

Shaping the Future Kitchen:

Passion, Pressure and the Next Generation of Chefs

June 2026



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01 Executive Summary

The 2026 Nestlé Professional Young Chef Survey captures the voices of 300 young and aspiring chefs aged 18-25 across Australia and New Zealand, offering a grounded view of what drives this generation into professional kitchens and what will keep them there.

This is a generation that chooses hospitality, not one that falls into it. Passion for cooking (75%) and creative expression (46%) are the strongest drivers for entering the industry, while many are also motivated by long-term opportunities such as career progression (34%), business ownership (32%) and the opportunity to work overseas (27%). Commitment is strong, with only 2% of respondents indicating they do not see themselves in hospitality in five years, and venue ownership (39%) and becoming a head chef (22%) are the leading career aspirations.

However, passion alone is not enough to sustain a career. The survey reveals persistent structural pressures that risk undermining retention. Staff shortages, long hours and work-life balance (63%) remain the largest challenge, followed by pay that reflects the workload (30%) and workplace culture (29%). While 63% describe their current working conditions as supportive or balanced, open-ended responses make clear that toxic culture, lack of access to mentorship and unpredictable rosters remain a lived reality. Better pay (63%), improved work-life balance (46%), healthier kitchen culture (37%) and clearer training and career progression (35%) are the strongest levers the industry can pull to retain young talent.

Mentorship continues to shape careers more than any digital platform. Chefs and mentors (64%) are the leading source of inspiration, ahead of social media (56%). This reinforces that personal connections and on-the-job learning remain powerful influences on young chefs' development. At the same time, this cohort is forward looking, with 78% already using AI in some capacity. However, only a minority of young chefs (34%) currently use AI in their work, with most of this usage sitting alongside personal use. They recognise its potential as a practical tool to reduce repetitive tasks, support menu development and enhance training. Sustainability is also a key consideration for young chefs, with reducing food waste being the most practised initiative today (72%) and the top sustainability priority for the next five years (73%).

The Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award continues to deliver meaningful, lasting impact in directly responding to the industry's biggest pressure points. Nearly 1 in 3 young chefs surveyed (29%) have competed, with more than 60% gaining increased confidence and motivation (61%) and improved cooking and kitchen skills (60%). Participants also highlight learning to perform under pressure (52%), mentorship from experienced chefs (51%) and new friendships and industry connections (48%) as key

takeaways, reinforcing the competition's role in building the skills and networks that shape long-term careers.

Nestlé Professional holds a strong and trusted position with competition alumni.

Among participants in the Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award, 95% currently use Nestlé Professional products and 90% are likely to continue using them in the future. MAGGI Professional is the leading brand (63%), followed by Nestlé DOCELLO (51%), Nestlé Baking Chocolate (45%) and NESCAFÉ (43%). Quality, consistency, trust and convenience remain the key drivers of future usage, with young chefs valuing products that deliver reliable results and operational efficiency in demanding kitchen environments.

Together, these findings point to a clear opportunity for Nestlé Professional to deepen its role as a trusted partner to the next generation of chefs, championing the causes that matter most, and continuing to invest in the products, platforms and programs that already resonate.



02 Survey Methodology



Fieldwork period

13 April – 1 May 2026



Target Audience

Young chefs & apprentice chefs aged 18–25



Geography

Australia and New Zealand



Methodology

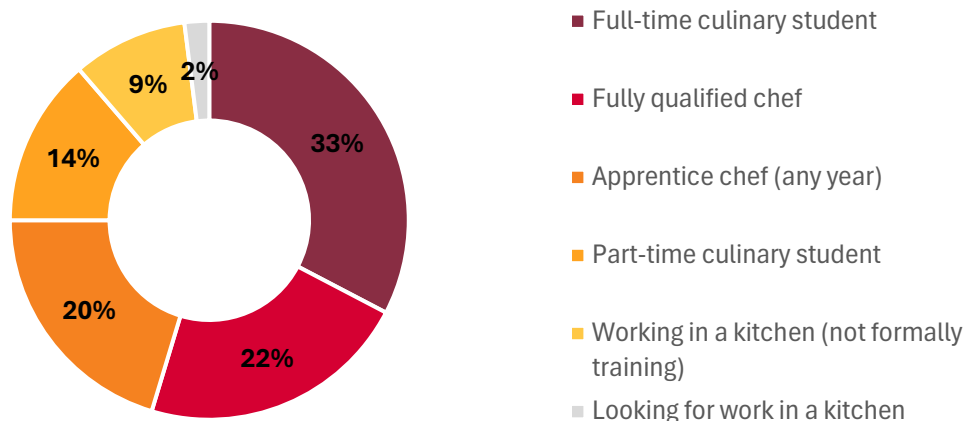
Online Survey, conducted by Nestlé Professional, n=300 valid responses

03 A Committed Generation

Who young chefs are

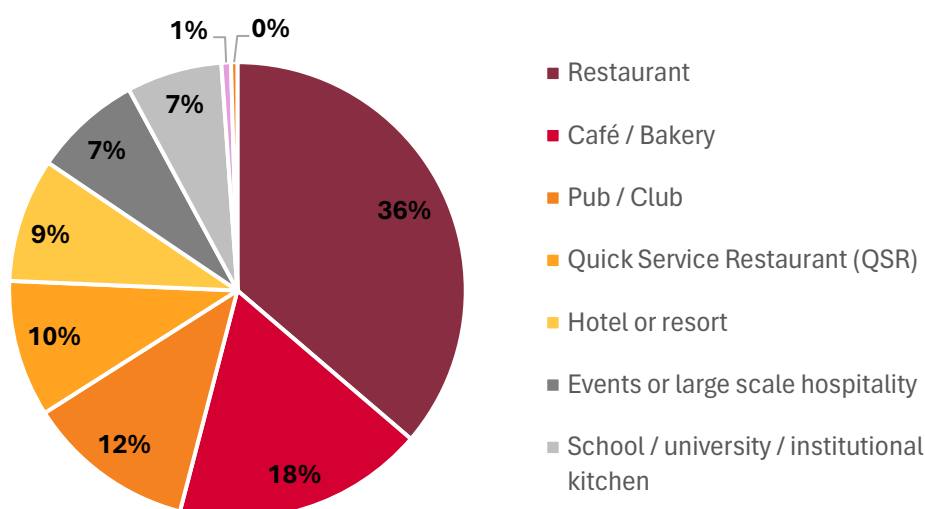
The sample provides a strong view of the early-career hospitality pipeline across Australia and New Zealand. Respondents span students, apprentices and qualified chefs, with full-time culinary students making up the largest group, followed by fully qualified chefs and apprentices. Most are currently working in restaurant environments, with café/bakery, pub/club and quick service venues also well represented. Together, this mix gives the study a balanced perspective across emerging talent and young chefs already building careers in professional kitchens.

