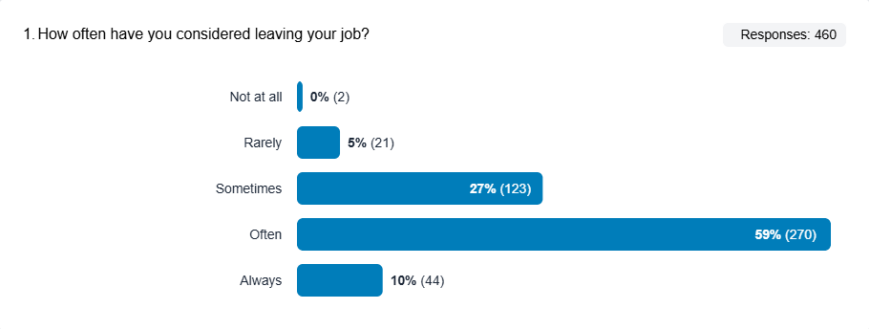


4. Quantitative Findings

4.1 Intention to Leave and Job Search Behaviour

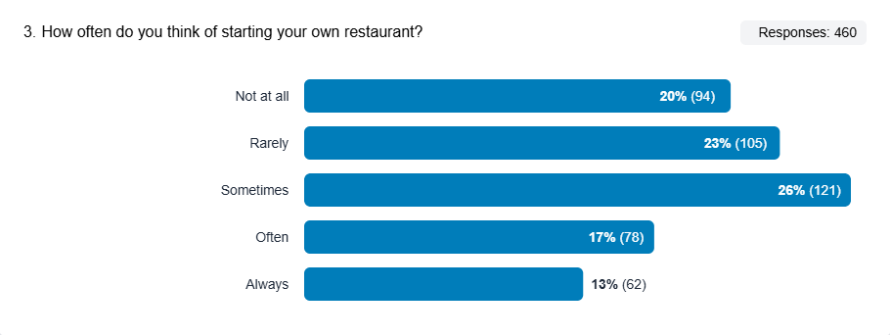
The findings reveal an exceptionally high level of turnover intention among chefs. Nearly seven in ten respondents (69%) report that they "often" (59%) or "*always*" (10%) consider leaving their current role, while a further 27% do so "*sometimes*." In effect, only a negligible minority of chefs report never contemplating exit. This suggests that thoughts of leaving are not episodic reactions to temporary dissatisfaction, but rather a normalised and persistent feature of working life in professional kitchens.

Figure 2: Intention to leave intensity



Importantly, these intentions are not merely attitudinal. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) engage in active job search behaviour, scanning online job opportunities at least sometimes, with 43% doing so often or always. This combination of high turnover intention and sustained job-search activity indicates a workforce in a state of chronic labour market readiness, constantly monitoring exit options even while remaining employed. Such behaviour reflects what experts describe as "*pre-exit mobility*", where employees remain physically present but psychologically disengaged.

Figure 3: Intention to start one's own restaurant

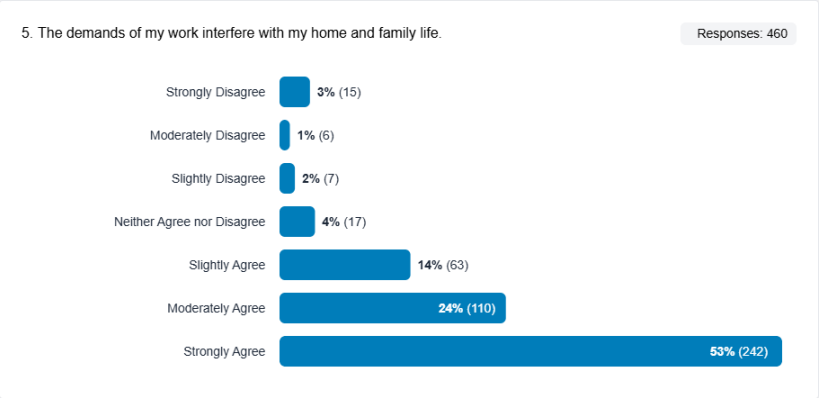


Alongside conventional job search, entrepreneurship emerges as a prominent alternative pathway. More than half of respondents (56%) think about starting their own business at least sometimes, with almost one-third doing so frequently. For many chefs, self-employment appears less as an aspirational career move and more as an "*escape strategy*," a perceived means of reclaiming autonomy, control over schedules, and dignity of labour in an industry where these are experienced as structurally constrained.

