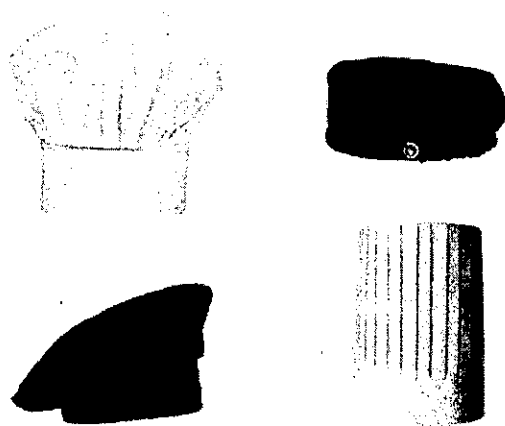


Resource: <http://www.reluctantgourmet.com/chef-hat-history/>

Chef Hat – History & Facts

G. Stephen Jones • June 8, 2010 •



Where Did the Chef Hat Come From?

The great thing about working in a kitchen is the tradition. From the techniques used to prepare dishes to the uniforms chefs wear, everything has a history. It's part of what makes being a cook or being a chef so incredible; when you step behind the line of a kitchen, you are becoming part of a historical tradition that dates back to over 2,000 years ago.

The Beginning

Legend has it that even earlier than seventh century A.D., chefs in Assyria wore crown-like hats that differentiated them from other kitchen help. Why? It seems that kings were being poisoned left and right by indignant chefs, so in order to placate them and make them feel special (thus hopefully eliminating the desire to poison the leader), they were presented with a unique piece of headgear.

Around this same time, chefs spent a great deal of time reading to learn new recipes and techniques. Since so few people at the time could read, chefs were considered learned men. Unfortunately, being smart wasn't "in," and many intellectuals were persecuted. Chefs sought refuge in the Greek Orthodox Church, where they donned the wardrobe of the monks, wearing robes and caps. Those caps later evolved into an early version of the chef hat.

Fact or Fiction?

One tale from Henry the VIII's era said that when King Henry found a hair in his soup, the king, so to speak, lost his head. Or rather, someone else did. The owner of the hair, a cook, was beheaded, and his replacement was politely requested to wear a hat to prevent further issue.

Today, this problem is handled with the much less traditional (and much less glamorous) hairnet. While few cooks embrace the hairnet as a fashion statement, they do go a long way in freeing up a chef from the worry of wayward hairs so he or she can focus on the real star of the show: the food.

Adding a Bit of Fashion

With all the variations of the hats worn by chefs around the world, a little creativity and design was needed to get to the crisp white cloth hats, also known as toques blanches, we're familiar with today. In the 1800s in France, a chef named Marie-Antoine Carême decided that chefs deserved a specific uniform, and white was his color of choice, since it signified cleanliness in the kitchen.

Each station and rank in the kitchen had a different height hat. The chef, being the highest ranking of all kitchen staff, wore the tallest hat, much in the same way that papal hats are used to designate class and standing. Rumor had it that Carême's hat was 18 inches high and had to be reinforced by cardboard to keep it standing.

How Many Pleats Do You Have?

Pleats, too, are steeped in a rich history. Their origin came from the idea that the more experience a chef had, the more pleats his hat had. A pleat could signify a technique or recipe he had mastered.

At one time, a chef had 100 pleats in his hat to signify the 100 ways he knew how to prepare eggs. Chef hats today don't hold so many pleats, but they still signify a chef's level of experience.

Modern Times

Today, the chef hat remains a symbol of authority and knowledge, and few pieces of headgear are as recognizable as the traditional white hat that many chefs today still embrace as their own. While few still wear the traditional cloth hat, due to issues related to air circulation and cleaning, many chefs wear paper versions, nontraditional hats (like baseball caps), or even no hat at all.

Whether or not you wear the chef hat upon graduation from culinary school depends on your personal preference and the rules and regulations of the kitchen you call home. Some Executive Chefs save the traditional toques blanches for those in charge. Others prefer the clean look of a line of cooks all embracing the rich traditions of the kitchen. Regardless of which hat a chef wears, however, one thing remains the same: all chefs deserve the respect of being part of a team.