Current Employment



Q4 Which best describes your current status n=300

Venue Type

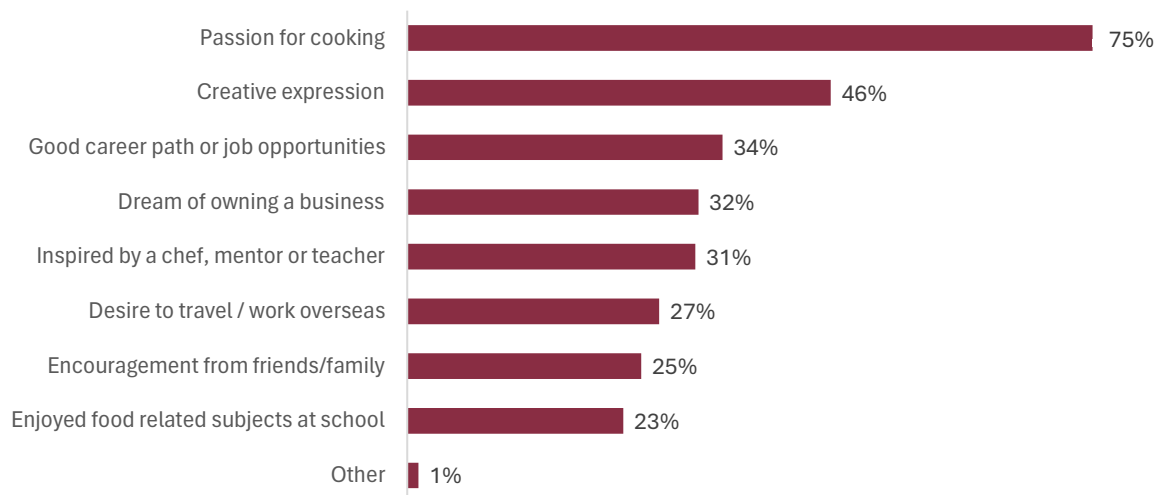


Q5 What type of venue do you currently work in most often? (Select up to two). n=444 responses

Why they choose hospitality

Young chefs are entering hospitality by choice, driven by genuine passion for the craft and a desire to grow. A love of cooking and creative expression stand out as the strongest motivators, supported by long-term ambitions around career progression, business ownership and the opportunity to travel.

Why did you choose to work in a professional kitchen?



Q6 Why did you choose to work in a professional kitchen? Please select all that apply. n=300

KEY INSIGHT

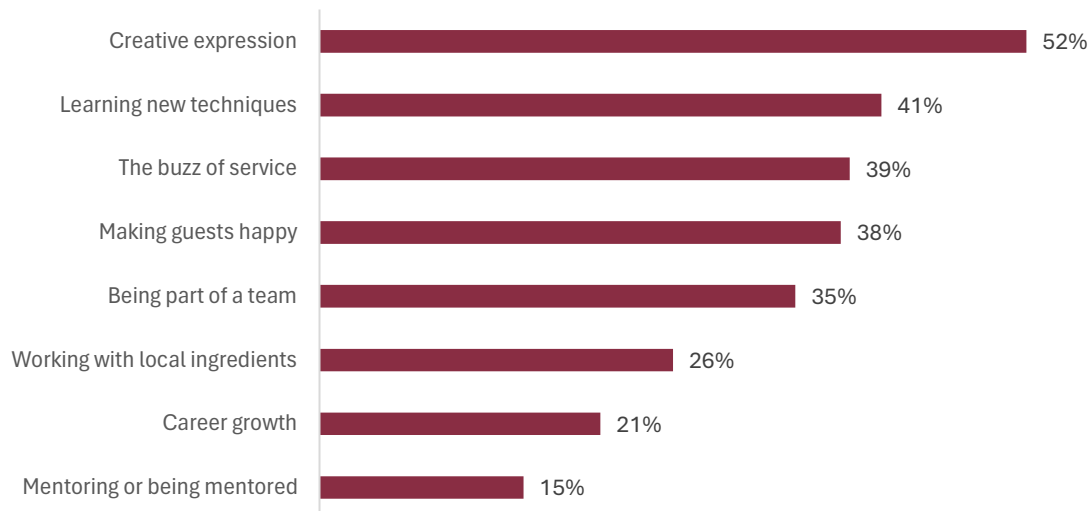
The strongest drivers for working in the industry are personal passion and creativity, with 75% citing a passion for cooking and 46% creative expression. Respondents are entering professional kitchens because they genuinely enjoy cooking and see it as a creative outlet, showing that intrinsic motivation is at the heart of career choice.

Respondents are also motivated by the long-term opportunities the industry can offer, including good career prospects (34%), the dream of owning a business (32%), and the desire to travel or work overseas (27%), suggesting that individuals in the industry are committed and view hospitality as an evolving career path.

04 Passion Meets Pressure

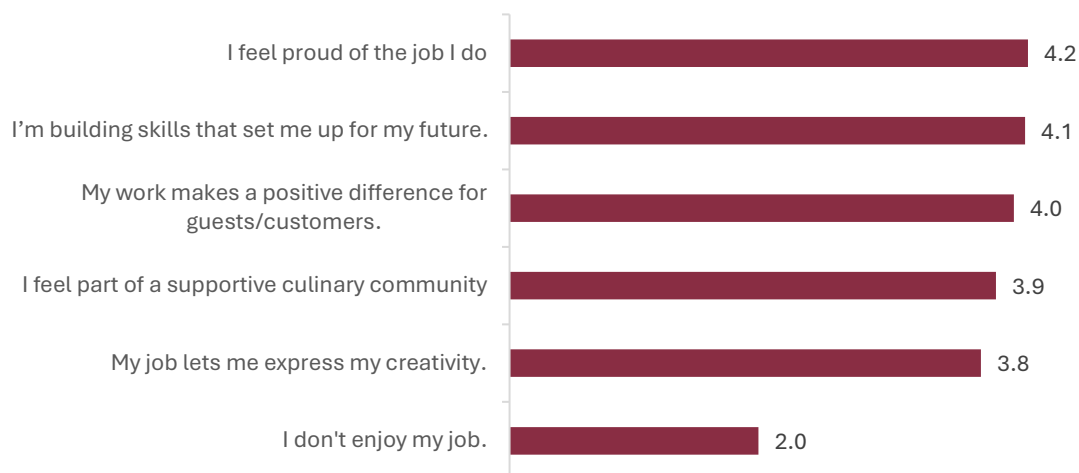
What they love about the industry

What do you enjoy most about working in a professional kitchen?



Q7 What do you enjoy most about working in a professional kitchen? Please select at most 3 options. n=300

How much do you agree with the following statements?

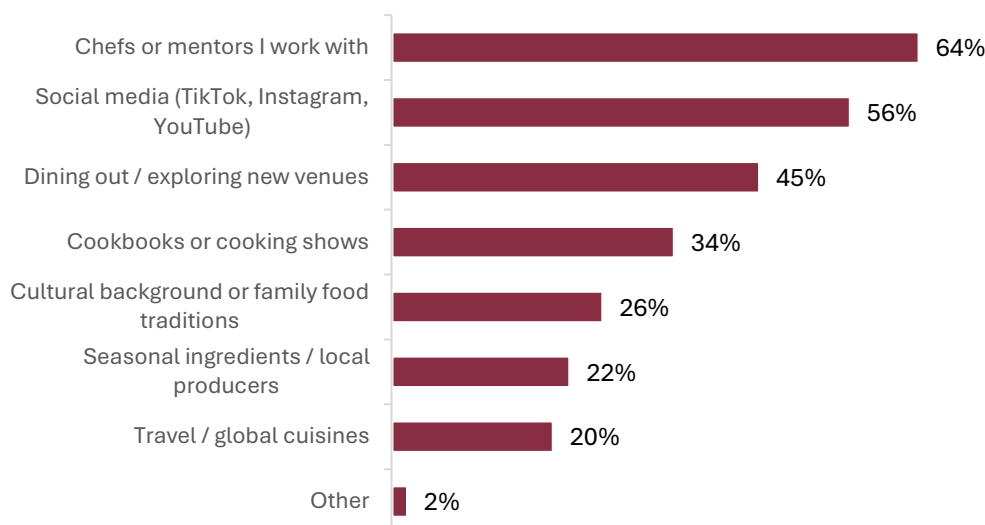


Q8 How much do you agree with the following statements? n=300

KEY INSIGHT

Young chefs are highly engaged and purpose-driven, with strong pride in their work (4.2) and confidence in the skills they are building for the future (4.1). This is reinforced by what they enjoy most in the kitchen: creative expression (52%), learning new techniques (41%) and the buzz of service (39%). Together, these results show that young chefs are not simply working in the industry but are deeply invested in it, motivated by growth, creativity and the opportunity to make a meaningful impact, signalling strong long-term career commitment.