4.2 Work–Family Conflict

Work-Family Conflict emerges as one of the most powerful structural pressures shaping chefs' intention to leave. On the statement "*The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life*," 68% of respondents moderately or strongly agree, with a further 20% slightly agreeing. This means that almost nine out of ten chefs (88%) experience some degree of work-to-family interference, and more than two-thirds experience it at a level likely to generate sustained strain.

Figure 4: Work interference in family life



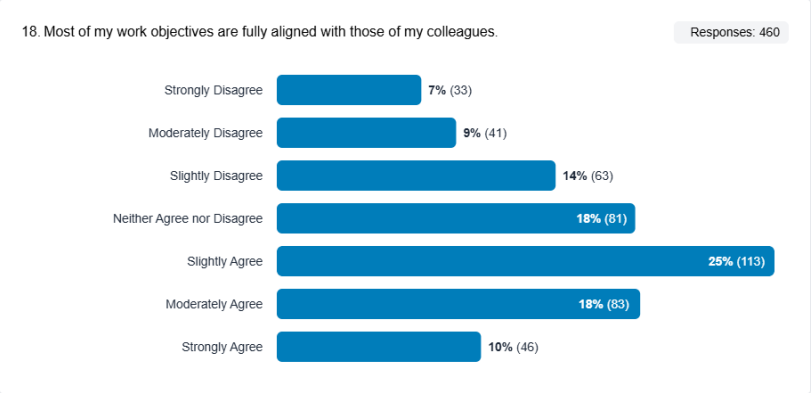
This pattern is replicated across related items measuring difficulty fulfilling family responsibilities, having to cancel or alter family plans due to work, and experiencing emotional strain at home as a consequence of job demands. Collectively, these findings point to work-family conflict as a systemic condition of kitchen work rather than an individual coping failure.

Crucially, the quantitative patterns strongly reinforce the qualitative accounts of missed milestones, relationship breakdowns, and narratives such as "*90% of my time belongs to the job*." This consistency across methods suggests that work-family conflict is not simply a correlational backdrop but a central mechanism through which the organisational realities of kitchen work translate into withdrawal cognitions and exit planning.

4.3 Goal Alignment and Collegiality

In contrast to the severity of work-family strain, chefs report relatively moderate and generally positive levels of alignment with their immediate colleagues. A clear majority agree, at least slightly, that they share similar goals, values, and a common vision for the business, and that work-related problems are understood as collective rather than individual failures.

Figure 5: Work objectives alignment

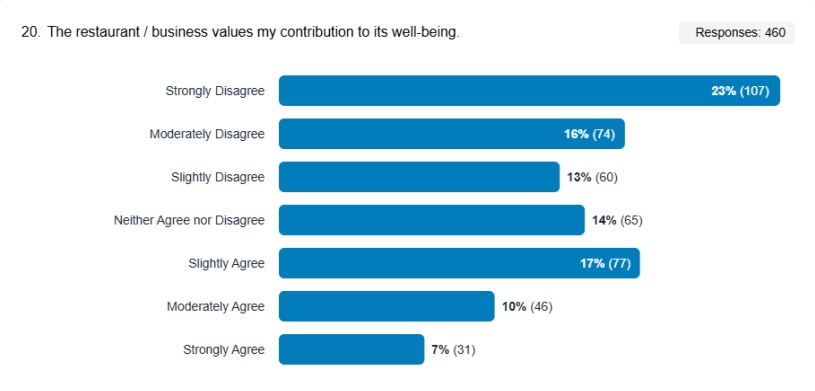


These findings suggest that peer relationships and team cohesion are not the primary drivers of dissatisfaction or exit intentions. Instead, they highlight a key distinction between horizontal and vertical relationships within kitchens. While solidarity and mutual understanding often exist among chefs themselves, tensions appear to be located more strongly in relationships with organisational leadership, ownership, or the wider business model, an interpretation that closely mirrors the qualitative narratives. This distinction is important: it indicates that retention problems cannot be solved simply by improving team dynamics or "*kitchen culture*" at the micro level but require engagement with broader structural and managerial practices.

4.4 Perceived Organisational Support

The data on perceived organisational support reveal a workforce characterised less by outright rejection of the profession and more by deep ambivalence. Many chefs remain passionate about cooking, service, and craft; however, this passion coexists with a growing sense that the prevailing employment model is unsustainable.

