

History 6

If You Can't Stand the Heat, Get Out of the Kitchen.

The Role Gender Plays in Professional Kitchens

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Women's involvement with food can be traced back to the creation of mankind and women, "through the everyday routines of family meals, are the transmitters of cultural codes pertaining to food and eating"(Van Esterik). Always relegated to the position of cook, the feminist movement of the 1970s helped to inspire a generation of women to "rebel against the reality that their professional aspirations were stymied by a society that did not recognize their importance in the work place or allow them to advance into management roles"(Smith). Women soon began to enter male-dominated fields including professional kitchens. In the early 1970s,

Opportunities for women in the industry were limited. There were no prominent women chefs or sommeliers, few female restaurateurs and no women allowed as wait staff in fine dining establishments. In the rare cases where women toiled behind the stoves in the kitchens of small eateries, they were cooks. Men alone were chefs.(Smith)

It has only been in the last forty years that women have been looked upon as viable sources of inspiration and have received accolades within the culinary arts. Women like Alice Waters, Nancy Silverton, Traci des Jardins and Jody Adams. But the road to becoming chefs has been met with resistance and many women that have worked in professional kitchens are able to recount similar stories of discrimination and sexism. Mary A., a professional chef, shared a story of her first cooking position in a hotel restaurant. "Any time that I reached for something that was perceived to be too heavy for me to pick up or carry, one of the male chefs would quickly come over to do the job for me. I was very capable of doing it myself, but it seemed like it was their duty to rescue me." She goes on to say that the Executive Chef looked to her to do all the bookkeeping because "it was women's work."

In the article, FemiNoshing: Why are most chefs men, the writer quotes several women chefs about their own experiences in professional kitchens. One woman wrote, “I was once told at a job interview that ‘We don’t have women in the kitchen. How about we put you on the waitstaff instead?’ I was interviewing to be a sous chef.” And my own story which involved a chef that hired me only because he wanted to see me fail and didn’t believe I had the skills I said I possessed, or being paid less than my male counterpart for the same position even though I had more experience.

Unfortunately, occurrences such as these are all too commonplace amongst women who have stepped foot in professional kitchens. Not only is sexism a shared experience, but so is the desire to be accepted as “one of the boys” and to be rewarded for a job well done based on your abilities and not because you stayed within the boundaries of “femininity”. Many women also coped with kitchen work by becoming invisible. April Bloomfield, chef of The Spotted Pig in New York City said, “I didn’t want the fact that I was a woman to be an issue, so I just put my head down and cooked and did the best that I could”(NYM).

This essay will explore gender stereotypes that have created biases in professional kitchens, understand the tensions women experienced by entering the work force when social indoctrination suggested and woman’s place was in the home and how that led to the defeminization of women chefs and discover why men are celebrated for their culinary acumen while women’s contributions to the world of food have been minimized or overlooked.

Gender is defined as “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex”(MWD). And these traits have been used to define gender-specific roles in society and the workplace,

Such as the term *cook* and *chef*. The latter is the shortened version of the French *chef de cuisine* (literally, “head of the kitchen”) and relates directly to the *métier* of food preparation. You can become a chef only after formal culinary training or apprenticeship. A “cook” is generic, referring to anyone who prepares food, whether professionally or at home.(Druckman)

Therefore, “chef” by definition is associated with masculine psychological traits while “cook” is associated with feminine psychological traits of “compassion, nurturance, sensitivity, tenderness, and humility”(Vetterling 5). Masculine psychological traits such as “assertiveness, ambition, rationality or the ability to think logically, abstractly and analytically, and the ability to control emotion”(Vetterling 6) have long been viewed as necessary traits needed in order to function in a professional kitchen. Traits “alleged to fall under the feminine or masculine categories are valued differently depending on whether they apply to women or men. Aggression is regarded as a flaw in women and an asset in men while dependence is regarded as an asset in women and a flaw in men”(Hoagland 86). The scars of gender stereotypes in professional kitchens run deep. Fernand Point, a chef and creator of *nouvelle cuisine* during the fifties has been quoted as saying, “only men have the technique, discipline, and passion that makes cooking consistently an art”(Radice).