Where do you get inspiration for food and cooking?



Q9. Where do you get inspiration for food and cooking? Please select at most 3 options. n=300

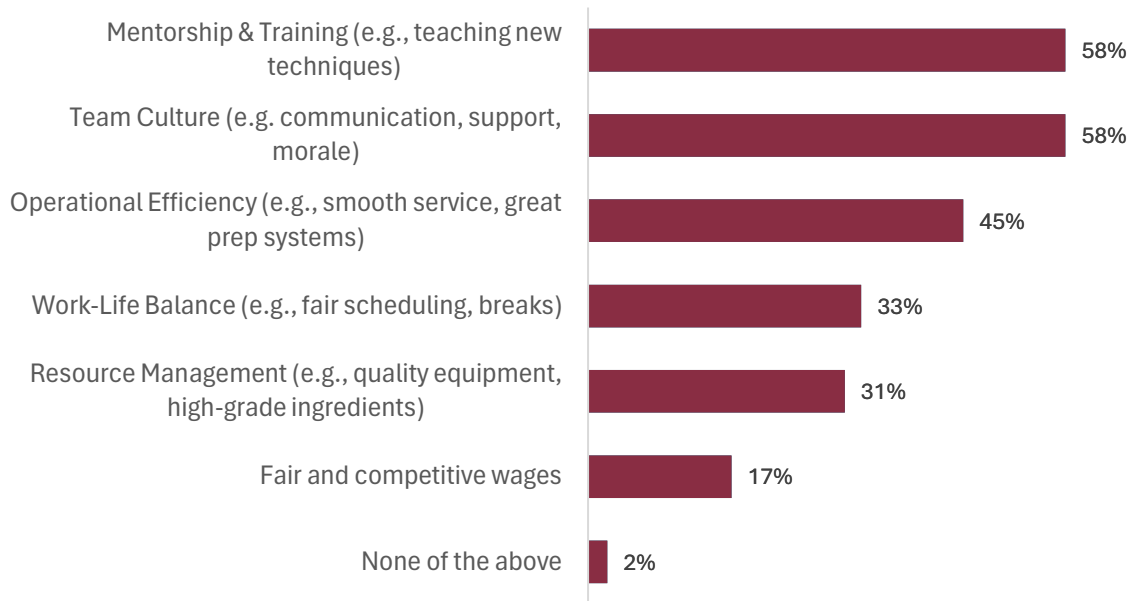
KEY INSIGHT

Respondents primarily draw inspiration from more traditional influences such as professional chefs and mentors (64%) and family and cultural food traditions (26%), while social media plays a significant supporting role (56%). This reinforces the continued importance of mentorship, on-the-job learning and personal connections as highly influential forces shaping young chefs' development.

The reality of kitchen life

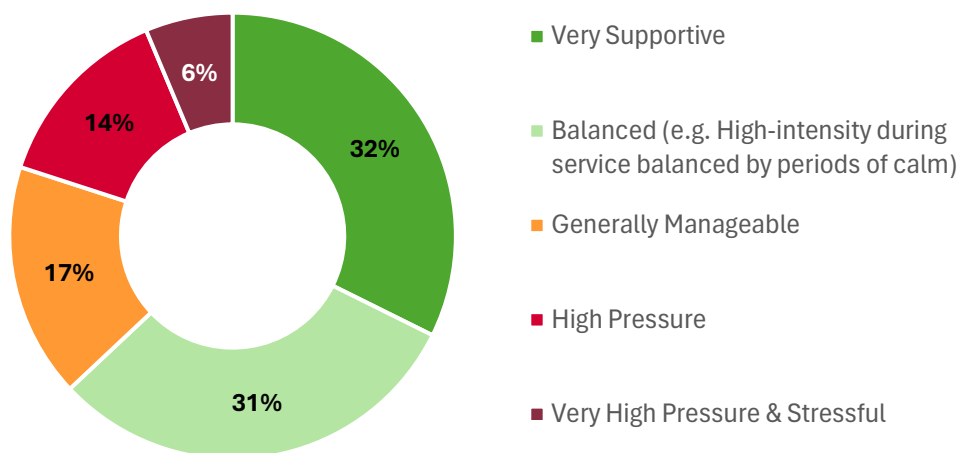
Young chefs see genuine positives in professional kitchen life, particularly where workplaces foster pride in output, strong teamwork, skill development and a positive customer experience. At the same time, the data points to clear and persistent tensions. Staff shortages, long hours, work-life balance, pay and workplace culture remain the most common pain points, and open-ended responses show these issues are often felt deeply in day-to-day working life. The overall picture is one of an industry that continues to inspire, but where the experience of work must become more sustainable, respectful and supportive if young talent is to stay.

Workplace Strengths



Q10. In which of the following areas does your current (or past) workplace most excel? Please select all that apply. n=300

Current working conditions



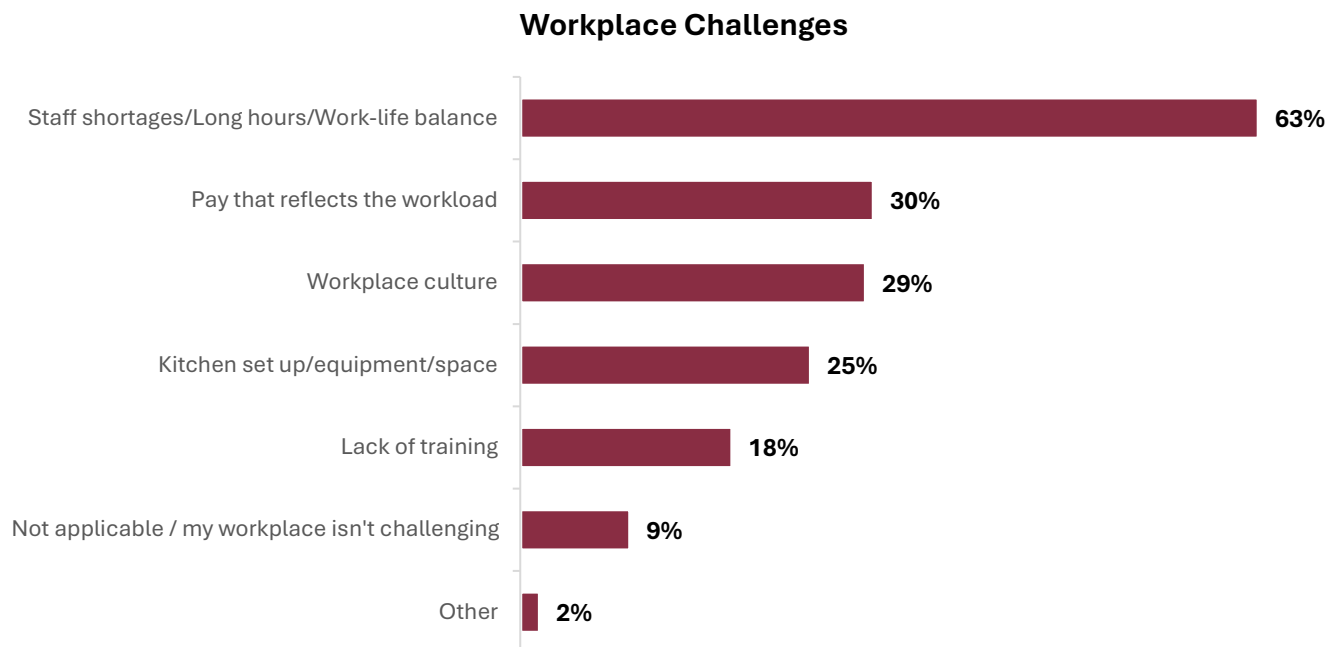
Q11. How would you describe working conditions in your current or most recent kitchen? Please select all that apply. n=300