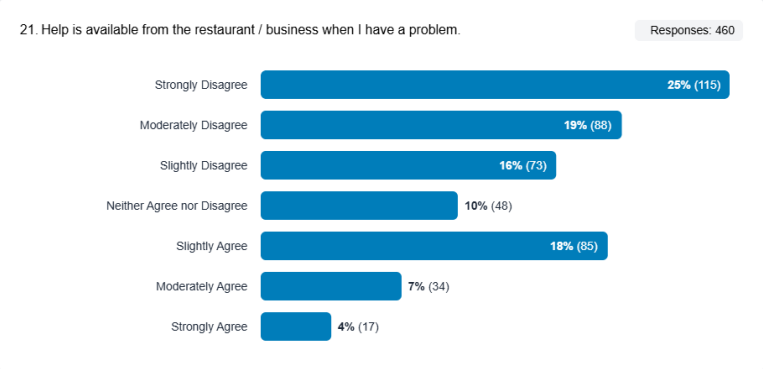
Figure 6: Perceived recognition



Responses to positive organisational support items such as "*The restaurant / business values my contribution*" and "*Help is available when I have a problem*" cluster around the mid-point, with substantial dispersion across the scale. This indicates inconsistency in chefs' experiences, likely reflecting wide variation across establishments rather than uniform industry conditions.

At the same time, a significant proportion of respondents agree with negatively framed statements such as "*If given the opportunity, the business would take advantage of me*" and "*The restaurant shows very little concern for me*." These responses point to mistrust, perceived expendability, and feelings of exploitation, suggesting that many chefs do not experience their employer as a source of security or care.

Figure 7: Perceived organisational support



Taken together, perceived organisational support appears polarised: while some chefs feel genuinely recognised and supported, many others feel taken for granted and easily replaceable. This polarisation helps explain why high turnover intentions coexist with continued commitment to the craft itself. The problem, for many chefs, is not cooking, but the organisational context in which cooking is performed.

4.5 Quantitative findings Summary

Overall, the quantitative findings portray a workforce that is psychologically halfway "*out of the door*," even when still physically present in the kitchen. High turnover intentions, active job search behaviour, chronic work-family conflict, and ambivalent organisational support combine to create a condition of prolonged liminality, where chefs remain committed to their vocation but increasingly detached from their current employment arrangements. These patterns provide strong empirical grounding for the qualitative narratives and underscore the need to shift industry debates away from individual resilience and towards the structural sustainability of kitchen work itself.

5. Qualitative Findings

The open-ended responses offer a stark and emotionally charged insight into why many chefs contemplate leaving the profession. Beyond isolated grievances, the data reveal systemic, culturally embedded problems that shape everyday working life in professional kitchens. Thematic analysis identified several interrelated themes, which together illustrate how structural conditions, leadership practices and identity tensions combine to erode wellbeing, commitment and retention.

5.1 Toxic leadership and abusive cultures

One of the most pervasive themes concerns toxic leadership and normalised abuse, often framed by respondents as an intrinsic feature of kitchen culture rather than an aberration. Chefs describe bullying, harassment and fear-based management styles, frequently in prestigious or high-profile establishments:

> "*Head chef is abusive and harasses staff…I have witnessed this chef verbally abuse a young chef who was having a panic attack: 'how dare you have a panic attack in my restaurant?'… This head chef just won the care award and is an advocate for treating their staff well.*" (P3)

This account highlights a troubling disconnect between public narratives of care and internal realities, suggesting that reputational signals and awards may mask harmful practices. Others use extreme language to convey the psychological toll of authoritarian management:

> "*My boss is a dictator, micromanager, gaslighter, psychopath, bully that leads with fear. I'd love my job if that boss was not there*". (P138)

Crucially, such experiences cut across independent and corporate settings and are often compounded by institutional silence or inaction, particularly from HR and senior management:

> "*I left my dream job… because I was bullied by my managers and even with reporting it to HR several times they did nothing about it… I still have to do weekly therapy and have PTSD from it.*" (P37)

These narratives suggest not only individual leadership failure but a systemic breakdown of safeguarding and accountability, reinforcing a culture in which abuse is tolerated, minimised or rendered invisible.

