After 20 years in the business as a cook, I’ve reached a pinnacle of being taken advantage of. I’m paid enough and given enough time off that my personal quality of life is pretty good. But the frustrations at work constantly threaten to topple over into my personal life.

This restaurant – a non-corporate mom & pop – style restaurant – has no Chef, so basically no one with the stated responsibility for and authority over the kitchen.

I’m actually introduced as the head chef when the owners tour their friends around, but to new staff I’m introduced as ‘the guy who knows everything,’ and I have no voice in the management of staff.

Often the owners consult me in private about operations, because they value my opinion and experience. But externally, I’m just like every other cook.

It seems like the owners are insecure about giving up control formally, and acknowledging publicly that someone knows their business ‘better than they do’ . . . even though obviously they have limited/no experience actually cooking (as is often the case). So they in fact don’t have the nuts-and-bolts skill set that is necessary to effectively run a restaurant.

Instead they ‘get that guy to do it’ more or less, and ignore whatever bad outcomes do crop up.

Some initiatives I’ve taken on my own include typing up closing lists, dishwasher cleaning duties, a weekly deep cleaning process, and monthly cleaning schedules.

There are ‘managers’ who are supposed to oversee the entire staff, but they don’t actually accept responsibility for outcomes. The results include dirty floors, full trash cans, a mouse problem that was totally avoidable.

I’m at my wits end, and I’m afraid I’m losing the battle.
This senior cook has been applying his own professional expertise to the job simply as an outgrowth from their years of experience. He’s acting with self-designated responsibility whenever possible, with being allocated any of the RAA attributes by the owners. That is commendable, but without an internal coherence will likely lead to burnout.

Suggestions:

He could have a clarifying conversation with the owner’s, saying ‘I like working here but I’m having a major problem because we have not clarified the scope of my responsibility. I want to make sure I have the ability to make decisions in the areas for which I am responsible.’

If that does not work out, this person needs to make a difficult decision. If staying is worth it for personal reasons, despite the workplace craziness, then actively decide to stay. That means deciding to put up with the downsides of the situation. Once that is done, there are small things that will continue to be possible to make things better.. but only after accepting the big problems in general.

Otherwise the person can try and find a better situation – or at least put out feelers/check with their network. Taking those active steps will reduce the powerlessness sensations, and will present a better information set about the options available.

Actively exploring and making choices completely changes the experience itself, even while nothing external has changed.