KEY INSIGHT

Working conditions are generally viewed positively, with 63% describing them as ‘Very Supportive’ or ‘Balanced’, but significant challenges remain. Staff shortages, long hours, and pay are the biggest pressure points highlighting that operational strain continues to shape the kitchen experience. (See section 5).

05 The Reality of Staying in Hospitality

Key challenges and pressure points

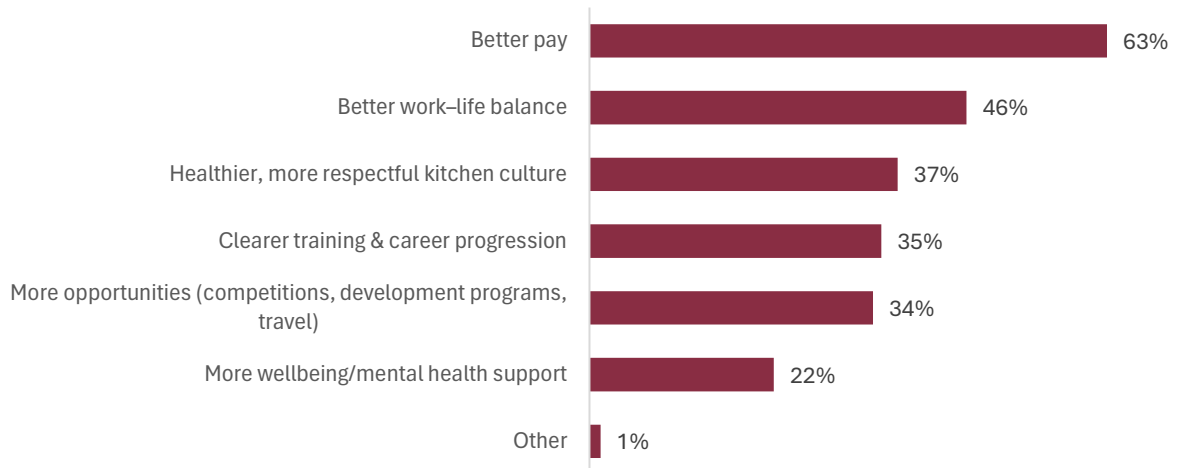


Q12. What makes your workplace challenging? Please select all that apply. n=300

What needs to change

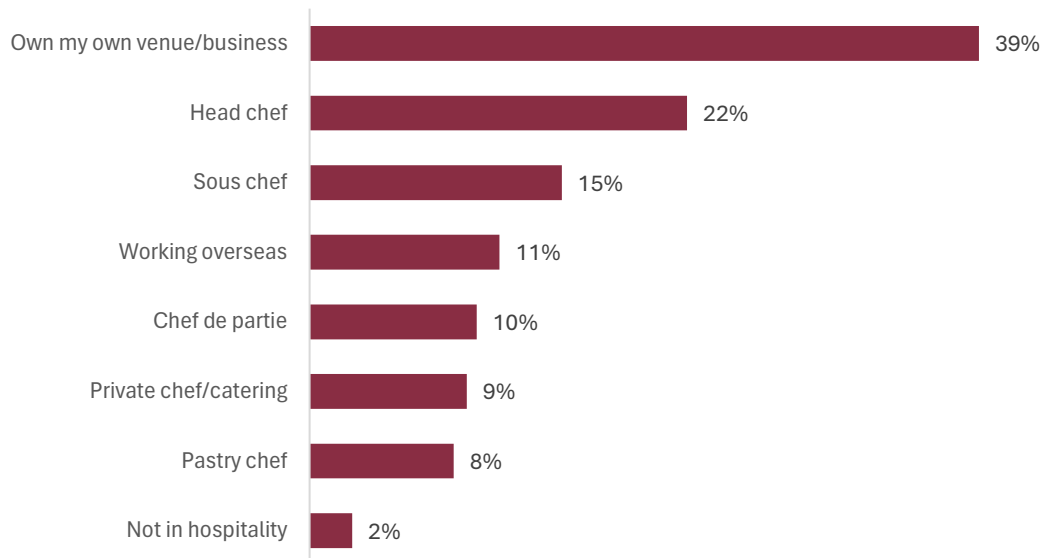
Young chefs remain highly ambitious about their future in hospitality, with many aspiring to become head chefs or own their own business within five years. However, the conditions required to sustain that ambition are clear. Better pay stands out as the strongest factor influencing long-term retention, followed by improved work-life balance, healthier kitchen culture and clearer training and career progression. Together, these findings show that young talent is not turning away from hospitality as a profession, but is asking for a version of the industry that feels more sustainable, better supported and more viable as a long-term career.

Key Retention Factors



Q13. What would make you more likely to stay in your job long-term? Please select all that apply. n=300

Career Aspirations in 5 years

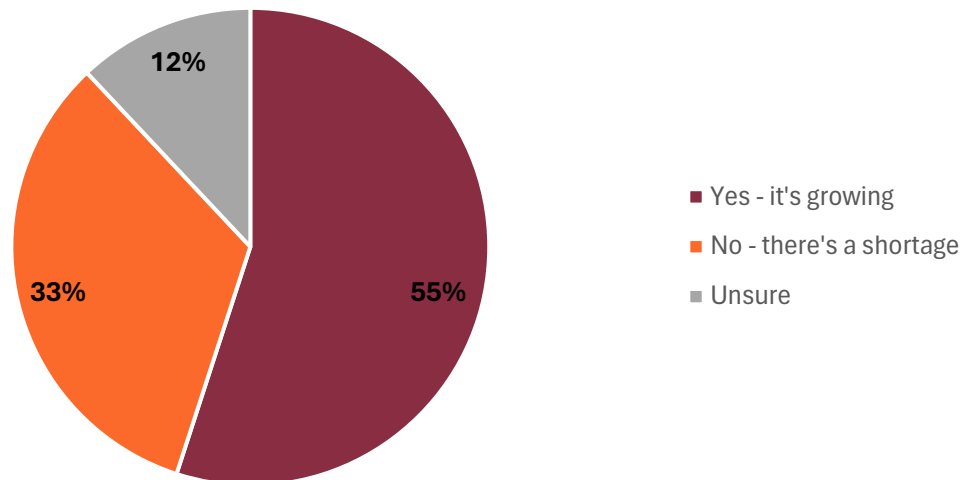


Q14. Where do you hope to be in five years? Please select at most 2 options. n=300

KEY INSIGHT

Only 2% of respondents indicate they do not see themselves in hospitality, suggesting young chefs have strong intent to stay in the industry in the medium term.