5.2 Overwork, understaffing and wage theft

A second dominant theme relates to chronic overwork, labour exploitation and wage theft, widely described as both expected and unavoidable. Long hours, understaffing and unpaid overtime are portrayed as structural norms rather than temporary pressures:

> "*Standard expectancy of unpaid overtime of sometimes double your paid hours… Chefing really is one of the worst-regulated professions of our time*." (P251)

Respondents frequently link excessive hours to declining mental health and physical exhaustion:

> "*The hours that I'm working at the moment are anything from 60 to 80 hours a week… it is really affecting my mental state.*" (P192)

Several chefs explicitly describe wage theft and the moral normalisation of free labour, often juxtaposing their unpaid work and wage theft with organisational wealth:

> "*We tallied the unpaid OT… it totalled approximately 20k per head for the year. It was less than 1% of the revenue and could have bought a single piece of artwork on the wall.*" (P280)

Such comparisons underline a sense of deep injustice and disposability, reinforcing perceptions that chefs' labour is undervalued despite its centrality to organisational success.

5.3 Work–life imbalance and family strain

The consequences of these working patterns extend well beyond the workplace. Many chefs articulate profound work–life imbalance, describing chronic absence from family life and important milestones:

> "*Missing your family birthdays & wedding celebrations and sometimes wakes… Missing the birth of your child and not seeing your baby's first steps… You see your family for breakfast and not again till breakfast the next day."* (P36)

Others explicitly link their working conditions to relationship breakdown and parental guilt:

> "*My now ex-wife was fed up with me never being at home on weekends and now divorced is more annoyed I can't see my kids every weekend*." (P5)

Unpredictable rotas, last-minute changes and a lack of control over time emerge as particularly damaging, reinforcing the idea that kitchen work colonises personal life, leaving little space for recovery or relational stability.

5.4 Mental health issues and burnout

Perhaps the most alarming findings relate to mental health deterioration. Many chefs describe burnout not as fatigue but as a state of emotional collapse, physical illness and loss of self-worth:

> "*I was so burnt out that I was physically ill and needed 1 full year to recover from it… this situation made me almost completely quit working in this industry*." (P37)

Some accounts are even more severe, revealing suicidal ideation and attempts:

> "*I tried to kill myself twice thinking that I am weak… It's been very stressful my time at this company*." (P31)

Notably, chefs often internalise blame, framing distress as personal weakness rather than a rational response to unsustainable conditions. At the same time, several respondents explicitly credit external support mechanisms, such as therapy and The Burnt Chef Project, with helping them survive or re-evaluate their careers. This suggests both the absence of internal organisational support and the growing importance of sector-wide mental health advocacy.

5.5 Inequality, sexism and lack of inclusion

Gendered and intersectional inequalities further intensify intentions to leave. Women chefs frequently report sexism, marginalisation and everyday microaggressions:

> "*For the last few years, the main issue faced is sexism in the workplace. The men I work with are the main reason I question my job and my career*." (P10)

Others point to the absence of basic gender awareness and empathy:

> "*Being a female within hospitality… I feel that ALL male staff should be encouraged to understand the female menstrual cycle & just how badly it can affect a woman… It is absolutely not a subject to joke about.*" (P69)

Immigrant chefs describe additional layers of vulnerability, including precarious visa status, exploitation and blocked progression, despite demonstrating commitment and resilience. Together, these accounts reveal how exclusionary cultures intersect with power imbalances, amplifying stress and reducing perceived belonging.

5.6 Lack of progression, recognition and fair pay

A recurring motif across responses is career stagnation and symbolic recognition without material reward. Chefs describe being trapped in roles with limited development, poor pay and declining motivation:

> "*Job often does not allow us chefs for progress and development… Rubbish pay and no respect towards us or our job whatsoever*." (P40)

Even senior titles are described as hollow when detached from fair conditions:

> "*It's nice to be 'Head Chef', but it's really meaningless if you are getting minimum wage, no legally mandated breaks and awful staff food, no creative input and have no motivation*." (P227)

These narratives strongly reflect a psychological contract breach, in which the effort, sacrifice and loyalty chefs invest are no longer reciprocated through pay, respect or opportunity. This breach emerges as a critical driver of disengagement and exit intention.

5.7 Why some chefs stay

Despite the overwhelming negativity, some chefs articulate reasons for staying. These include camaraderie and team loyalty, financial necessity (including visa sponsorship), and a deep sense of occupational identity, with being a chef described as "*who I am*" rather than simply what they do.