Women chefs have been continuously working towards proving these deeply imbedded stereotypes incorrect and to move away from gender-specific roles and towards neutrality, but the media continues to perpetuate images and ideas of gender-specific cooking styles. Take for example Mike Weiss’ article about whether there is a difference between the cooking styles of women and men. He set out to answer the question, “why did I prefer women’s cooking?” and interviewed Loretta Keller, chef at CoCo 500. She described her cooking style as taking

something beautiful and “preserving its integrity, transforming it a little bit and giving it to someone to share it. That was extremely satisfying.” Keller’s statement left Weiss with the need to express how “extremely feminine, that impulse to share, to feed” is. But Keller did not see gender in her cooking; she was a woman who created delicious food from her heart to feed others. These notions of gender will never leave our vernacular if we continue to use them or feel we need to use them in order to define what something is. Catherine Price, in her article *The Mama Chef*, makes an argument against the belief that a certain style of cooking is feminine or masculine.

If you approach food from the traditionally female standpoint of creating something to nurture and feed your family, you’ll have a different attitude than if you cook as a career with the aim of impressing strangers. So if you buy the idea that women traditionally have cooked for families, whereas male chefs are just that-chefs-it makes sense that there’d be a difference. But I think that has less to do with gender than it does with goals.

This image that a meal can be distinctly feminine or masculine directly correlates with society’s view of gender. Less attention needs to be placed on what gender a person is and more on the goals a person is trying to achieve.

The appearance of women cooking on television may give the illusion that women are succeeding in professional kitchens, but statistics prove otherwise. One thousand culinary professionals were surveyed by starchefs.com, and they found that women comprised 16% of all executive chef positions while men were the majority by 38%. Even more alarming is the discrepancy in pay:

The hospitality industry is still off-kilter when it comes to fiscal equality between the sexes and races. The gaps in some cases are jarring—an average pastry chef salary for women of \$38,000 is a far cry from that for men of \$52,713. This seems counterintuitive—after all, the customer doesn't know whether that food they love so much comes from an old white guy or a young African American woman.(SC)

The numbers illustrate that great strides still need to be made for women in the culinary arts in order for them to reach the apex of equality.

For a woman to compete in the culinary arts, she must do so not as a “woman”, but as a “man”. Femininity is not celebrated in professional kitchens because of the gender stereotypes and the need for women to be seen as serious competitors. Becoming “one of the boys” includes adopting the language and behaviors of perceived masculine psychological traits and as a respondent in the article FemiNoshing: Why are most chefs men stated, “in the industry, it was more brutal—if you couldn't laugh at rape jokes, you were an uptight bitch.” Women who cried or became emotional in the kitchen were looked down upon and “we separated ourselves from them so that the men knew that we were different, stronger, and well-equipped to stay on course. It's sad that we did it but we had to survive”, explained Mary A. This circles back to perceived gender stereotypes and when a woman steps outside of those bounds, “she is subject to derision, attack, and denial”(Hoagland 87)

Chef Marco Pierre White explained, kitchen culture is not conducive for women because “the kitchen is a place where only the strong survive. Competition is constant. Women are not often welcome there-not because they can't cook but because they're not taken seriously as competitors”(Druckman 29). Sexism exists blatantly and without repercussions. When asked if

sexism existed and why there were few women at the helms of professional kitchens, New York Magazine editors noted that, “the chefs we spoke to were at first reluctant to cite sexism as the reason there aren’t more women among the city’s elite chefs. In part, it seemed they didn’t want to play the victim or be labeled whiny; in part, they didn’t want to believe it—the better to not let it stop them.” Their hesitance at speaking on sexism in the kitchen reflects still on their need to be accepted by other men and to prove that they are willing to accept and play by the rules of the “boys club”.