Young People in Industry

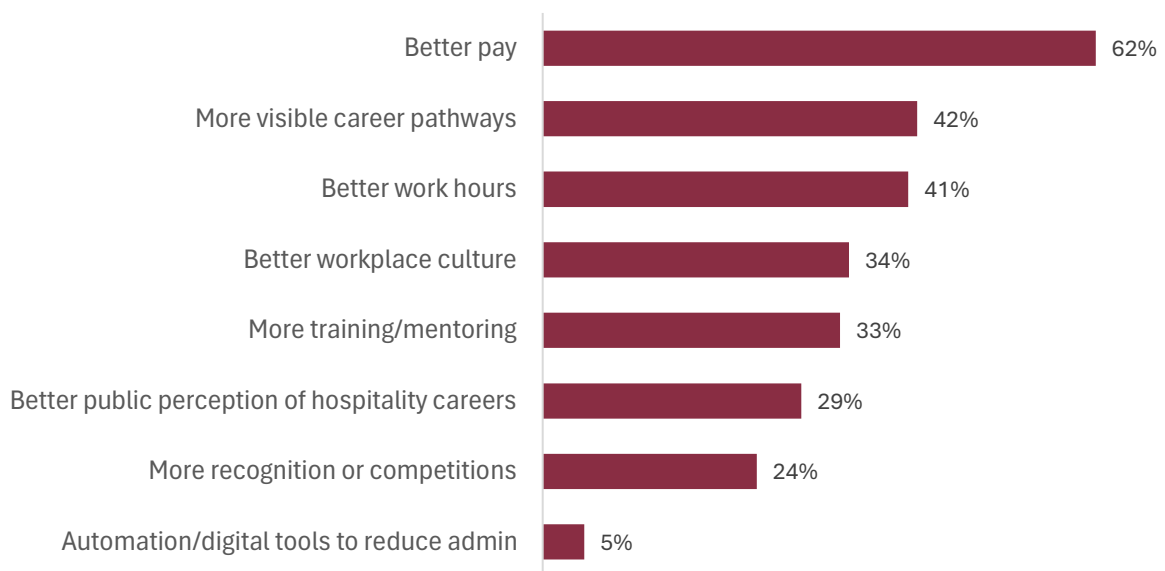


Q15. Do you think the industry is attracting enough young people? n=300

KEY INSIGHT

While over half of respondents (55%) see growth in young talent, one-third (33%) still perceive a shortage, indicating an ongoing gap in attracting and retaining young people in the industry.

What would help attract more young chefs?



Q16. What do you think would help attract more young chefs like you to the industry? Please select at most 3 options. n=300

The open-ended responses provide additional context, making it clear that these challenges are experienced day-to-day in the kitchen.

Across responses, five themes emerge consistently: fairer pay, better work-life balance, healthier workplace culture, stronger mentorship and clearer career pathways. These comments reinforce that while passion for the profession remains strong, long-term commitment depends on whether young chefs feel respected, supported and able to build a future in the industry.

Q17. If you could change one thing about working in hospitality right now, what would it be?

1) Work-life balance, long hours and burnout (29%)

Examples of verbatim:

- *“I would improve the work life balance by reducing excessive hours and making rosters more predictable.”*
- *“The ridiculous split shifts and 6-day work weeks during peak season.”*
- *“The early starts are brutal. Getting up at 2:30am to laminate pastry means you literally have no social life during the week.”*
- *“Split shifts need to go. Working lunch, sitting around for three hours doing nothing, and then working dinner ruins your entire day.”*
- *“One guaranteed 48-hour break weekly to actually recover from burns and fatigue.”*
- *“Better work-life balance. The long hours and constant pressure can be exhausting.”*

2) Better pay and fair compensation (17%)

Examples of verbatim:

- *“That would be increasing pay to better reflect the skill, pressure and long hours that come with working in hospitality.”*
- *“...apprentice wages. I literally have to work a second job on my days off just to afford rent in Sydney.”*
- *“I would increase wages so staff can actually keep up with the cost of living.”*
- *“Penalty rates. The club makes a fortune on weekends and public holidays, and the kitchen staff gets hammered without seeing enough of that profit in our paychecks.”*

3) Toxic kitchen culture, bullying and respect (13%)

Examples of verbatim:

- *“The mentality that yelling and screaming makes you a better chef.”*
- *“The toxic old-school kitchen mentality.”*
- *“The expectation and hierarchy of beginner chefs and the way that they speak to each other (degrading tones).”*
- *“Less workplace bullying.”*
- *“The toxic environments some people have to deal with.”*

- *“I would change the workplace culture so every level of cook and kitchen hand is respected.”*
- *“Shifting kitchen culture away from this old ‘tough love’ mentality toward one based on mutual respect, clear communication, and mental wellbeing.”*

4) Better training, mentorship and support for young chefs (12%)

Examples of verbatim:

- *“I would invest more in training and mentorship so junior staff feel supported and can develop faster.”*
- *“More venues need to actually invest in their apprentices rather than just treating them as cheap dishwashers.”*
- *“It’s really hard to find a mentor when you’re just a part-timer flipping burgers.”*
- *“Make head chefs actually teach apprentices instead of just using us to peel potatoes for 8 hours a day.”*
- *“Real mentorship over ego—less yelling, more teaching. We want to learn, not just survive service.”*
- *“It would be better if the older generation of chefs open up and teach us the new generation of chefs the skills and techniques.”*

5) Clearer career pathways and growth opportunities (3%)

Examples of verbatim:

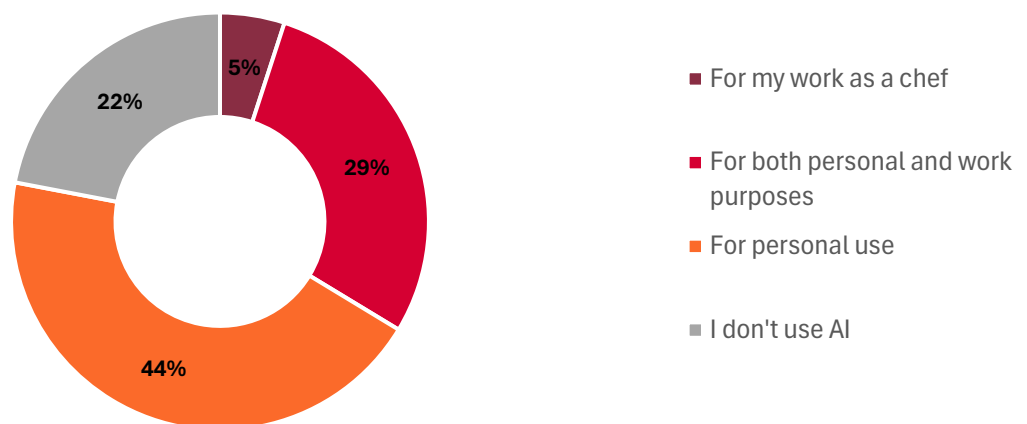
- *“I would provide clearer career pathways so young chefs can see real long-term growth in the industry.”*
- *“The ability for upward growth and recognition.”*
- *“The lack of growth opportunities. It’s so hard to find work as a young chef and even harder to grow within your work.”*
- *“I would provide better training and clearer career pathways for young chefs.”*
- *“I just think the career pathways and the recognition of the industry needs to improve.”*
- *“Career growth regardless of your age, ethnicity, and based on what and how you get things done.”*