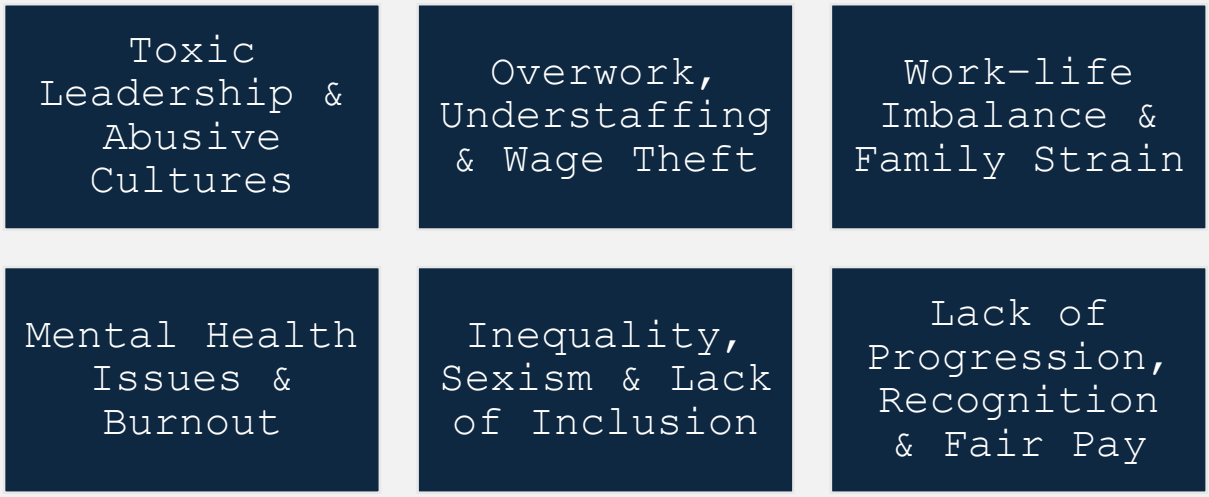
However, several respondents who have already left report significant improvements in wellbeing, even when moving to lower-paid or lower-status roles. This finding is particularly revealing, suggesting that many chefs are ultimately willing to trade prestige and identity for sustainability, dignity and health, challenging long-standing assumptions about passion as a sufficient retention strategy.

Source: https://stock.adobe.com [File #:731051457], by vadymstock. © Adobe Stock

6. Discussion

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings present a coherent, convergent and deeply concerning picture of contemporary kitchen work (Figure 8). Rather than isolated complaints or short-term dissatisfaction, the data indicate a structurally embedded pattern of strain that systematically undermines wellbeing, commitment and retention among chefs.

Figure 8: Primary drivers of chefs' intention to leave



First, intention to leave emerges as a normative condition rather than a marginal outcome. With 69% of respondents often or always considering leaving the profession, and nearly two thirds actively scanning for alternative employment, turnover intention appears woven into the everyday reality of kitchen life. This aligns with the qualitative narratives, where leaving is frequently framed not as a dramatic rupture but as a constant, low-level calculation. From an organisational perspective, this level of chronic exit intention has profound implications for recruitment costs, return on training investment, succession planning and the long-term maintenance of culinary standards. Importantly, it suggests that retention problems cannot be solved through episodic recruitment drives alone, as the underlying conditions that generate exit intentions remain largely unchanged.

Second, work–family conflict operates as a central explanatory mechanism linking working conditions to withdrawal cognitions. Quantitatively, the overwhelming majority of chefs report persistent conflict between work demands and home life. Qualitatively, this conflict is vividly illustrated through accounts of missed life events, relationship breakdowns and parenting strain. Together, these findings reinforce the view that kitchen work is organised around assumptions of unlimited temporal availability, rendering sustainable participation, particularly for those with caring responsibilities, exceptionally difficult. The data therefore challenge long-standing industry norms that implicitly privilege endurance and sacrifice, highlighting how these expectations disproportionately erode both wellbeing and long-term employability.