The need to defeminize women reflects on the conflict of sex roles in society. Women’s primary role is to be attractive to men and in order to do this; you must be beautiful or have the means to make yourself pretty. Men may seek out sexual approval but they can “become respected and appreciated for their other accomplishments and be attractive to females as a result of their other accomplishments”(Rainone 231). Sexual attraction is how women gain approval or disapproval from men but it is a double-edged sword because “being attractive to males is often considered a disqualification for some professional roles and/or an invitation to sexual harassment(Rainone 231). Hence the need to shed one’s femininity in order to become “one of the boys”

In the restaurant kitchen, women who wish to be taken seriously forego virgin-whore style in favor of androgyny. They are generally unfeminine, short-haired, and makeup free, often quite muscular, even manly, in appearance. It’s as though the only way to gain legitimacy as a food force is by hiding all traces of femininity. Male chefs are inherently sexy; female chefs, sexless. This assumption runs counter to the media-friendly

women of the TV cooking shows that, by putting beautiful homemaker types on screen, reinforce the male-is-to-chef what female-is-to-cook Identification.(Druckman 29)

The contributions that women have made in the culinary arts have been foreshadowed by men and media bias. Men have not been held prisoners to their gender-specific roles and are encouraged to and celebrated when they display the masculine psychological traits. Programs such as “Hell’s Kitchen” with chef Gordon Ramsey show a man that can become a tyrant at the drop of a hat and yet this behavior is looked upon as acceptable because it falls within the range of masculinity. Television programming constantly reinforces the gender-stereotypes of women as cooks and men as chefs by having shows on during the daytime that have women cooking in their own “home” kitchens “as pretty faces who do easy meals for families or casual parties”(Druckman 28).

Food competition shows with their high-energy and commentary are equivalent to sports games. These programs are targeted to men and are shown during prime time. They portray men as “serious chefs, experts, adventurers, competitors”(Druckman 28). The shows are exciting and give the false sense of reality that this is how a professional kitchen works. If it is in our mind that a kitchen is this fast-paced and possibly dangerous, then it is no place for a woman.

A feminine being is one who is by nature relatively passive and dependent. It follows that those that to whom the label is applied must be seeking protection (domination) by nature and should be subjected to authority for their own good. Femininity portrays those not in power as needing and wanting control. It is a matter of logic, then, that those who refuse control are abnormal.(Hoagland 91)

So for a woman to want to have this lifestyle and become a chef, she is no longer living within the boundaries of femininity and is considered socially undesirable and deviant.

Alex Guarnaschelli of Butter restaurant was asked by the editors of New York Magazine if it was harder for women to get their name out there. She responded with, “You have to put on a pair of fishnet stockings, and you have to get yourself on television. I find myself hoping I can get on a TV show and then people from Oklahoma will come to my restaurant. Then I’ll be able to make enough money to open my own place.” It would appear then that a woman’s talent as a chef alone will not help her progress but based on whether a woman fits the sex role for women, a person who is to be desired based on appearances and not accomplishments.

Women do not receive the same recognition as men not because they have not contributed to the culinary field, “it can only be subtle, ingrained sexism-the failure of people in the media to highlight women’s contributions”(Philpott). Another factor that may contribute to fewer executive chefs being women according to Chef Traci Des Jardin is their priorities.

Why aren’t there more women running restaurants like the French Laundry, or Jean Georges? I think women have different priorities. I have run kitchens like that and it takes such intensity you can’t have anything else in your life. Then women crash into their child-bearing years, and they have a much greater focus on their home life.(Weiss)

These priorities and familial duties can cause conflict when a woman is trying to establish her career and become a successful chef. The attributes of a successful chef have long been associated with men and

Has historically been measured more by business acumen, celebrity, and marketability rather than by what happens at the stove. Who cares if your panna cotta has a “female” look to it; tell me instead whether you own multiple eateries. Is your personality translatable to a wider audience? Is your restaurant concept something that can be replicated? Do you have a style that complements and transcends your culinary point of view?(Druckman 26)

In order for women to move beyond these gender-specific roles, society as a whole has to change the way it sees gender. And one way for society to not see gender is for women chefs to not be called as such and just be seen as chefs. Differences in cooking styles or techniques should not be based on gender, but on education or experience. As long as we continue to associate feminine qualities with cooking and masculine qualities with chefdom, we will continue to send ourselves deeper into the abyss of sexism and discrimination.

Today, women chefs have embraced their equal value and have faced the facts of their situation. But because they remain isolated and pigeonholed by the media, by culinary institutions, and sometimes even by their male peers, women don't have the influence, numbers, or respect to change the reality of restaurant kitchens. The women who ought to question their culpability or power to effect change are those with agency and clout-the members of social institutions like the media and culinary organizations. Better to try and fail than do nothing.(Druckman 31)

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