06 The Future of the Industry

AI and evolving kitchen roles

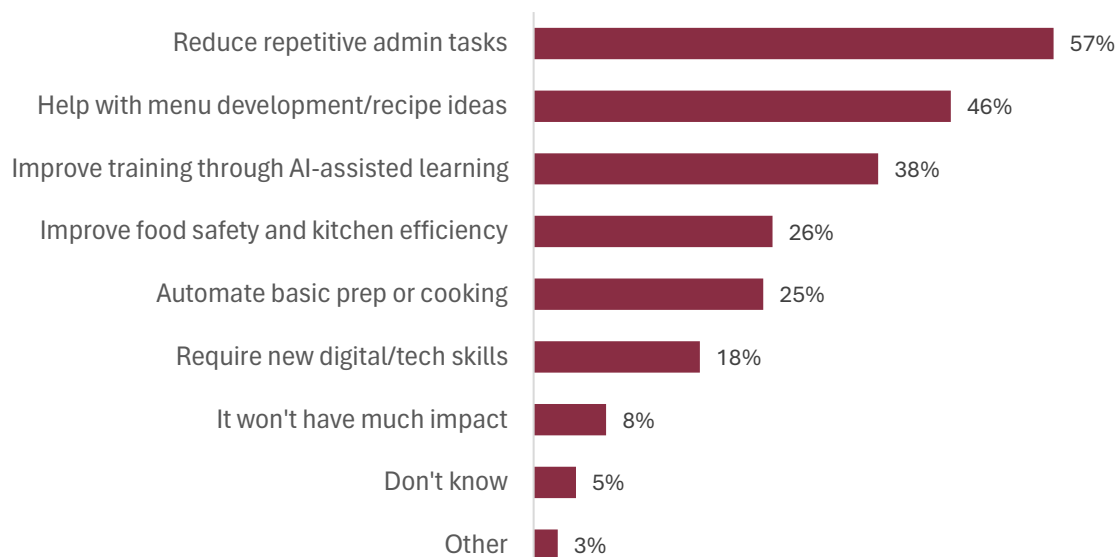
Young chefs are already engaging with the future of the industry in practical ways. AI is emerging less as a disruptive threat and more as a useful support tool, particularly where it can help reduce repetitive tasks, support idea generation and improve efficiency in busy kitchen environments.

AI Usage



Q18. Do you currently use AI? n=300

AI Impact

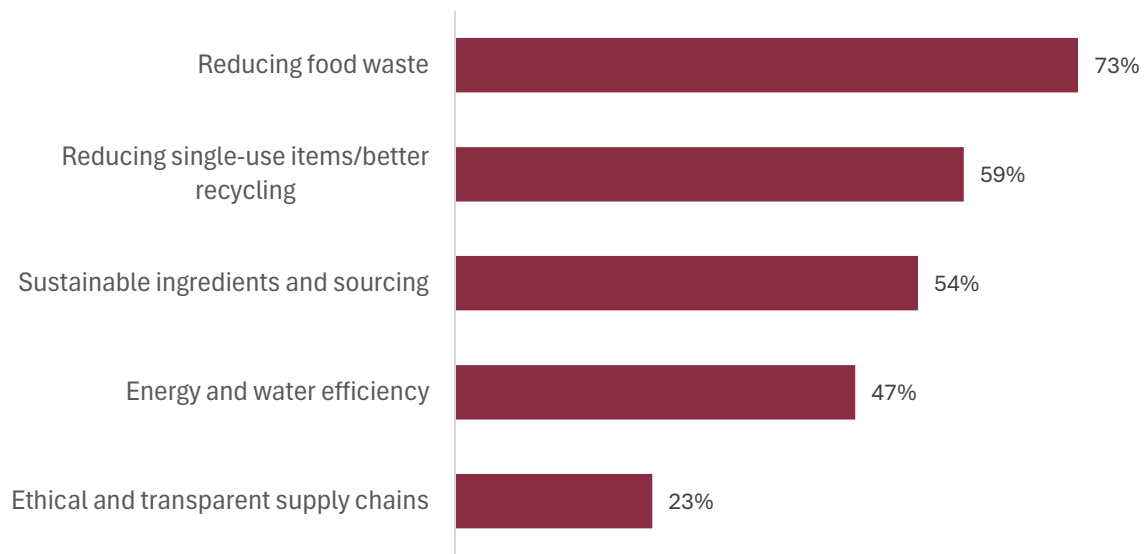


Q19. How do you think AI will impact your role as a chef in the next 5 years? Please select all that apply. n=300

Sustainability priorities

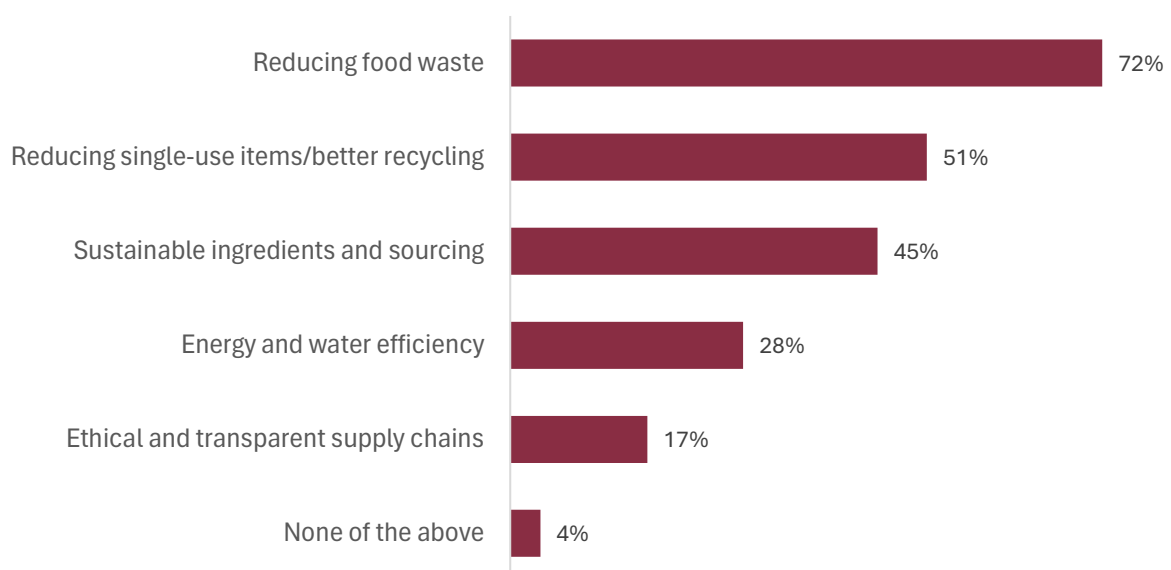
Sustainability is also becoming embedded in everyday practice, with food waste reduction, more conscious resource use and improved operational habits already visible in many workplaces. Together, these findings suggest that the next generation expects hospitality to evolve in ways that are both smarter and more responsible, without losing the craft and creativity at the heart of the profession.