Third, while long hours and low pay remain critical stressors, the findings demonstrate that leadership behaviour and workplace culture are equally, if not more, decisive in shaping intention to leave. Some of the most emotionally intense qualitative accounts centre not on workload alone, but on experiences of humiliation, fear-based management, gaslighting and perceived indifference to illness or injury. Quantitative patterns support this, indicating that poor treatment and lack of support exacerbate dissatisfaction beyond what pay adjustments alone can offset. These findings reinforce the argument that financial rewards cannot compensate for psychologically unsafe or degrading environments, and that retention strategies focused solely on wages risk missing a substantial part of the problem.

A particularly striking theme is the credibility gap between organisational rhetoric and lived reality. Several respondents describe employers who publicly promote wellbeing, care or “family” cultures while privately tolerating abusive leadership and unsustainable workloads. This dissonance appears to intensify cynicism and moral injury, undermining trust and accelerating disengagement. Rather than acting as a protective factor, performative wellbeing initiatives may therefore backfire when they are not matched by meaningful structural change.

Crucially, the findings also complicate any simplistic narrative that chefs are disengaged or unwilling to work. On the contrary, the data suggest that chefs are not anti-work, but anti-exploitation. Many express deep pride in their craft, strong occupational identity and loyalty to their teams. What they reject is a model of employment that normalises unpaid labour, indefinite availability and the erosion of physical and mental health. The qualitative accounts of chefs who left and subsequently experienced improved wellbeing, even at the cost of status or income, are particularly telling. They indicate a growing willingness to trade prestige for sustainability, challenging the industry’s long-standing reliance on passion as a substitute for decent working conditions.

From a strategic standpoint, these findings position retention as both an economic and organisational risk, not merely a moral or ethical concern. High turnover disrupts team cohesion, undermines training effectiveness, constrains menu innovation and threatens brand consistency, especially in a sector already experiencing acute labour shortages. Treating intention to leave as a “*soft*” HR issue risks underestimating its cumulative impact on operational performance and competitive advantage.

Finally, the collaboration with mental health support organisations such as The Burnt Chef Project underscores that mental health is no longer peripheral to workforce strategy but central to it. The prevalence of burnout, psychological distress and crisis-level experiences suggests that without targeted, credible and sustained interventions, particularly around leadership practice, workload regulation and accountability, the sector will continue to lose experienced chefs. Many of these individuals are not simply moving between kitchens, but actively exiting hospitality altogether, representing a significant loss of skill, knowledge and cultural capital.

Taken as a whole, the findings point to an industry at a crossroads: one in which the continuation of traditional kitchen norms increasingly conflicts with the realities of contemporary working lives, societal expectations and the long-term viability of the chef workforce.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This study confirms that chefs' intention to leave their jobs, and often the profession, is pervasive, intense and rooted in lived experience of overwork, mismanagement and lack of support.

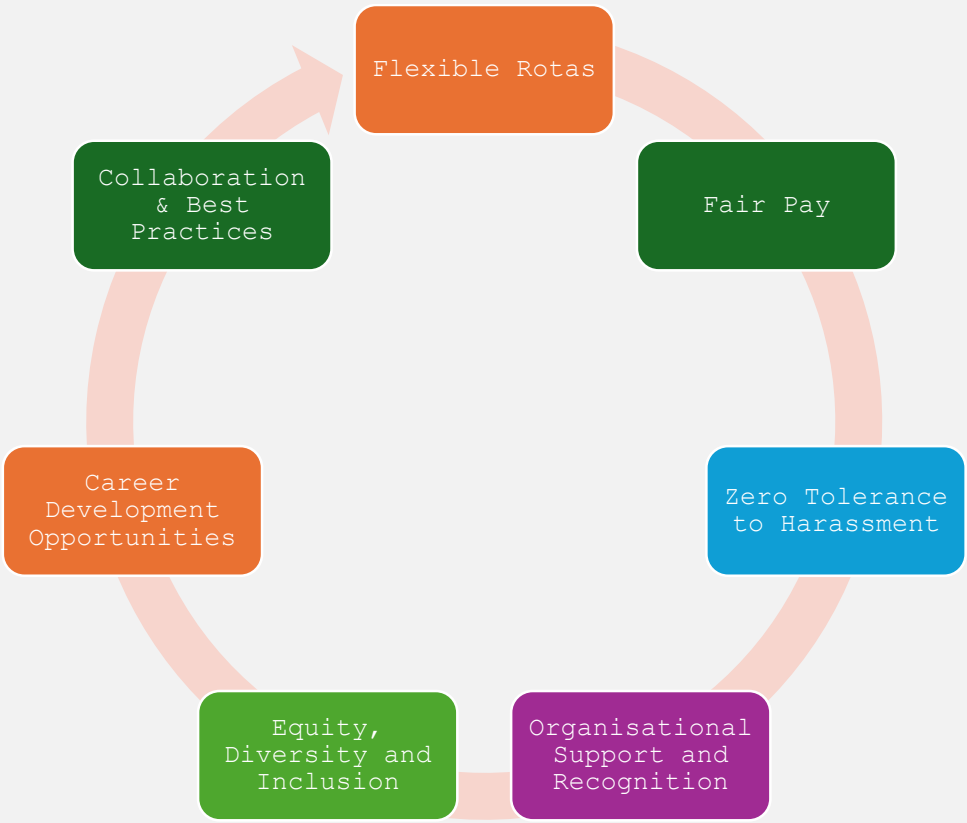
The findings challenge the idea that the problem can be solved by "toughening up" individuals or offering token wellbeing initiatives. Instead, they point to the need for structural changes in how kitchens are staffed, scheduled, managed and rewarded.

Crucially, the data also show that change is possible. Examples from respondents include workplaces that have improved work–life balance through smarter rotas, paid closures, better staffing ratios and genuinely supportive leadership. The choice facing the industry is therefore stark: transform the way we work with chefs or continue to bleed talent.

7.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at owners, operators, HR leaders and industry bodies.

Figure 9: How to reduce chefs' intention to leave



1. Redesign rota patterns and staffing models:

- Move away from normalising 60–80 hour weeks and double shifts.
- Implement clear caps on weekly hours, with genuine rest days and predictable schedules.
- Invest in adequate staffing levels to reduce reliance on “heroic” overtime.
- Monitor and act on work–family conflict indicators as leading predictors of turnover.

2. Eliminate unpaid overtime and ensure fair pay:

- Conduct pay and hours audits to identify unpaid labour and potential wage theft.
- Introduce transparent overtime policies and pay for all hours worked.
- Benchmark chef pay against other skilled trades to ensure competitiveness, particularly for senior roles.

3. Build psychologically safe, zero-tolerance cultures:

- Adopt a zero-tolerance stance on bullying, harassment and discriminatory behaviour, regardless of a chef’s seniority or reputation.
- Train managers and head chefs in modern people-leadership skills, including coaching, feedback, conflict resolution and mental-health awareness.
- Create confidential reporting channels and ensure visible consequences when standards are breached.

4. Strengthen organisational support and recognition:

- Regularly recognise chefs’ contributions through meaningful feedback and appreciation, not just critique.
- Involve kitchen teams in decisions on menu changes, equipment investments and service models.
- Provide access to mental-health support, including partnerships with organisations like The Burnt Chef Project.

5. Address equity, diversity and inclusion:

- Implement targeted measures to tackle sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination, including training and clear disciplinary policies.
- Develop specific policies around menstrual health and chronic conditions, ensuring women and others affected can work without stigma or penalty.
- Ensure migrant and agency workers are protected from exploitation and have transparent routes to progression.

6. Create real career paths and development opportunities

- Map clear progression pathways from junior roles to senior leadership, with structured training and mentoring.
- Offer alternative career routes (e.g. product development, education, operations) to retain experienced chefs who no longer wish to work full service.
- Support entrepreneurial chefs with business skills training and, where possible, incubation arrangements.

7. Collaborate and share best practice

- Use industry bodies and networks to showcase operators who have successfully reduced hours, improved retention and maintained profitability.
- Work with mental-health experts and projects such as The Burnt Chef Project to co-design interventions and evaluate their impact over time.

Final note

This report is based on a rich dataset generated through the trust chefs place in The Burnt Chef Project and our research team. It gives voice to hundreds of professionals who want to keep cooking, but not at any cost.

For operators willing to listen, the message is both challenging and hopeful: when we treat chefs as skilled professionals and human beings, they are more likely to stay, grow and lead the kitchens of the future.

Source: https://stock.adobe.com [File #:1690615908], by Rifqi. © Adobe Stock

References

Baum, T. (2019). Does the hospitality industry need or deserve talent?. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 31(10), 3823-3837.

Burnt Chef Project. (2020). *Mental Health Survey Report*. The Burnt Chef Project. Available at: https://www.theburntchefproject.com/learnmore/mental-health-survey

CIPD. (2025). *Health and wellbeing at work*. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/health-well-being-work/

Cooper, C. (2019). *Wellbeing at Work: How to Design, Implement and Evaluate an Effective Strategy.* CIPD & Kogan Page.