Which sustainability issues matter most to you?



Q20. Over the next 5 years, which sustainability areas will matter most in professional kitchens? Please select at most 3 options. n=300

Sustainability Practices



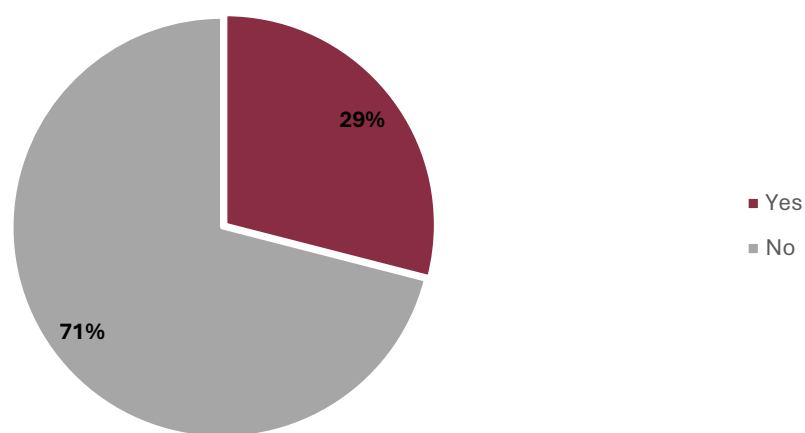
Q21. Which of these are you actively doing today in your workplace? Please select all that apply. n=300

07 Closing the Gap: Developing Talent

The impact of the Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award

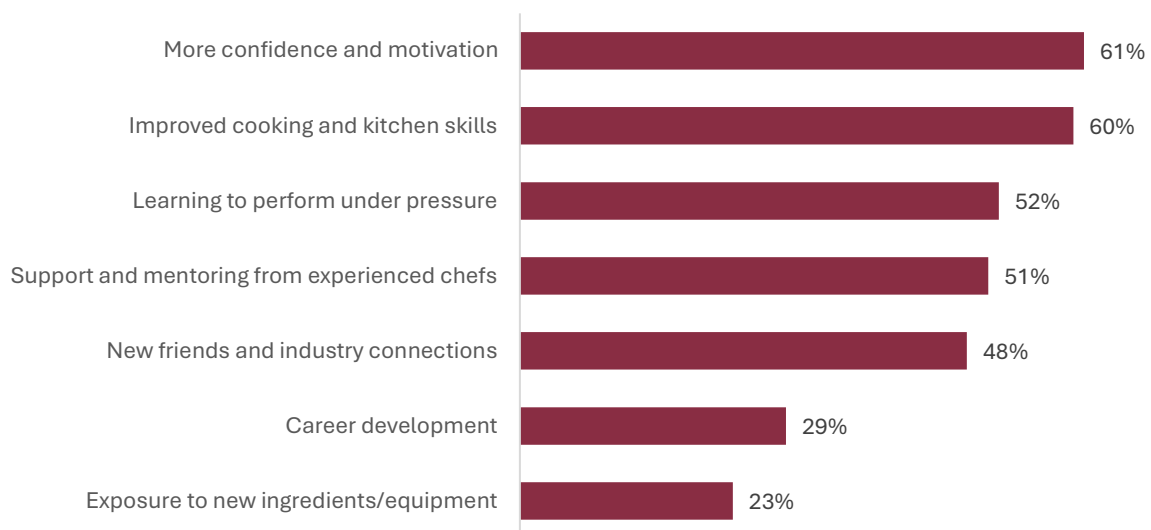
In an industry facing workforce shortages, demanding conditions and need for genuine mentoring opportunities, the Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award plays a vital role in nurturing the next generation of chefs, building the skills, confidence and industry connections needed to support long-term careers.

Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award Participation



Q22. Have you previously competed in the Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award? n=300

Value gained from participation in Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award



Q23. What were the most valuable things you gained from taking part? Please select all that apply. n=87

The Nestlé Golden Chef Award has clearly made a positive impact on participants in the industry and offers career development beyond the competition itself, with more than 60% gaining increased confidence and motivation (61%) and improved cooking and kitchen skills (60%). Participation primarily delivers confidence and skill development, with strong value placed on learning to perform under pressure (52%), mentorship (51%), and networking (48%).



Q24. Describe the Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award in three words. n=87

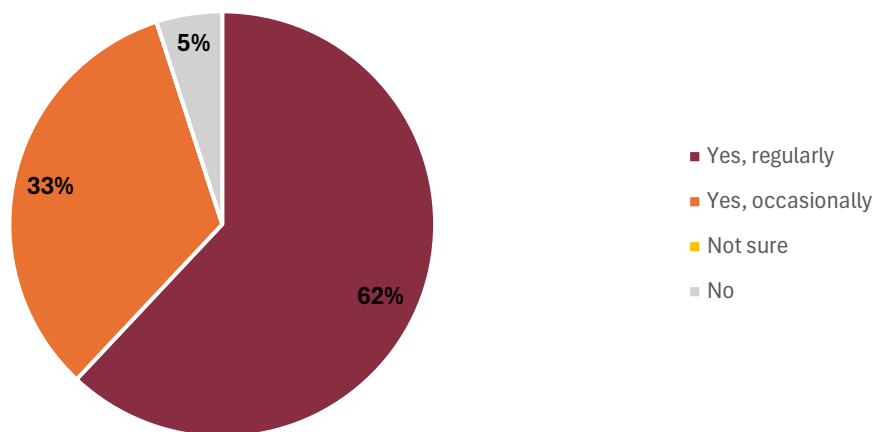


08 Nestlé Professional's Role in Supporting the Next Generation

Nestlé Professional plays a meaningful role in helping young chefs navigate the pressures of modern kitchens with products that support consistency, efficiency and creativity in everyday service.

Brand usage and trust

Nestlé Professional Products Usage



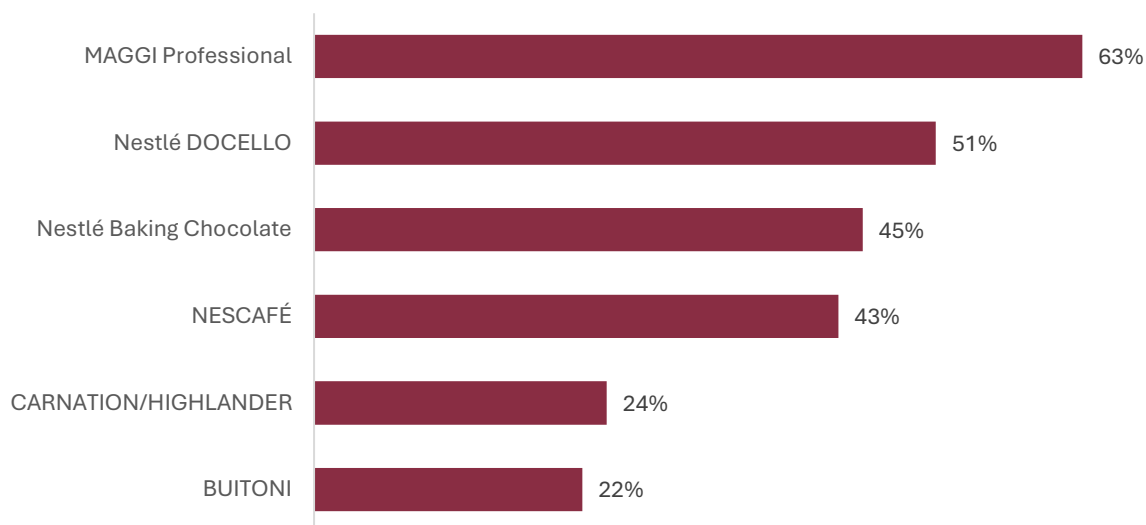
Q25. Do you currently use any Nestlé Professional products? n=87

KEY INSIGHT

Nestlé Professional products are deeply embedded in the kitchens of Nestlé's Golden Chef's Hat Award participants, with 95% reporting current product usage, including 62% using them regularly. This high level of adoption demonstrates the program's ability to build familiarity, trust and ongoing brand relevance among emerging culinary talent.



Nestlé Professional products used

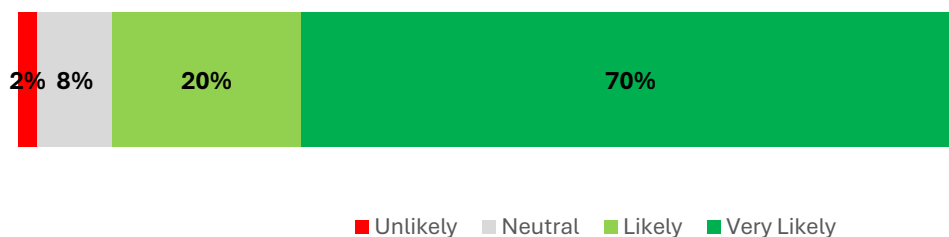


Q26. If yes, which brands do you use? Please select all that apply. n=83

KEY INSIGHT

Amongst Golden Chef alumni, MAGGI Professional is the leading brand, while a strong second tier of brands (NESCAFÉ, Nestlé Docello and Nestlé Baking Chocolate) deliver strong but differentiated usage, highlighting breadth and depth across the portfolio.

Likelihood to Use Nestlé Professional Products in Future



■ Unlikely ■ Neutral ■ Likely ■ Very Likely

Q27 How likely are you to use Nestlé Professional products in the future? n=87

KEY INSIGHT

Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award participants demonstrate exceptionally strong future intent toward the Nestlé Professional portfolio, with 90% likely to use Nestlé Professional products in the future, including 70% who are very likely. This overwhelmingly positive sentiment highlights the lasting impact of the competition in building brand affinity and reinforcing the relevance of Nestlé Professional products throughout participants' culinary careers.

28) Why or Why Not?

WHY

1) Quality, reliability & consistency (25%)

Example verbatim:

- *“Reliable, high quality, with a wide product range that supports consistency.”*
- *“Reliable, cost-effective, and helps maintain consistency in professional kitchens.”*
- *“Consistent, reliable quality.”*
- *“The products provide consistent quality and operational efficiency, which is essential during high-pressure services when consistency across the team is key.”*
- *“Because their products are consistent, reliable, and designed specifically for professional kitchens, which makes them practical and efficient to use in a fast-paced hospitality environment.”*

2) Trust, professional endorsement & brand support (21%)

Example verbatim:

- *“Trusted by culinary schools.”*
- *“Widely used in Aussie venues.”*
- *“Trusted Aussie industry standard.”*
- *“Loved by head chefs.”*
- *“I love the support they have under young chefs like myself and I want to continue to support that.”*

3) Convenience, ease of use & kitchen efficiency (16%)

Example verbatim:

- *“Simplifies kitchen workflow.”*
- *“Saves busy prep time.”*
- *“As a chef, consistency and efficiency matter a lot in a professional kitchen... They save time during prep.”*
- *“Because the products are reliable, easy to use... They also save time during prep, which is important in a fast-paced environment.”*
- *“They are easily accessible and convenient for large scale operations.”*
- *“Accessible, quality products, simple and made easy to use.”*

4) Variety, versatility & menu flexibility (15%)

Example verbatim:

- *“I really enjoy using Nestlé Professional products as they have so much variety and can be used as kitchen staples.”*
- *“Variety of products and easy use in kitchens and menus as they can be changed to preference.”*
- *“Versatile for all dishes.”*
- *“The compound chocolate is great for a number of things and we use it very regularly in our workplace! Very diverse!”*

5) Value for money & affordability (11%)

Example verbatim:

- “Low cost.”
- “Cost-effective for kitchens.”
- “Nestlé is a good brand and affordable.”
- “Good quality products at reasonable prices. Easily accessible through local suppliers.”
- “Because they’re reliable and cost-effective.”
- “They are easily accessible and convenient for large scale operations”

WHY NOT

A small number of respondents indicated they are unlikely to use Nestlé Professional products in the future, primarily reflecting a preference for from-scratch cooking depending on their kitchen environment.

Example verbatim:

- “We make almost everything from scratch.”
- “Most products can be made by hand.”
- “Challenging myself to cook from scratch.”



09 Conclusion: Supporting the Next Generation of Chefs

The 2026 Nestlé Professional Young Chef Survey paints a clear picture of a generation that is passionate, ambitious and committed to building long-term careers in hospitality. They are not falling into the industry - they are choosing it, driven by creativity, craft and the desire to grow.

Yet passion alone will not sustain them. Staff shortages, long hours, inadequate pay and unhealthy kitchen culture remain significant barriers to retention. Young chefs are not turning away from the profession; they are asking for a version of it that feels more sustainable, better supported and more viable as a long-term career. Better pay, improved work-life balance, stronger mentorship and clearer career pathways are the changes the industry must rise to deliver.

This is where Nestlé Professional plays a meaningful role. With 95% of participants in the Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award already using Nestlé Professional products and 90% likely to continue using them in the future, the brand has earned deep trust through consistency, quality, convenience and efficiency. But the relationship extends well beyond products. The Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award continues to deliver real, lasting impact: building confidence, sharpening skills, fostering mentorship and creating the industry connections that shape careers well beyond the competition itself.

In an industry where retention is the greatest challenge and mentorship the greatest source of inspiration, programs like the Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award are not just valuable, they are essential.

By continuing to champion the causes that matter most to young chefs and reinforcing the products, platforms and programs that already resonate, Nestlé Professional is positioned to be more than a trusted supplier. It can be the industry partner that helps the next generation of culinary talent not only enter the kitchen, but thrive in it.





Nestlé Professional

At Nestlé Professional, we offer a diverse portfolio of food and beverage products alongside tailored solutions to help you create better business. Backed by over 160 years of foodservice expertise, we partner with you to deliver the tools and support you need to succeed.

Website:

Product Catalogue: nes.tl/npau-product-catalogue

Contact: 1800 20 30 50 or [Fill Out Form](#)



Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award

The Nestlé Golden Chef's Hat Award is Australia's longest-running culinary competition for young chefs aged 18–24 across Australia and New Zealand. For over 60 years, it has supported emerging talent, helping more than 8,000 young chefs gain experience, industry recognition and the skills to succeed in modern foodservice.

Website: www.goldenchefs.com.au

Contact: golden.chefs@au.nestle.com