Cooper, J., Giousmpasoglou, C., & Marinakou, E. (2017). Occupational identity and culture: the case of Michelin-starred chefs. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 29(5), 1362-1379. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-02-2016-0071

Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(3), 500.

Fine, G. A. (2009). *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work*. University of California Press.

Giousmpasoglou, C., Marinakou, E., & Cooper, J. (2018). “Banter, bollockings and beatings” The occupational socialisation process in Michelin-starred kitchen brigades in Great Britain and Ireland. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 30(3), 1882-1902. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-01-2017-0030

Giousmpasoglou, C., Marinakou, E., Papavasileiou, E., & Hall, K. (2025a). *Front Line Employees’ Emotional Exhaustion in UK’s Fine Dining Restaurants*. Bournemouth University. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18746/4ktp-pb34

Giousmpasoglou, C., Marinakou, E., Papavasileiou, E., & Hall, K. (2025b). *The imposter syndrome among chefs: A global survey* (pp. 1-20). Bournemouth University. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18746/kfqw-dx66

Giousmpasoglou, C., Marinakou, E., Zopiatis, A., & Cooper, J. (2022). *Managing people in commercial kitchens: A contemporary approach*. Routledge.

Griffeth, R. W., Hom, P. W., & Gaertner, S. (2000). A meta-analysis of antecedents and correlates of employee turnover. *Journal of Management*, 26(3), 463-488. https://doi.org/10.1177/014920630002600305

Hoel, H., & Einarsen, S. (2003). *Violence and stress at work in the hospitality industry*. International Labour Office. Available at: https://researchrepository.ilo.org/esploro/outputs/encyclopediaEntry/Violence-at-work-in-hotels-catering/995328404402676

Karatepe, O. M., & Uludag, O. (2008). Role stress, burnout and their effects on frontline hotel employees' job performance: evidence from Northern Cyprus. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 10(2), 111-126. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.645

Moore UK (2024). Addressing labour shortages in the hospitality sector. Available at: https://www.moore.co.uk/insights/addressing-labour-shortages-in-the-hospitality-sector/

Netemeyer, R. G., Boles, J. S., & McMurrian, R. (1996). Development and validation of work–family conflict and family–work conflict scales. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81(4), 400-410.

Rubenstein, A.L., Eberly, M.B., Lee, T.W., & Mitchell, T.R. (2018). Surveying the forest: A meta-analysis, moderator investigation, and future-oriented discussion of the antecedents of voluntary employee turnover. *Personnel Psychology*, 71(1), 23-65. https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12226

Sonnentag, S. (2018). The recovery paradox: Portraying the complex interplay between job stressors, lack of recovery, and poor well-being. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 38, 169-185. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2018.11.002

Tett, R. P., & Meyer, J. P. (1993). Job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intention, and turnover: path analyses based on meta-analytic findings. Personnel psychology, 46(2), 259-293. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1993.tb00874.x

UKHospitality (2022). *Workforce Strategy 2022*. UKHospitality. Available at: https://www.ukhospitality.org.uk/work/hospitality-workforce-strategy/

Wong, A. K. F., Kim, S., Gamor, E., Koseoglu, M. A., & Liu, Y. (2025). Advancing employees' mental health and psychological well-being research in hospitality and tourism: Systematic review, critical reflections, and future prospects. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research*, 49(5), 1014-1031. https://doi.org/10.1177/10963480241271084

Acknowledgements: This report was made possible with the support of The Burnt Chef Project, who generously assisted in collecting the global online survey data and provided the accompanying artwork. Their collaboration was invaluable in shaping the insights presented in this report.

Source: https://stock.adobe.com [File #:1541224453], by Karam. © Adobe Stock

Published by Bournemouth University, January 2026

Report DOI: https://doi.org/10.18746/tmds-5v59

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Charalampos (Babis) Giousmpasoglou
Principal Academic in Human Resource Management
Prog. Manager: MSc Int. Hospitality & Tourism Management
Bournemouth University Business School
D120, Dorset House, Talbot Campus, BH12 5BB
t: +44(0)1202 965265
e: cgiousmpasoglou@bournemouth.ac.uk
www.bournemouth.ac.uk

Bournemouth University